



MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD

WE ARE THE NHS: THE NHS PEOPLE PLAN 2020/21

UNISON BRIEFING, AUGUST 2020

Introduction

On 30 July 2020, [We Are The NHS: People Plan 2020/21 - Action For Us All](#) was published by NHS England. This is the delayed follow-up to the Interim NHS People Plan which came out in June 2019.

The People Plan sets out what NHS staff can expect from leaders and each other. It includes actions to support transformation, with a focus on fostering “a culture of inclusion and belonging”, as well as action to increase and train the workforce, and deliver care in different ways. In summary, “the NHS needs more people, working differently, in a compassionate and inclusive culture.”

The People Plan focuses on the current financial year 2020/21, but its principles are intended to endure beyond this. Further detail on aspects of the plan will follow once the government clarifies the available budget for workforce, education and training – this is expected in this autumn’s spending review. It also claims that further action “is expected to be set out later in the year, once funding arrangements for future years have been confirmed by the government.”

The principles outlined in the People Plan will apply “across all organisations, and to all of our people involved in providing or commissioning NHS care” with NHS England / Improvement and Health Education England (HEE) committing to work with non-NHS employers on how they deliver the principles laid out in the plan.

The People Plan issues a rallying cry for the NHS to harness the “energy, creativity and drive in finding solutions to new problems” that has been demonstrated by healthcare staff during the Covid-19 pandemic. Plans for recovery should include “a strong focus on looking after our people.”

There are four main sections to the People Plan and the briefing below aims to summarise the key elements of each. This is followed by some analysis from a UNISON perspective, along with suggested actions for branches and links for further reading.

1. Looking after our people

This section includes [Our NHS People Promise](#), which outlines the actions and behaviours staff should expect from their employers and colleagues, as part of improving the experience of working in the NHS for everyone. It builds on work through the NHS Social Partnership Forum on turning the “making the NHS the best place to work” section of the Interim People Plan into reality. The Promise outlines those areas which NHS staff have made clear matter most to them and these are summarised under a number of categories covering team working, flexible working, a learning culture, health and safety, a voice at work, being recognised and rewarded, and a compassionate and inclusive NHS culture. It makes clear

that for many staff some parts of the Promise will already match their current experience at work, but for others this may be further off. From 2021 the annual NHS Staff Survey will be redesigned to align with the Promise.

This section also covers areas that employers should focus on as part of the ongoing response to the Covid-19 pandemic, such as combating the risk of infection, ensuring suitable protective equipment is available, support for home-working, and ensuring sufficient rest and breaks for staff. In terms of bullying and harassment, by March 2021 a toolkit for employers will be produced on civility and respect, to support them in creating a positive workplace culture. And, building on recent initiatives to tackle violence against staff, by December 2020 an NHS violence reduction standard will be launched “to establish a systematic approach to protecting staff”.

In terms of staff wellbeing, all NHS organisations should have a wellbeing guardian, to look at the organisation’s activities from a health and wellbeing perspective; all staff should be supported to get to work, which includes confirmation that “NHS organisations should continue to give their people free car parking at their place of work for the duration of the pandemic”; and “resilience hubs” will be piloted alongside existing occupational health programmes to help improve staff mental health, including by referring staff to appropriate treatment and support if necessary.

The People Plan seeks to build on the flexible working changes that have taken place during the pandemic, with a new expectation of “flexibility by default”: from January 2021, all job roles across the NHS will be advertised as being available for flexible working patterns, with work set to take place with the NHS Staff Council on guidance to make this ambition a reality. In addition, NHS organisations should consider it good practice to offer flexible working from day one; online guidance and training on flexible working will be produced for staff and managers by December 2020; and employers should roll out new materials to support people with caring responsibilities.

2. Belonging in the NHS

In the section on equality, diversity and inclusion, the People Plan includes an acknowledgement that “the treatment of our colleagues from minority groups falls short far too often”, along with a call to create an organisational culture where everyone feels they belong, “in particular to improve the experience of our people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds.”

