

AUGUST 2020

**HOW TO EMBED
FLEXIBLE WORKING
FOR NURSES**

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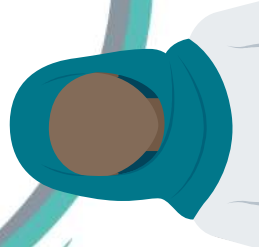
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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

NHS Employers has worked with many NHS organisations in recent years to support them to develop and implement plans to improve workforce retention.

“ If I had a flexible working pattern, I would be able to work more hours. Unfortunately, over the last few years I’ve had to gradually reduce my hours more and more to be able to work around my commitments.”

Band 6, Senior Staff Nurse



This guide has been commissioned by NHS England and NHS Improvement and the Department of Health and Social Care to support NHS organisations to improve their offer of flexibility for the nursing workforce. Increasing opportunities for nurses to work flexibly is known to improve staff experience and can ultimately translate to better retention outcomes for this critically important staff group.

This resource is aimed at colleagues that have a responsibility or interest in implementing flexible working, including HR professionals, line managers and nurse leaders. While the focus of this guide is tailored to the nursing workforce, improving access to flexible working for all staff groups is important in making the NHS an attractive place to work and many of the principles outlined in this guide can be applied regardless of job role, grade, or profession.

Based on extensive employer engagement, the guide signposts to the latest research and thinking concerning flexible working, highlights what nurses look for in a flexible role, and identifies a number of key enablers to successfully embedding a culture of flexible working. The guide also includes good practice examples from NHS organisations that have taken positive steps to increase flexible working and provides practical tips to help you get started.

This guide forms part of a suite of resources developed by NHS Employers to assist you in planning and developing your approach to flexible working, all of which can be accessed via www.nhsemployers.org/flexibleworking

INTRODUCTION

Offering flexible working is one of the ways you can attract and retain a diverse nursing workforce, across a range of settings.

The [NHS Interim People Plan](#) and the [We are the NHS: People Plan for 2020/21 - action for us all](#) give a clear commitment to tackling nursing workforce shortages and set out the actions needed to address this situation. Improving retention of our existing nurses is seen as the most immediate action that can be taken to increase nurse numbers and contribute to the government target of 50,000 more nurses in the NHS over the next five years.

Myth: 'Flexible working isn't productive'

Fact: You may have heard that flexible working isn't as productive as more traditional working patterns, but this couldn't be further from the truth. Growing numbers of organisations are trying to accommodate their employees' requests for flexible working because of the benefits for both staff and employer.

Since 2017, in partnership with NHS England and NHS Improvement, NHS Employers has been working with trusts to target interventions to improve nurse retention. This work has identified that increasing opportunities to work flexibly holds great potential to improve nursing turnover rates and reduce the number of nurse vacancies in the NHS.

We know that poor work-life balance is predominately cited by nurses as the first or second reason for low job satisfaction. It is evident that increasing access to flexible working can enable staff to achieve a better work-life balance, enhance job satisfaction, and ultimately improve the retention of this important staff group.

Working Families' [Flexible Hiring: Guidance for Employers](#), states:

'Nearly nine in ten UK employees either work flexibly already or wish they could. Many of them will only apply for a job where this is possible. Yet only 11 per cent of jobs with salaries of £20K+ FTE are advertised as being open to flexible working options. Too few jobs are being advertised as suitable for flexible working, restricting the talent pool from which employers can recruit. Being able to offer a job on a flexible basis increases the talent pool, helps retain staff and saves on sickness absence.'

To ensure the NHS remains an employer of choice and can attract talent in a competitive job market, more action is needed to increase the uptake of flexible working. In turn, this will help to create more inclusive, diverse, and productive workplaces that suit both the needs of the NHS and individuals.

ABOUT FLEXIBLE WORKING

Flexible working relates to the arrangements in place regarding the time, location and pattern of work.

With more and more people thinking differently about how, when and where they work, flexible working is increasingly helping people join and stay in the NHS. Inflexible and unpredictable working patterns make it harder for people to balance their work and personal lives. The [NHS Long Term Plan](#) sets out ambitions to give people greater choice over their working patterns, help them achieve a better work-life balance, and help the NHS remain an employer of choice. To support this ambition, the [NHS We are the NHS: People Plan for 2020/21 - action for us all](#) encourages employers to increase uptake of flexible working.

In 2003, the UK government introduced the right to request flexible working, which historically only applied to parents and certain other carers. The legislation now includes all employees with at least 26 weeks' continuous employment. Employers have a duty to consider a request in a reasonable manner and can only refuse a request for flexible working if they can show that specific grounds apply.

There are various different types of flexible working available, which are detailed in our guide: [Improving Staff Retention: Flexible Working](#) (p. 5-7).

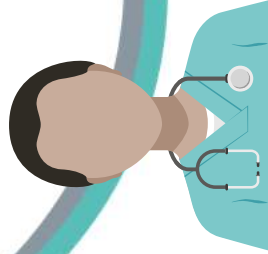
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Myth: 'Flexible working always involves working from home'

Fact: Working flexibly isn't simply working from home all the time. It covers a wide variety of options and can be anything outside a standard Monday-to-Friday, nine-to-five arrangement. Forms of flexible working can include, part-time work, different start and finish times, compressed hours or term-time working.

