

Building on our on-going cultural improvement journey

1. Why the Review was undertaken

Creating a culture where everyone feels safe, respected, valued and able to speak up remains a core priority for SECAMB.

Over recent years, the Trust has undertaken significant work to strengthen staff experience, leadership capability, inclusion, safeguarding and organisational culture. This work has been informed through a range of cultural reviews, staff feedback, organisational assessments and improvement programmes, some commissioned specifically by the Trust and others undertaken at a national NHS or ambulance sector level.

Collectively, these have helped the organisation better understand its strengths, identify areas for improvement and shape a sustained programme of cultural development.

Against this backdrop, the Trust commissioned an independent and targeted Culture Review in January 2026. The Review represents the latest source of insight within this broader improvement journey, providing an objective assessment of specific cultural risks that had been identified through staff feedback and organisational intelligence. It was particularly focused on understanding experiences relating to professional boundaries, the use of positional power, student experience and safeguarding, leadership behaviours, and the extent to which colleagues felt able to raise concerns.

Importantly, the Review was not commissioned because culture improvement work was absent. Rather, it was undertaken as part of an ongoing programme of cultural development, helping the Trust understand where progress had been made, where risks remained, and what further improvements were required to embed a consistently positive experience across all parts of the organisation.

The Review forms part of a wider body of learning accumulated over several years through both Trust-led and nationally commissioned reviews, assessments and improvement initiatives. Whilst each review has had a different purpose and focus, together they have provided valuable insight into the factors that enable a healthy culture and the areas where further attention is required. Consistently, they have highlighted the importance of leadership, psychological safety, accountability, inclusion and trust in creating a positive working environment.

The Trust recognised that understanding these issues openly and honestly was essential to continuing its cultural improvement journey. The Review therefore sought to provide independent insight into both the progress achieved and the challenges that still needed to be addressed.

2. How the Review was undertaken

To ensure independence and objectivity, the Trust commissioned Jacqui Marshall-Dibble, an experienced independent consultant and Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (FCIPD), to undertake the Review.

The reviewer had no previous connection with the Trust and was recommended specifically because of her independence and experience in conducting impartial workplace culture reviews.

The Review drew on multiple sources of evidence, including:

- Confidential and anonymised staff interviews
- Qualitative feedback from the NHS Staff Survey
- Existing internal reviews, reports and organisational documentation
- Previous recommendations and learning from other internal and external assessments

Interviews were conducted on a confidential basis to enable participants to speak openly about their experiences. This confidentiality was a critical element of the methodology, helping ensure that insights reflected genuine experiences and observations.

The Review adopted a qualitative, evidence-based approach. Themes were identified through detailed analysis of the information gathered, allowing common patterns and issues to emerge rather than seeking to validate predetermined conclusions.

Alongside identifying areas of concern, the Review also considered evidence of progress. It found that many staff recognised positive changes in recent years and described improvements in leadership visibility, openness, staff engagement and organisational culture. The Review therefore presents a balanced picture - one that acknowledges meaningful improvement while identifying specific areas where further work is needed.

3. Findings presented by theme

The Review concluded that genuine progress has been made in the Trust's cultural development over recent years. Positive indicators included improved staff survey results, signs of increased psychological safety, greater leadership openness and growing confidence in organisational improvement efforts.

However, the Review also identified several inter-connected themes that continue to affect the experience of some colleagues. These themes were not found to be universal across the organisation, but in the 'pockets' where they occurred, they had a significant impact on trust, confidence and staff wellbeing.

- **Professional boundaries and use of authority**

The Review identified examples where professional boundaries had not always been maintained appropriately and where positions of authority had, at times, been used in ways that undermined trust.

The findings highlighted the importance of ensuring that all employees, particularly those in leadership positions, understand both the responsibilities and influence that come with their roles. Maintaining professional standards and creating environments where individuals feel respected and protected must remain a key expectation throughout the organisation.

The Review reinforced the need for clear behavioural expectations, visible leadership accountability and consistent responses when standards are not met.

- **Fairness and transparency in recruitment and career development**

Some participants expressed concerns about the fairness and transparency of recruitment, promotion and progression processes.

While many colleagues reported positive experiences, the Review found that perceptions of inconsistency can have a significant impact on trust and confidence. In some cases, individuals questioned whether opportunities were always allocated transparently or whether informal influence could affect decision-making.

The Review concluded that continued work is needed to strengthen confidence in recruitment and progression processes, ensuring that decisions are demonstrably fair, equitable and based on clear criteria.

- **Localised sub-cultures and informal power structures**

A recurring theme was the existence of localised sub-cultures in some areas of the organisation.

These environments were characterised by informal power structures, longstanding behaviours and, in some instances, command-and-control leadership approaches that differed from the culture the Trust is seeking to embed.

The Review found that these sub-cultures could create barriers to inclusion, reduce confidence in leadership and make it more difficult for positive cultural change to be experienced consistently across all teams.

The findings suggest that organisational culture is influenced not only by policies and strategies but by everyday behaviours, leadership actions and the standards that are reinforced locally.

- **Speaking Up and psychological safety**

The ability for colleagues to raise concerns safely and confidently emerged as a significant theme.

Although the Review recognised progress in creating a more open environment, some participants remained concerned about whether concerns would always be handled consistently, fairly and promptly.

For some staff, this uncertainty affected confidence in speaking up. The Review emphasised that psychological safety and accountability are not competing priorities - both are essential to creating a healthy organisational culture.