In terms of actions, by October 2020 employers, in partnership with staff representatives, should overhaul their recruitment and promotion practices to make sure their staffing reflects the diversity of their community, and every NHS body must publish progress to ensure that the workforce, at every level, is representative of the overall Black workforce. Further plans include commitments to boost leadership diversity and tackle the ethnicity gap in the use of disciplinary procedures

In terms of staff voice, the [NHS People Pulse](#) was recently launched to gauge the NHS staff experience of Covid-19. There are now plans to adapt the 2020 NHS Staff Survey to reflect the current context and to launch a new quarterly staff survey to better track morale.

The NHS will support compassionate and inclusive leadership through the development of a “leadership compact” that will be published shortly, and several more immediate actions to support leaders to continue building more compassionate and inclusive cultures in their teams.

3. New ways of working and delivering care

In reference to the achievements of NHS staff during the pandemic so far, this section states that such success was made possible “as bureaucracy fell away and people felt empowered to do what was needed.” Alongside the plan, the government launched a [call for evidence](#) in which, in the words of Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock, staff are urged to “speak up about what red tape you can do without to allow you to better deliver the high-quality care you are renowned for.” Hancock also gave a [speech](#) in which he drew on seven “cultural lessons” from the pandemic to launch the call for evidence, saying that staff should be trusted to use their own judgement, without having “layers of management peering over their shoulder.”

The People Plan follows on from the Interim People Plan with its focus on the importance of volunteers. The National Learning Hub for Volunteering has been launched by HEE, and should be used to support the training and development of volunteers in the NHS; and systems and employers are instructed to review how volunteers can help support the pandemic recovery phase, along with planning to support any volunteers who wish to move into NHS employment.

In terms of education and training, there will be a new £10m fund to boost placement capacity for nurses, midwives and allied health professionals. With online education, from January 2021 several universities will start delivering a pre-registration blended learning nursing degree programme.

4. Growing for the future

The People Plan outlines commitments to boost the mental health and cancer workforce, including the offer of training grants for 350 nurses to become specialists in cancer or chemotherapy. It also reiterates the ambition to increase undergraduate places by 5,000 from September 2020 in nursing, midwifery and allied health professional courses.

The People Plan refers to the need for employers to offer more apprenticeships, ranging from entry-level jobs through to senior clinical, scientific and managerial roles. This commitment was reinforced by a subsequent [announcement](#) of a £172m package from the government to enable up to 2,000 nursing apprentices to be trained every year for the next four years.

There is an aim to boost ethical international recruitment, with a new marketing campaign for the rest of 2020/21 to promote the NHS as an employer of choice for international health workers. The People Plan outlines further work to encourage former NHS staff to return to the service, claiming that around half of those who have returned are interested in continuing in some capacity. There are further plans to retain more staff who are approaching retirement.

The People Plan makes clear that the developing health systems in England (Sustainability and Transformation Partnerships or Integrated Care Systems) will be “the key units in planning for recovery.” The systems are expected to strengthen their approach to workforce planning to ensure that the skills of the workforce are deployed more effectively. This includes making better use of apprentices and volunteers; prioritising the use of bank staff over more expensive agency options when it comes to temporary staff; developing local workforce sharing agreements to enable rapid deployment of staff across localities; and supporting the trial of the Covid-19 digital staff passport this winter, which aims to make temporary staff movement around the NHS easier.

Analysis

The People Plan rightly acknowledges the severe strain that Covid-19 has placed on the healthcare workforce, as well as the commitment and sacrifice of NHS staff in continuing to deliver for patients during this time. And while there is little new in the plan, there is an important recognition that some of the positive changes brought about by the pandemic should become part of the everyday experience of working life in the NHS.