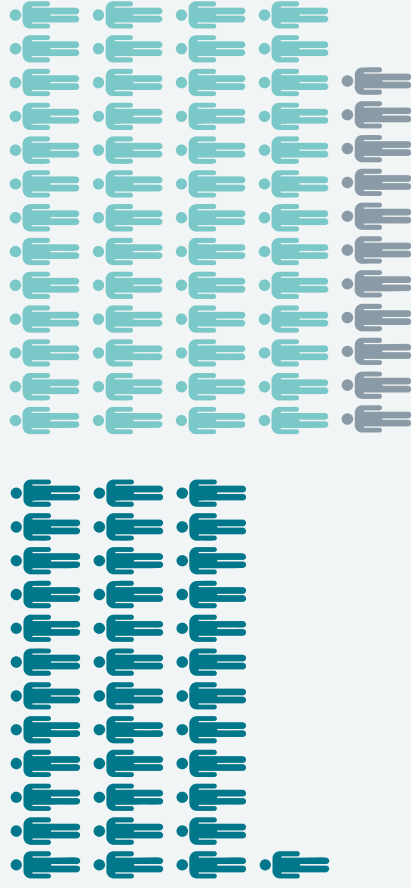
“ There needs to be a balance for the individual and the service when implementing flexible working and someone's flexible working arrangement should not impact on others and their access to working flexibly.”

Band 6, Senior Staff Nurse



WHAT NURSES WANT

In March 2020, NHS Employers surveyed the nursing workforce to seek their views on flexible working, the opportunities available, and what employers can do to support them to work more flexibly.

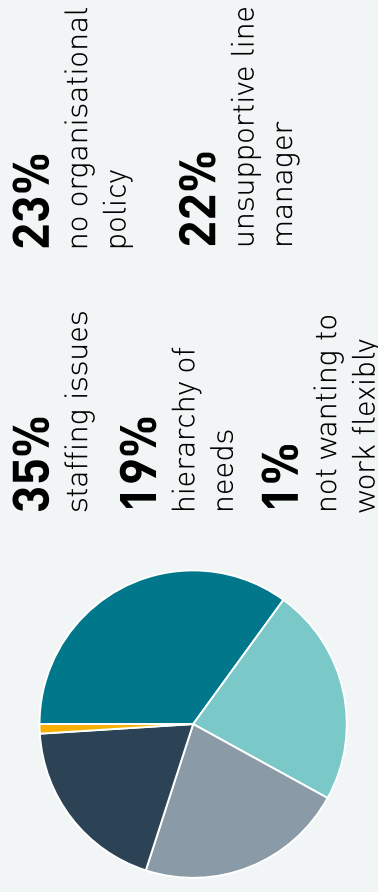


Of the 99 respondents to the survey, only 37 per cent currently had a flexible working arrangement in place, and of those who did not, 83 per cent would like to.

The reasons for working or wanting to work flexibly included:

- ✓ improved work-life balance
- ✓ to fulfil caring responsibilities
- ✓ to suit extracurricular activities
- ✓ to study or complete qualifications
- ✓ health reasons.

There were several issues outlined by the nurse respondents as barriers to flexible working, including:



These key issues are explored throughout the remainder of this guide and a full breakdown of the results is available in the [survey report](#).

BENEFITS OF FLEXIBLE WORKING

This Timewise report, [Flexible Working in the NHS: The Case for Action](#), provides clear reasons why the NHS needs to take action on flexible working and outlines the expected benefits with evidence from across the NHS and other sectors.

FOR EMPLOYEES

- ✓ Improved job satisfaction
- ✓ Higher levels of engagement
- ✓ Improved health and wellbeing
- ✓ A better work-life balance
- ✓ Support to manage caring responsibilities

FOR EMPLOYERS

- ✓ Larger talent pool of potential employees
- ✓ Improved diversity of workforce
- ✓ Reduced costs where full-time cover is not required
- ✓ Loyal and committed employees
- ✓ Reduced sickness absence



Myth: 'No one will want to work Fridays'

Fact: It is highly unlikely that everyone will ask for the same working pattern. If you do receive several competing requests, look at them in the order you received them and assess each based on the circumstances at that point. For any requests you can't agree to, you may be able to find a suitable alternative, such as Mondays off instead of Fridays, or other arrangements agreed between colleagues.

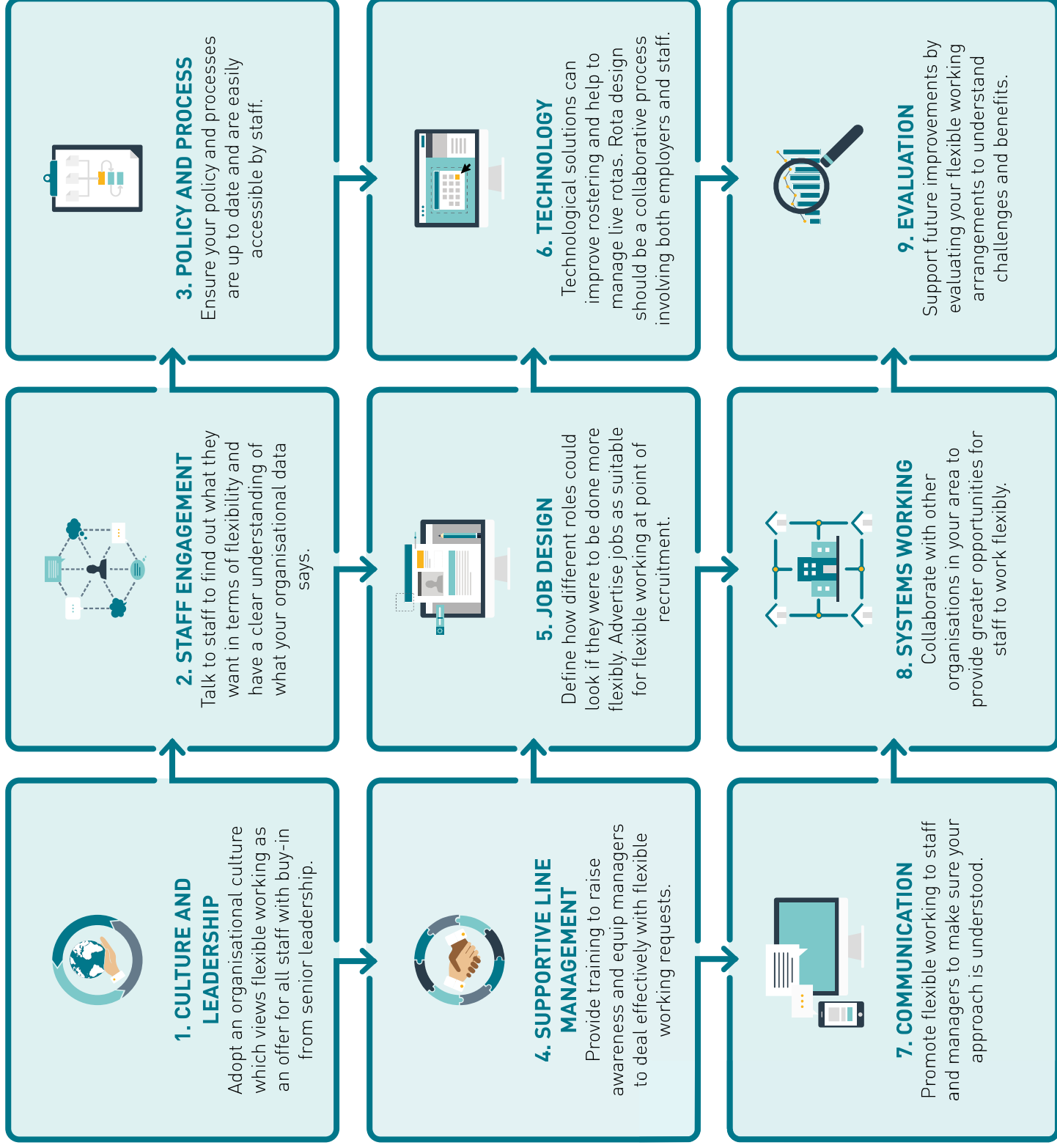
ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