Ensuring that colleagues can raise concerns without fear of disadvantage remains a critical component of the Trust's improvement work.

- **Safeguarding, student experience and safety**

The Review highlighted particular risks where there are inherent power imbalances, especially in relation to students and individuals early in their careers.

Findings identified the importance of robust safeguarding arrangements, effective supervision, clear escalation routes and consistent professional standards.

The Review reinforced the need to ensure that all learners, students and junior colleagues experience supportive environments where concerns are taken seriously and appropriate protections are in place.

- **Leadership consistency**

Perhaps the most significant overarching theme was the consistency of leadership behaviour.

The Review found strong evidence that the Executive Team has worked to establish a more open, visible and improvement-focused approach. However, it also identified variation in how expectations were understood and demonstrated at different leadership levels throughout the organisation.

A central conclusion of the Review was that sustainable cultural improvement depends less on introducing additional policies and more on ensuring consistent leadership behaviour, accountability and role-modelling across every part of the Trust.

The findings highlighted that leadership behaviour is inseparable from culture, staff experience, organisational performance and patient care.

4. What we will be doing next

The Review provides valuable insight that will help shape the next phase of the Trust's cultural improvement journey. As the latest contribution in a series of reviews, assessments and improvement activities undertaken over recent years, it adds further evidence to inform the Trust's ongoing work to strengthen culture, leadership and staff experience. Our response is focused on building on existing progress rather than creating a separate programme of work. The Review's findings align

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- **Strengthening leadership expectations**

The Trust's new Leadership Framework will serve as the foundation for the next phase of improvement.

The Framework sets out the behaviours and values expected of leaders and provides a clear, consistent standard for how leadership should be demonstrated across the organisation. It emphasises compassion, inclusion, accountability, curiosity, integrity and collaboration.

As part of this work, senior leaders will formally commit to these expectations, reinforcing a shared understanding of what good leadership looks like and how it should be experienced by colleagues.

- **Creating greater consistency**

A key priority will be ensuring that organisational expectations are translated into day-to-day experiences across all teams and services.

This means maintaining a clear focus on leadership behaviours, professional standards and accountability, with consistent expectations regardless of role, seniority or professional background.

Improvement efforts will focus on ensuring that positive cultural change is experienced as consistently as possible across the organisation.

- **Strengthening Speaking Up and psychological safety**

The Trust will continue to enhance the ways colleagues can raise concerns, provide feedback and contribute to organisational learning.

This includes maintaining a strong focus on psychological safety, improving confidence in escalation processes and ensuring concerns are handled appropriately, consistently and transparently.

Regular opportunities for staff engagement and dialogue will remain important elements of this work.

- **Improving safeguarding and support**

Further work will be undertaken to strengthen safeguarding arrangements, support for students and learners, and organisational oversight of issues relating to safety, professional boundaries and conduct.

These actions will build on existing programmes and reinforce the Trust's commitment to creating safe environments for everyone who learns, works and develops within the organisation.

- **Improving fairness and transparency**

The Trust will continue work to strengthen confidence in recruitment and progression processes through enhanced transparency, oversight and assurance.

Ensuring that opportunities are fair, equitable and clearly understood is an important part of building trust and supporting an inclusive culture.

- **Maintaining oversight and accountability**

Progress against the Review's themes will be monitored through established governance arrangements, including leadership oversight, People Committee scrutiny and Board assurance processes.

Regular updates will help ensure that improvement activity remains focused, transparent and measurable.

5. Embedding this work through our strategic priorities

The Trust's People Committee already provides oversight of our culture improvement programme and will continue to play a central role in monitoring progress in response to the Review's findings. This Review is one of a number of important sources of learning that have informed the Trust's approach to cultural improvement in recent years. Alongside previous Trust-commissioned reviews, national reviews, staff feedback and broader organisational development activity, it provides additional insight that will help guide and assure the next phase of improvement.

This work is firmly connected to the Trust's wider strategic objectives and Board Assurance Framework (BAF) priorities, particularly those relating to our people, leadership, workforce experience, inclusion, wellbeing and organisational development

The Review's themes reinforce existing priorities rather than creating new ones, providing additional evidence and insight to help shape, strengthen and assure delivery of the Trust's People Strategy and wider organisational improvement plans.

Through regular scrutiny, performance monitoring and assurance reporting, the People Committee will ensure that culture improvement remains embedded within the Trust's governance arrangements and continues to support the delivery of our strategic ambitions for colleagues, patients and communities.

6. Conclusion

The Culture Review confirmed that meaningful progress has been made in strengthening culture across SECamb. It also highlighted that some longstanding

challenges remain and that further work is required to ensure every colleague experiences the culture we aspire to create.

The Review should therefore be viewed not as a stand-alone event, but as the latest contribution to a broader and continuing cultural improvement journey. Over a number of years, the Trust has drawn upon learning from a range of reviews, assessments and staff feedback mechanisms, both locally commissioned and nationally led, to strengthen its understanding of organisational culture and guide improvement efforts. This Review adds further evidence and insight to that ongoing programme of work.

The findings reinforce a clear message – sustainable change depends on consistent leadership behaviour, strong professional standards, psychological safety, fairness, accountability and trust.

By building on existing improvement programmes, learning from previous reviews, and maintaining a relentless focus on these areas, the Trust aims to create an environment where all colleagues feel safe, respected, included and empowered to deliver their best for patients and one another.