



10 December 2014

Frequently asked questions: Unite the Union

How is Yorkshire Ambulance Service managing increased levels of demand and related performance issues?

Ambulance trusts across the UK have been hit by increasing demand over the last few months. We, and other trusts, have analysed the data but there appears to be no single root cause. Overall demand for emergency ambulances is increasing year-on-year and this is reflected across the whole country. In Yorkshire and the Humber demand for the most seriously ill and injured patients ('Red' incidents) in the first six months of the year (April - September 2014) was up by 11.5% which equates to nearly 15,000 more 'Red' incidents in the year-to-date.

Yorkshire Ambulance Service (YAS) has tried to deal with this by putting more staff out over periods where we know demand is at its highest. The November 2014 figures for 'Red' response times have shown improvement with 72.15% of incidents responded to within the 8-minute target (the national target is 75%). We are working hard to continue this upward trend across the busy winter period.

Why is Unite raising concerns around patient safety?

YAS is committed to the highest possible standards of patient safety. The YAS frontline workforce comprises state registered paramedics, emergency medical technicians and Emergency Care Assistants (ECA). Unite's concerns stem from the introduction of the role of Band 3 ECA to work alongside Band 5 paramedics on ambulances. The ECA is a well-established role used by the majority of other ambulance trusts to deliver an appropriate level of clinical support to their paramedic colleagues. They have all received the required level of training to carry out this role, including emergency 'blue light' response driving. Currently ECAs do not work on their own or paired with another ECA even if they are the only staff free to respond to an incident.

By implementing our five-year A&E workforce plan YAS aims to have a paramedic on every frontline emergency vehicle. This requires substantial investment to significantly increase our numbers of qualified paramedics as well as fully funding training for 450 staff to become paramedics.

When we were inspected by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) in July 2013 there were no concerns raised about the level of ECA training.

Why did Yorkshire Ambulance Service derecognise Unite?

Unite the Union, which represents around 350 people or 8% of our workforce, was derecognised by YAS in February 2013. This action was due to an ongoing, unconstructive working relationship, particularly around difficult decisions that the Trust needed to make to ensure high quality care for patients going forward.

YAS continues to work with Unison and has continued to seek ongoing dialogue with Unite with assistance from ACAS.

What is the relationship between Unison and Unite?

Significant differences have existed between Unite and Unison for some time. We have been involved in trying to bring the two parties together on a number of occasions and in October 2014 Unite agreed to develop a concordat between themselves and Unison. YAS agreed that when this was in place we would consider officially recognising them again and bring them back into the collective bargaining process. They have so far not delivered on this commitment.

What other issues have Unite raised concern about?

Unite has stated that we have compromised patient safety by the introduction of changes to staff rotas and meal breaks. Changes to staff rotas and rest breaks were implemented after a period of consultation with staff and Unison, following a detailed and comprehensive review of our service which took place throughout 2013. They form part of changes we are making to improve our responsiveness for patients and increase operational efficiency.

The new rotas seek to improve the allocation of rest breaks and ensure the rest break period is a minimum of 30 minutes during a 10-hour shift and 45 minutes during a 12-hour shift. We are, and remain, disappointed with Unite's deliberate misinterpretation of this matter. Staff welfare is a key priority for the Trust and whilst we have to ensure our staff are available to respond to emergencies we balance this with adequate rest breaks for our staff.

Getting optimum rotas in place is a shared priority for YAS management and frontline staff and we have continued to amend them as issues have arisen with the full support of Unison. Unite has not been supportive of these changes or engaged in any constructive dialogue.

Why did Unite ballot for industrial action?

Unite balloted its members on industrial action on the basis of de-recognition, not patient safety. So far it has carried out strike action of up to 24 hours on 17 dates since April 2013 without any concessions for the most seriously ill and injured patients.