Flexible working forms a crucial part of creating modern and inclusive employment practices.

More action is needed to increase the uptake of flexible working across the NHS, to recruit and retain diverse talent and ensure that the NHS is an employer of choice.

Following employer engagement, we have identified nine enablers to flexible working, highlighted in this infographic.

Click on each of the nine images in the infographic to navigate to the relevant sections of the guide.



1. CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP

ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

Across the NHS there needs to be a shift in the narrative and language used around flexible working. [Research](#) suggests that flexible working is currently perceived to hinder career progression and is not fully understood by staff. Developing an organisational culture that is inclusive and values flexible working for all will maximise the benefits to both your organisation and employees.

Building a diverse and inclusive workforce is a fundamental aspect of widening participation and recruitment to fill nurse vacancies. [The Office for National Statistics data](#) shows that women do most of the unpaid care work in the UK and the majority of those with a flexible working arrangement are women. There is still a lingering perception that part-time and flexible working are only valid for women with children. While attitudes are changing, the 'request-response' model is slowing progress. It creates a sense that flexible working is something that requires a specific set of circumstances, rather than being open to all. If it were proactively offered to everyone and more accessible to those in shift-based roles, flexible working would become more widespread, more gender-neutral, and no longer lumped together with childcare. This would increase take-up by non-parents and open more flexible career pathways. Over time, this would help employers achieve a healthier, happier workforce. Improving access to flexible working across the NHS as a whole, regardless of gender, can also provide access to a larger talent pool of potential employees and have a positive impact on the disproportionate effects of part-time working on women's careers and the contribution this makes to the gender pay gap.

To improve access to flexible working, a proactive strategy needs to be built that encourages line managers to discuss flexible preferences at key career stages. However, a strategy alone is not enough. As an employer, you also need to offer training to line managers to help make sure they are implementing your strategy in the right way. This could involve upskilling your managers in job design and giving them the confidence to discuss flexible working arrangements that balance the needs of the service with those of staff.





1. CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP

ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

Employers have a vital role to play in upskilling leaders and managers to facilitate change. This involves changing workplace cultures and giving staff the skills and the permission to identify flexible working solutions that fit with the specific needs of their team. Leaders need to be supportive of flexible working in principle and create a framework in which others can act.

Organisational development (OD) practitioners are an invaluable resource in generating and implementing solutions to changing workplace cultures and you may find it helpful to draw on their expertise. There are many OD models available to support the development of change management activities and you can access a number of these on the [DoOD web pages](#).

It has been acknowledged that shifts in culture take time and their intangible nature make it difficult for organisations to pinpoint how to change them. Leadership teams have the power to create waves of top-down behaviour change that influence the culture of an organisation. They are the image of success. When they role model and actively promote and support flexible working practices this sends a strong message to all employees.

A key ingredient to improving access to flexible working is trust. An employer needs to trust that its staff will manage their time in a way that does not compromise productivity. At the same time, employees need to trust that this arrangement will be respected and that it will not compromise their position or prospects within the organisation. The importance of communication cannot be underestimated and maintaining an open and honest dialogue is essential.

Case study: University Hospitals Bristol NHS Foundation Trust

The trust focused on [staff retention](#) from an [organisational development \(OD\)](#) perspective, recognising that leadership and culture were critical in determining whether staff decide to remain with an employer. When identifying areas for improvement, the OD team engaged staff from the outset in the design of suitable interventions. Each division already had robust plans in place for improving staff experience. As such, the OD team sought to develop an organisation-wide approach to further support local divisional plans.



1. CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP

ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

Case study: Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS Trust

The trust's senior leadership team has changed its approach to working patterns and flexible working. The trust's board is totally committed to work-life balance, with all staff able to request flexibility from day one of employment. Flexible working is now the 'new normal' approach to how the trust works and delivers care to its communities, with all parts of the organisation now using team-based flexible working.