The plans to ensure greater flexible working are a definite positive, particularly as the NHS Staff Council will have a role in ensuring they become a reality. The acknowledgement that systemic racism continues to blight the NHS is welcome, as are the detailed plans to address discrimination. Likewise, the continuing work to tackle violence against NHS staff that UNISON have been heavily involved in, as well as the practical steps to improve and protect staff wellbeing.

The accompanying announcement on apprenticeships represents a victory for UNISON. The union has long championed the need for employers to be able to use apprenticeship funding to cover the costs of “backfill” staff while apprentices are undertaking education and training. It was frustrating, however, that the announcement was limited to nursing, and there remains a need to ensure that apprentices receive a fair and consistent wage.

On the downside, there is a major missed opportunity when it comes to pay, with a failure to link any of the People Plan aims to staff reward. Many of the ambitions outlined in the Plan to improve staff morale or boost recruitment and retention are inextricably tied to levels of pay, so this feels like an obvious gap.

Similarly, while there are a number of references to the importance of the NHS working with social care, the Plan is powerless to deliver real change in this area while the government continues to duck the pressing need for wholesale reform of the social care sector.

As part of his plans to “bust bureaucracy”, health secretary Matt Hancock has conflated management and bureaucracy, which represents either an unfortunate ignorance of the fact that the NHS is relatively under-managed compared to other sectors, or a wrong-headed lurch into populism. Improved pay and training are more likely to boost the sense of staff empowerment than attacking NHS managers, and the most obvious way of reducing bureaucracy would be to dispense with the NHS market – something which even the Conservative 2019 election manifesto seemed to accept, but which the government so far failed to implement.

The Plan is light on how its various ambitions should be put into practice. The “Phase 3” [letter](#), that went out from NHS England to health bodies the day after the People Plan was published, confirmed that all systems should develop their own local people plan to detail how they will implement the aims of the national plan in their areas. But this puts a great deal of responsibility onto the emerging systems, some of which are in a far better position to do this than others.

And finally, there remains the perennial problem of money. Crucial elements of any effort to properly address key workforce issues – such as the actual numbers of staff that will make up the future NHS – remain on hold pending government funding allocations. For this the NHS must wait until later in the year at the earliest, and this assumes that Covid-19, Brexit or other unforeseen problems do not blow the spending review off course. There are many extenuating circumstances, but in an ideal world the NHS would have a fully funded comprehensive workforce strategy for the next five years, rather than a stop-gap solution for the next nine months devoid of any price tags.

Action for UNISON branches

The plan aims to produce what it calls a “movement for improvement”, in which systems work with staff and employers to develop local people plans to deliver the ambitions set out in the national document. Such plans “should be reviewed by regional and system People Boards and should be refreshed regularly in response to changes in demand or services.” Where UNISON branches or regions are able to engage with People Boards, the development of these local plans does provide a chance for the union to have an input into the way the national plan is implemented.

At the local level, branches should ensure that HR leads are aware of the key content of the national People Plan, particularly drawing their attention to the content of the People Promise and the attendant commitments to extend flexible working and improve staff wellbeing. These parts of the plan should also be included on agendas for JNCCs in the coming months to establish how UNISON can play a role locally.

The People Plan promises there will be a continuing programme of engagement (such as webinars, discussion groups and roundtables) for the rest of this year, and the union will cascade any information we receive about such events through regions. There may also be further notices posted on the People Plan part of the NHS England website: www.england.nhs.uk/ournhspeople.

Further reading

- [We Are The NHS: The NHS People Plan 2020/21](#)
- [Government press release announcing the publication of the People Plan](#)
- ["Reducing bureaucracy" call for evidence](#)
- [Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock's speech on the future of healthcare](#)
- [Government announcement on nursing apprenticeships](#)
- [NHS England, "Phase 3" letter to the system](#)
- [Summary of People Plan actions from NHS Employers](#)
- [UNISON press release on the People Plan](#)
- [Interim NHS People Plan \(2019\)](#)
- [UNISON briefing on the Interim NHS People Plan \(2019\)](#)

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