Prior to making these changes, the trust struggled with recruitment and retention due to location. Following an initial pilot scheme in several different departments, including admin, inpatients, community and outpatients, teams have reduced their sickness absence levels and, in some instances, their vacancies to zero. The morale and engagement of colleagues has improved due to staff having more input into their working patterns. In the outpatients' department, staff had previously been leaving substantive posts to join the bank because of a desire for greater flexibility but this trend has now been reversed.

TOP TIPS

- ✓ Analyse your organisation's culture as it is now by asking questions that help you determine the dominant factors. For example: 'what stories do people currently tell about your organisation's approach to flexible working?'
- ✓ Contrast your analysis of where you are now with how you would like the culture to feel in the future and assess the differences between the two. What factors need to change to achieve your future vision?
- ✓ Look at how leaders within your organisation role model your approach to flexible working. Could board members be doing more to utilise the policy or communicate it to staff?
- ✓ Involve your OD colleagues to support your approach to change.
- ✓ Prioritise the changes you wish to make and develop a plan to address them.
- ✓ Share success stories highlighting the impact of improving access to flexible working.

2. STAFF ENGAGEMENT

ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

Employers should talk to their staff and make appropriate use of their workforce data to find out what nurses want in terms of flexibility.

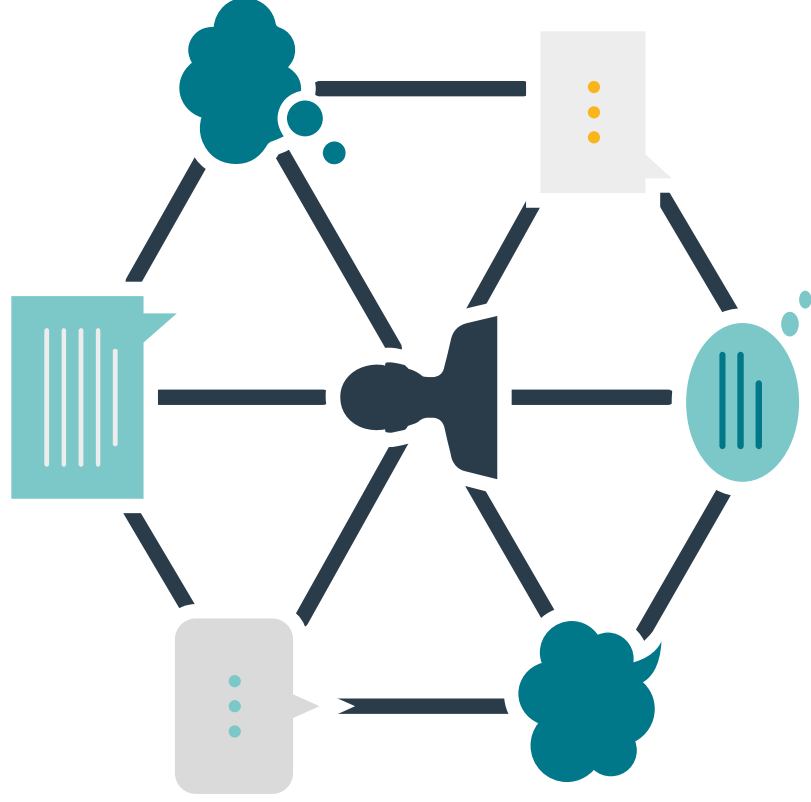
You should look to make use of a variety of different data sources and triangulate the information obtained. Some examples of relevant data sources could include nurse turnover and vacancy rates, feedback from exit interviews, and your staff survey results. It is also important to consider whether there are any gaps in your existing data sets and if you need to establish additional mechanisms to address these.

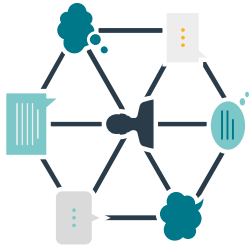
By regularly engaging with your nursing staff, you can capture and learn whether they are happy with their working patterns and understand the strengths and weaknesses of the roles that currently exist and how they can be improved. Regular engagement should also include communications through existing staff networks to enable a fully inclusive approach to be developed, and the use of a framework to aid discussions at key career development points, such as in annual appraisals and performance reviews.

Flexible vs Predictable

Flexible scheduling gives employees stability as well as opportunities to balance other commitments. Predictable scheduling refers to employers providing employees with advance notice of their work schedule and minimising alterations to an employee's schedule once they are agreed.

When an employee makes a request for flexible working you should seek to discuss and understand the reasons behind the request. This will enable you to explore the various options available, how these fit with the needs of the team/department as a whole, and to decipher whether it is a flexible or predictable working pattern that matters most to the member of staff.





2. STAFF ENGAGEMENT ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

Case study: Tameside and Glossop Integrated Care NHS Foundation Trust

Tameside and Glossop Integrated Care NHS Foundation Trust reduced overall turnover for nursing staff from 16.1 per cent to 11.5 per cent. The trust initially took some time to try and understand why nurses were leaving but it quickly became apparent that they needed to establish better mechanisms for gathering this intelligence. By reviewing ESR data, the trust found they were losing more than 50 per cent of registered nurses within their first two years of employment, and that one of the most common reason for leaving was work-life balance.

To gather more information, the organisation surveyed new starters to ask them 'why Tameside?' The trust held focus groups with existing nursing staff to understand why they stayed and implemented an electronic exit questionnaire for staff who were choosing to leave, which within the first month had a return rate of 40 per cent. The trust analysed their data to inform a detailed nurse retention action plan, with flexible working featuring as a key component. The trust noted that the most crucial lesson learned was to use the intelligence available to create action plans or strategies, rather than

making assumptions about what staff want and, where there are gaps in information, seek to address these by asking key questions of job applicants, current staff and leavers.

As a result, the organisation worked with managers to look at opportunities for flexibility at local levels. The Trust also wrote out to those over 50 to let them know about flexible retirement options. This work is still ongoing, and the organisation is currently partnered with [Timewise](#) to further develop its approach to flexible working.

Flexible working would increase staff retention, improve work-life balance and ultimately the quality of patient care."

Band 8a, Advanced Nurse Practitioner



3. POLICY AND PROCESS

ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

Allowing your staff to work flexibly and having a clear policy and processes in place is an important part of creating a modern and appealing employment culture.

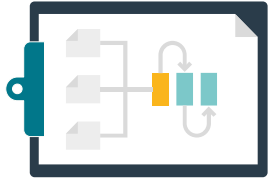
Having a robust policy in place will help in handling flexible working applications and shows trust-wide commitment. This may be a standalone policy or incorporated into other documents and should include information on how to make a request and how it will be considered. A clear policy with leadership buy-in is essential and this should outline a simple process that defines the roles and responsibilities of HR and line managers.

Corporate policies play an important role in embedding flexible working. Policies and processes alone are ineffective if nobody makes use of them or employees are unaware that they exist. If individuals are supported by the organisation, this can provide them with further options if their line manager raises any objections.

TOP TIPS

- ✓ Check to see if there are any existing policies in place that can be reviewed.
- ✓ Simplify the process for requesting a flexible working arrangement with short and clear forms. Remove any restrictions on when individuals can make requests and ensure that the process is clearly signposted to employees.
- ✓ Make accepting flexible working requests the default with the onus on line managers to provide a compelling reason for refusal.
- ✓ Ensure that HR are aware of any flexible working requests where it has been difficult to reach an agreement between line manager and staff member to ensure fairness and equity of approach.
- ✓ Regularly review individual flexible working arrangements in line with policy timeframes. Any proposed arrangements could be trialled for a few weeks or months to see if they will work for both the staff member and the service before formalising.





3. POLICY AND PROCESS ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

A policy alone will not lead to the change desired if it is not supported by leadership teams, HR, and managers within the organisation.

Organisations can put policies and processes in place to enable a culture of flexible working to flourish and the cultural norms of the organisation ensure that these policies and processes are properly utilised.

Here are some good practice example policies from NHS trusts that are available to guide the development of a new flexible working policy:


 [Rotherham, Doncaster, and South Humber NHS Foundation Trust](#)

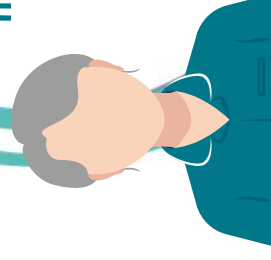
 [Great Western Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust](#)

Case study: Ministry of Defence

Other sectors also have great examples of flexible working to support staff retention. The Ministry of Defence has introduced a [flexible service scheme](#) that allows Armed Forces personnel to ask to temporarily work part time and/or restrict their separation from home base. Applications can be made for any reason but are limited in length to three years for the arrangement to be reviewed.

Implementing a regular review period can help ensure you are balancing the needs of the service with those of individuals. It can also ensure that flexible working requests made by newer staff members are not automatically turned down because of pre-existing arrangements that have not been reviewed for a long time.

 **Flexible working should be considered wherever possible as it helps to create a workforce that feels equipped to juggle the demands of everyday life and work."**



4. SUPPORTIVE LINE MANAGER

ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

Line managers are key to the successful roll out of flexible working, as they have responsibility for managing flexible working requests by understanding the priorities of their nursing teams and the needs of the service.

Supporting line managers to have better conversations about flexible working is important in increasing access to and uptake of flexible working across the nursing workforce. Better conversations will empower line managers to explore possibilities around flexible working and support their teams to work more flexibly to suit individual work-life needs, whilst maintaining safe and effective services.

Providing training to raise awareness and equip managers to deal effectively with flexible working requests is essential and can also reduce discrepancies in how flexible working is applied. This will require an initial investment of time and training, however, the benefits of flexible working will ensure a worthwhile return on this resource.

As alluded to in the section on culture and leadership, the NHS tends to operate on a request-response model, in which flexibility is seen as something that needs to be accommodated, rather than something that brings about the balance that enables staff to thrive. A more preferable alternative is to take a proactive approach in which employers openly explore and acknowledge all employees' work-life balance needs at specific career stages, such as at the point of induction, during annual appraisals or after periods of parental leave. Employers also have a responsibility to clearly articulate to nursing staff the operational constraints about what is possible in shift formats. Jobs can then be designed to meet the needs of both sides and flexibility can be made available to everyone. We cover this in more detail in the next section.

Employers may face several barriers to effectively communicating and implementing flexible working with managers:

- ✔ Overcoming concerns about operational pressures and meeting service needs.
- ✔ Line managers' current attitudes towards flexible working.
- ✔ Handling colleagues' concerns about the impact of other peoples' flexible working on them.





4. SUPPORTIVE LINE MANAGER

ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

The importance of managers' perceptions of flexible working and support for flexible workers should not be underestimated. 📄 **Research by Acas** shows that managers see the use of flexible working as an indicator of employees' organisational commitment and work ethic. By encouraging managers to work flexibly themselves, they will be more likely to support flexible working within their own teams, with a better understanding and accepting of the benefits and what this means for retention. 📄 **The Institute of Leadership and Management** found 82 per cent of managers who work flexibly believe it benefits their organisation, whereas managers without personal experience are less convinced, with 27 per cent thinking there would be no benefit at all to the organisation.

It is important to ensure clear communication, including setting boundaries and managing expectations as part of the two-way dialogue between manager and employee. It is also useful to build teams with shared objectives and mutual trust, making a team commitment to work together in supporting each other's working patterns, involving the whole team and not just leaders and managers. Our 📄 **People Performance Management toolkit** is a useful resource to provide practical advice and support to handle key management situations confidently and consistently.

TOP TIPS

- ✔ Support and train line managers about how to manage flexible workers.
- ✔ Encourage line managers to talk about flexible working with staff, without them needing to ask.
- ✔ Make it clear that flexible working is available to everyone.
- ✔ Tackle the lack of peer support for flexible working by implementing consistent practices across the team.

Case study: Derbyshire Community Health Services NHS Foundation Trust

The organisation is supporting managers to deal with flexible working requests by making use of a clear framework. Flexible working is the default position for all jobs and where this is not considered to be viable, a separate 'confirm and challenge' conversation takes place.

Nearly 90 per cent of the trust's staff are female and 60 per cent work fewer than 30 hours a week. With some departments using strategies including agile working and delivering care closer to home, teams are given the freedom to roster their working hours with manager oversight.

The trust's chief executive leads by example by working a nine-day fortnight.

5. JOB DESIGN

ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

Most of the research and interventions on flexible working have focused on people in office-based roles.

Arrangements include working from home or shifting start and finish times to suit the individual's non-work needs. However, in a shift-based environment like nursing, jobs are not designed around individuals. The job is, in effect, designed by the roster, and that means that the work-life needs of every nurse are entwined with the needs of all the other nurses on their roster.

While no one goes into nursing expecting to work the traditional nine to five, working shifts can often present unexpected challenges. Nursing staff are often looking for predictable shift patterns and last-minute changes to rosters should be avoided. In this [guidance on e-rostering](#) for nursing and midwifery, NHS Improvement advises publishing rosters at least six weeks in advance.

Nurse staffing shortages and the associated issue of high agency expenditure are ongoing challenges for the NHS. In an attempt to address these challenges, many trusts are focusing on redesigning jobs and working practices so that flexibility can be offered to increased numbers of staff. There is no single solution that will work across the NHS as a whole, so, in addition to developing supportive cultures and behaviours, leaders need to ensure that flexible ways of working are designed and implemented based on the needs of specific teams and services.

Too few jobs are advertised as suitable for flexible working, restricting the talent pool from which employers can recruit. Moving to an assumption of flexibility by default and encouraging your hiring managers to consider how a role can be done flexibly from the start can encourage more candidates to apply. It is important to think about the flexibility of a role before recruitment and make it clear to candidates you are happy to discuss flexible working from the outset.


This will give applicants the confidence to discuss alternative patterns of work and give hiring managers the confidence to ask. Improving access to flexible working at the point of hire can encourage more nurses to join the NHS and also improve mobility, enabling employees who work flexibly to apply for promotion, which will ultimately help you build the best team while optimising performance and productivity.





5. JOB DESIGN

ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

When offering flexible working in a job advert, it is important to put the message across in a way that is honest, positive, clear, and positioned in a place the candidate will notice it, such as in the body of the job advert, or listed alongside other benefits such as pension and holiday entitlement. It is best to be specific about the types of flexible working options you will consider for each job. You could also use the Working Families  **happy to talk flexible working strapline** **and logo** in your job adverts, any accompanying materials, on your career's website, and through any recruitment agencies you use. This can also be added to your organisation's profile on NHS Jobs.

An innovative approach to flexible job design will create role-specific flexible options for nursing staff at all levels.

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Myth: 'I can't change a flexible working arrangement in the future if I need to'

Fact: Approving a flexible working request means a permanent amendment to the employee's contract. It can be changed, but only by mutual agreement. You may want to consider trial periods for new arrangements to see how they work for all parties before making a lasting commitment. Making use of trial periods can help identify any problems and propose solutions that suit both sides, making it more likely that future changes won't be needed

TOP TIPS

- ✔ Work with managers to define how different roles could look if they were to be done more flexibly.
- ✔ Undertake job analysis to consider the type of job and its activities to gather information about the required outputs, skills needed, resources and autonomy that will enable it. This should form the basis of a job description and person specification.
- ✔ Consider when and how much people work. How many hours are needed to carry out the role, where do activities need to be carried out and when?
- ✔ Determine how the job role relates to other relevant jobs in the organisation and team. How can everyone have an element of flexibility and work together?
- ✔ Scale workloads and set appropriate objectives with your staff in relation to their roles.

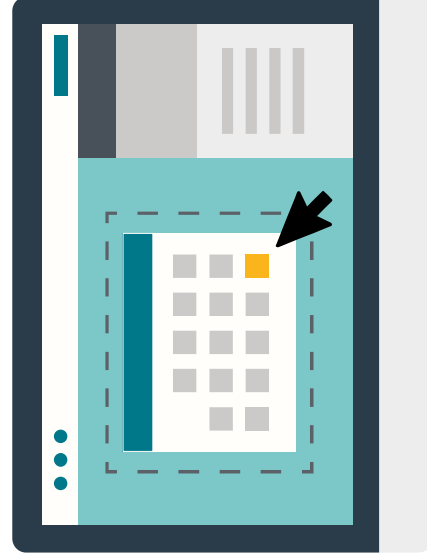
6. TECHNOLOGY

ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

The NHS can significantly increase flexible working through a combination of technology and changes in people practices.

Once a job has been designed flexibly and staff requests taken into consideration, you can use software to best effect to make rostering easier.

Rota design should be collaborative, with equal opportunity for both employers and nurses to input into it, and a commitment to reach agreement on final rota design through a clear and transparent process. Technological solutions can improve rostering and the managing of a live rota should be used wherever possible, particularly to support safe shift swapping where needed.



TYPES OF ROSTERING:

- **E-rostering** – systems allocate staff to shifts based on their working patterns and preferences as well as the needs of the ward, enabling managers to quickly build rotas and allocate shifts.
- **Team-based rostering** – staff put forward the times they would like to work and times they would like to protect away from work. This information is then used to compile shift patterns that match individual preferences as closely as possible, while maintaining agreed levels of cover at all times.
- **Self-rostering** – staff choose their own upcoming work schedules with blank rosters being released, and employees bidding for the shifts they would like to work.

A **Timewise nursing report** describes a pilot initiative to implement a team-based rostering system for nurses, with the aim of increasing nurses' input into their working patterns and improving their work-life balance. The project worked with 240 nurses in seven wards in three hospitals. Significant improvements were realised in three areas: meeting nurses' work-life preferences; increasing nurses' input into rosters; and improving collective responsibility for creating the roster.

The team-based process trained a 'lead team' of several nurses in each ward who gathered nurses' long-term work-life preferences, and then collectively negotiated each month's roster over a period of six to 12 months. Pre and post surveys of nurse participants showed that the proportion of nurses who felt that their work-life preferences were being met went up from 39 per cent to 51 per cent. The proportion of nurses scoring highly on the amount of input they have



6. TECHNOLOGY

ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

into rosters went up from 14 per cent to 26 per cent, and the proportion reporting a strong sense of collective responsibility improved from 16 per cent to 36 per cent.

The Timewise pilot indicates that it would be useful to develop better training and guidance on e-rostering for work-life balance, including harmonising flexible working policies and e-rostering guidelines. The NHS Employers and British Medical Association (BMA) [good rostering guide](#) sets out ways in which good rostering practice can be used to develop rotas. It aims to support and create an effective training environment that also meets the needs of the service, while enabling flexibility for staff and employers.

Although technology is useful in the implementation of rostering and managing when staff work or how they make requests, technology alone will not solve the issue. Technology can be used to support better access to and uptake of flexible working but it needs to be complimented by the other enablers highlighted throughout this guide in order to harness the true benefits.

Case study: Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust

While the trust appeared to have a healthy recruitment pipeline for nurses, retaining them was a challenge. The trust began a [pilot](#) to reduce ICU nursing turnover by improving 'joy' at work. After hearing from staff that offering greater flexibility and choice of shifts would improve their work-life balance, the trust introduced an electronic self-rostering system. The trust provided support and training to staff to help them use the system to its fullest potential and, since its implementation, turnover rates have reduced from 29.8 per cent to 17.2 per cent, alongside comments from staff expressing its benefit to their work-life balance.

Case study: Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust

The trust [developed a strategy to retain staff](#) with a key focus on flexible working. As part of the trust's commitment to flexible working, St Thomas' Hospital's maternity service adapted rosters to include one short night shift (10pm to 6am), providing greater flexibility for staff with caring responsibilities. This has helped the directorate to maintain low vacancy rates and high staff retention among midwifery staff.

7. COMMUNICATION

ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

i **Myth:** 'If I approve one request to work flexibly then I have to approve everyone's'

Fact: Employees don't request flexible working just because they can, they do so if it's right for them. You can consider each request on its own merits, so subsequent requests may not be acceptable for specific service needs.



It is important to promote flexible working to staff and managers to make sure that your approach is understood.

Sharing stories of where flexible working is being used well, will enable employees to see that flexible working is supported by the organisation. The more people in your organisation that champion flexible working and talk about how they make it work for themselves and their team, the more normal and accepted it will become.

You can raise awareness about flexible working through a variety of communications channels:

- ✓ Signpost to your organisational policy and ensure it is up to date and clearly accessible to staff. Include your policy in new staff inductions and promote it on your intranet.
- ✓ Use your intranet to make information visible and include things like request forms and promotion of the benefits.
- ✓ Introduce flexible working ambassadors, share case studies and make existing staff working flexibly more visible within the organisation. Build a staff network and encourage its members to act as mentors for staff starting out on their flexible working journey.



7. COMMUNICATION

ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

Case study: United Lincolnshire Hospitals NHS Trust

The trust launched a [communications campaign about flexible working](#), as staff survey data showed that their flexible working policy was often perceived as rigid and not applied consistently across sites.

The campaign involved visible support from leadership and development of an intranet site dedicated to flexible working, including case studies and video clips of the HR director and director of nursing sharing their views on flexible working and how the trust supports staff.

The trust plans to use this site as a key channel for enhancing future awareness of flexible working.

FlexNHS

The FlexNHS movement was established to create a supportive, encouraging and resourceful network to promote and enable flexible working in the NHS for every profession, role and grade. It is available to everyone, helping to generate more conversations about the benefits of flexible working and dispel any myths. The network encourages diversity of thought to enable the most productive and effective organisational cultures to develop and allows colleagues to share ideas and best practice.

You can follow and engage with the network on Twitter at [@flexnhs](#). One of the co-founders of FlexNHS works at Milton Keynes University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust and the [trust's website has a section dedicated to flexible working](#) and the FlexNHS campaign.

i

Myth: 'It's only useful for parents'

Fact: Although it can be particularly appealing to parents with children still at school, or couples looking to start a family, flexible working is a viable and attractive option for employees at any stage in their life. Individuals increasingly want more say in when and where they work. Jobs don't always have to come at the expense of time with friends and family or learning a new skill outside of work.

8. SYSTEMS WORKING

ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

With the implementation of integrated care systems (ICSs) and sustainability and transformation partnerships (STPs), there is an increasing demand to develop a multidisciplinary and adaptive nursing workforce that can deliver care flexibly across primary, community and acute care.

There is also the need to remove practical barriers to staff movement between organisations and NHS trusts will be expected to streamline their processes.

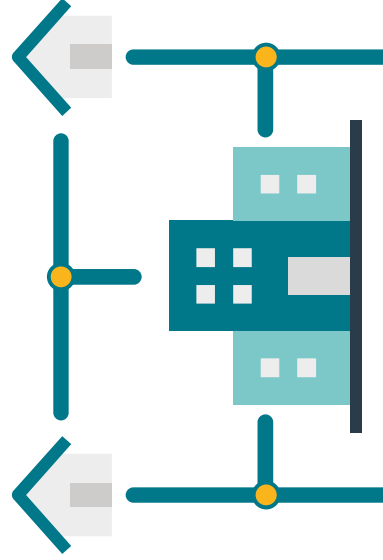
As part of the [NHS Long Term Plan](#), all trusts will be expected to implement staff banks, to create greater opportunities for staff to work flexibly and employers will also be expected to establish collaborative staff banks with other local trusts, increasing the potential number of shifts visible to those working flexibly.

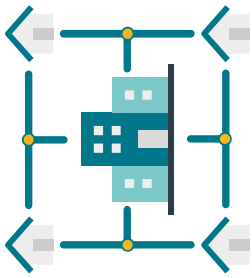
What needs to happen

Increasing opportunities across the NHS for nurses to work flexibly will require organisations to refocus efforts to ensure that processes are effective. By working collaboratively across organisational boundaries, systems working can lead to improved decision making and accomplishment of shared goals that cannot be achieved by working in isolation. The focus is no longer on operating as sole organisations. Systems must be enablers for the NHS organisations within them, making sure good practice is shared, facilitating lead models, and collaborating to ensure policies and processes are aligned.

There are no right answers about where to start and there is no single way to do it. Systems working is predominantly about building relationships and encouraging dialogue. The shift towards a collaborative approach will need an openness to embracing different ways of working and changes in mindset and behaviour from all organisations involved. Before participating in a systems approach, it is important to consider what your organisation is looking to get out of collaboration. The Leadership Academy [conversation cards](#) are a practical resource to help get groups talking and working together. Try using them with colleagues to encourage a different way of thinking about collaboration.

In time, as the capacity and maturity of ICSs develop, it is the ambition that these collaborative approaches become the norm and good practice and learning are shared to support other NHS organisations in the system.





8. SYSTEMS WORKING

ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

Case study: Lancashire and Cumbria Integrated Care System

Healthier Lancashire and South Cumbria ICS sought to improve the retention of staff across the region by increasing job opportunities and improving the mobility of the combined workforce.

The ICS developed the **It's Your Move Mobility Hub**, supported by a dedicated team that helps trusts identify and facilitate suitable job moves for staff across the partner organisations that make up the ICS, where redeployment, relocation or career development may otherwise cause staff to leave the system entirely.

Case study: CapitalNurse

Rather than competing to get nurses into a single organisation, **the CapitalNurse programme** in London has worked collaboratively using collective action to bring about measurable change. Nurse leaders have engaged at a regional level with STPs and locally in organisations, with an aim of attracting people into careers in nursing in London and keeping nurses throughout their career lifetime by streamlining employment processes and introducing standardised training.

The evaluation data shows that CapitalNurse has delivered initiatives that make it easier for registered nurses to build a career in the capital by moving between NHS trusts to gain experience. The programme has seen three times the improvement in retention in London, compared with the rest of the country, raised the profile of nursing at all levels across the capital, and achieved system-wide commitment to use the CapitalNurse model to deliver the NHS Long Term Plan and Vision for Health & Care in London.

The programme has tripled retention rates in London compared to the rest of the country

9. EVALUATION

ENABLERS TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

When planning your approach to increase the uptake of flexible working, you will want to consider how you are going to evaluate the impact of the changes you intend to make.

The evaluation process can help you to think through how you will measure the impact of your activities from the start.

Evaluating your flexible working approach will help you to:

- demonstrate the value
- adjust your processes to ensure quality and efficiency
- identify and replicate good practice
- celebrate and share successes.

Being clear about what you want to achieve and making time to regularly review your activities will help you to assess how successful they are and whether changes need to be made.

There are many information sources to consider when evaluating, including:

- workforce data (such as retention figures, flexible working uptake, bank staff numbers)
- staff surveys
- stay and exit interviews
- workshop-type discussions or focus groups with staff.

Ensuring a clear focus on evaluation will help you communicate your successes to your organisation's leadership and can help you identify elements that are critical to success, challenges and things that could have been improved. It is also useful to use as a baseline for other initiatives that your organisation would like to introduce.



CONCLUSION

There is no single solution that enables a culture of flexible working to thrive. This guide identifies a number of enablers to flexible working, which when looked at together, can improve opportunities for the nursing workforce to access shift patterns that allow them to achieve a better work-life balance.



Myth: 'Flexible working won't work here'

Fact: Very few organisations genuinely can't accommodate some form of flexible working. A pilot or trial period may be helpful in fine-tuning arrangements and dispelling any fears that colleagues may have about the impact on them. Putting teams in control of their own working arrangements, for example by use of self-rostering, is a good way of introducing flexibility and enabling shared responsibility for getting tasks done in ways that suit different service models.

Robust policies and processes are of course important, but these alone will not lead to the desired changes if focus is not also given to staff engagement, visible buy-in at leadership level and a commitment across organisations as a whole to shifting the narrative around flexible working so that it is seen as a normal part of the NHS employment offer.

Improving access to flexible working for nurses in a rostered and shift-based environment is not without its challenges. Through maintaining an open dialogue, employers can allow nurses to have better input into their working patterns and these conversations can lead to better shared decision making to develop solutions that balance the needs of the organisation with those of individual staff members.

Maintaining a focus on flexible working is an important part of how the NHS can seek to create a modern and appealing employment culture. In the midst of staffing shortages across the nursing workforce, it is essential that all parts of the system, at both a national and local level, look to flexible working as a way of improving retention outcomes for this section of the workforce.

For more tools, resources and case studies visit the NHS Employers [retention](#) and [flexible working](#) web pages and the [NHS England and NHS Improvement retention hub](#).



NHS Employers is the voice of employers in the NHS, supporting them to put patients first.

We actively seek the views of employers on key workforce issues and use our expertise to support them to develop a sustainable workforce, improve staff experience and provide high quality care to patients. We influence workforce policy at regional, national and European levels and turn policies into practical workable solutions.

NHS Employers is part of the NHS Confederation.

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