



**Northern Ireland
Confederation**
for Health and Social Care

No Time to Lose: Opportunities and Priorities for Northern Ireland's HSC Workforce

A roundtable report exploring system priorities and opportunities for the future of Northern Ireland's Health and Social Care workforce.

October 2023

About us

About NICON

The Northern Ireland Confederation for Health and Social Care (NICON) is the voice of the organisations working across Northern Ireland's integrated health and social care system (HSC). Part of the UK-wide NHS Confederation, it is the only membership body for all HSC organisations.

NICON's membership comprises all six HSC trusts (including the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service); the 'regional' organisations (the Public Health Agency and the Business Services Organisation); as well as the eight smaller HSC bodies.

www.nhsconfed.org/NICON

About HPMA

The Healthcare People Management Association is the professional voice of people professionals in health and care.

Established nearly 50 years ago, we now have over 5,000 members ranging from HR directors and deputy directors through to trusts and CCGs.

Our aim is to support and develop the people profession to improve the people management contribution in healthcare and ultimately improve patient care.

<https://www.hpma.org.uk/northern-ireland/>

About NHS Employers

We are the employers' organisation for the NHS in England. We support workforce leaders and represent employers and systems to develop a sustainable workforce and be the best employers they can be.

<https://www.nhsemployers.org/>

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Executive summary

1.1 Our rapidly changing global landscape has increased pressures on the healthcare workforce around the world, as demand for health and care services increasingly outstrips supply. Northern Ireland has not been immune to the impacts of this shift, and there is an ever-growing consensus that we must find new ways of adjusting to this ‘new normal’, particularly in a post-pandemic world. With system pressures in Northern Ireland at an all-time high and multi-year budgets an almost distant memory, it is vital that we take time to consider what more can be done within our existing structures and strategies to build a workforce that is truly fit for the future and can adapt to these pressures and, indeed, respond to future potential public health crises.

1.2 Against this backdrop, on 8th September 2023, leaders from across Northern Ireland’s Health and Social Care (HSC) system came together to discuss key opportunities and to agree on collective priorities to secure a robust, resilient, and agile HSC workforce.

1.3 The objectives for this workshop were to:

- Set out the context in general, reflecting on the changing landscape and key issues
- Gain insight into learning and approaches in other nations
- Develop a concept of what “good” would look like in order to develop a vision and plan for the future
- Develop a set of key actions, based on a consensus regarding the key workforce opportunities and priorities

1.4 Key actions to maximise our workforce:

There are significant opportunities to accelerate progress by building on existing policies and strategies and working as a system. These include:

- Developing effective and proactive workforce retention strategies
- Making HSC roles more attractive and removing barriers to recruitment
- Reducing agency spend and redirecting the associated savings

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- Thinking 'system' not institution when it comes to recruitment and fostering a sense of belonging among staff on an HSC-wide - rather than individual organisation - level
 - Exploring apprenticeships and associated funding pathways
 - Harnessing data and developing intelligence to target our actions
 - Strengthening engagement and opportunities for leadership

1.5 Thinking towards the future:

Recognising the globally emerging consensus on the future of the healthcare workforce, Northern Ireland's system must implement changes for the future. These include:

- Improving workplace experiences, empowering our workforce
- Investment in new and changing roles
- Working as one system
- Furthering the prevention agenda by embracing the HSC's role as a potential 'anchor institution'¹
- Resource allocation and redirection

1.6 Conclusion and next steps:

This report outlines agreed actions required to ensure that the workforce is best positioned to deliver high quality care for the future. The output from this report highlights the importance of collaboration across all professional groups to harness system wide knowledge and agree a shared vision for what the future should look like.

Consideration of next steps is required to identify the best way to implement the key actions and to agree leadership mechanisms for success.

1. Introduction

In September 2023, senior leaders from across Northern Ireland's Health and Social Care (HSC) system came together for a roundtable discussion on the key HSC workforce opportunities and priorities. The workshop, delivered in association with HPMA and NHS Employers, was facilitated by prominent health and care system leader, Mike Farrar. It provided an opportunity to collectively identify the possibilities amid current pressures and to consider what actions can be taken today to address increasingly pressing workforce issues.

Northern Ireland's health and social care system has experienced unprecedented pressure in recent years. The dedicated and compassionate individuals who make up the workforce, unsurprisingly, remain the HSC's greatest asset. Workforce is therefore a key transformational issue requiring urgent consideration to ensure that it is fit to deliver high quality care, both now and in the future. However, longstanding workforce challenges have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, ongoing political instability, and budgetary constraints. The recent publication of a new [NHS workforce plan](#)² in England emphasises the importance of redoubling our efforts to drive forward Northern Ireland's [Health and Social Care Workforce Strategy 2026](#)³.

Senior HSC leaders were joined by a number of external experts who set out the wider national and international context, enhancing perspectives and informing the subsequent discussions. This included the international context, presented by Dr Ronan Glynn, Health Sector Lead at EY Ireland, and insights on the NHS in England from Caroline Waterfield, Director of Development and Employment at NHS Employers. Rodney Redmond, Head of the Workforce Strategy Unit in Northern Ireland's Department of Health, provided local insights, as well as an update on progress to date on the HSC Workforce Strategy. The workshop provided an opportunity for senior leaders to connect, refresh their ideas around workforce challenges and the current context, and agree best approaches to the increasing demand and challenges.

2. Reflecting on national and international perspectives

“The health workforce crisis is no longer a looming threat – it is here and now... The health and wellbeing of our societies are at stake – there is simply no time to lose.”

- Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe

International context: EY

Dr Ronan Glynn, Health Sector Lead at EY Ireland, set out the international context. Exemplifying the global nature of health and care workforce supply challenges, Dr Glynn pointed to the recent adoption of the 2023 [Bucharest Declaration](#)⁴ by World Health Organisation member states, which sets out the need to adopt a strategic approach to workforce planning; improve recruitment and retention strategies; optimise our existing workforce and make the best possible use of public investment.

Northern Ireland’s health and social care system is undoubtedly not alone in facing significant and sustained pressures. The familiar pattern of ageing demographics, chronic illness and consequent growing demand have combined with service backlogs and rising patient expectations, rendering many national healthcare systems in urgent need of transformation. In this context, Dr Glynn stressed the need for healthcare systems to better understand the rapid changes that are underway and to revise their approach to workforce planning accordingly.

While the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the extent of our reliance on health and social care staff, it also laid bare the incidence and impact of [staff burnout](#)⁵, placing a renewed emphasis on the importance of staff wellbeing and working conditions as a key element of workforce retention. Additionally, how and where work takes place has transformed significantly as a result of the pandemic. Remote and hybrid working remain a viable option for many, with more employees seeking hybrid and flexible working conditions. Such broader changes in the labour market emphasise the need for health and care systems to consider how they can adapt to meet market demands and remain competitive as an employer. Dr Glynn invited

colleagues to consider what health systems are doing at the international level to meet these pressing workforce challenges and to collectively agree on potential solutions that could make a difference today in our local context.

National context: NHS Employers

Caroline Waterfield, Director of Development and Employment at NHS Employers, provided insight into solutions that are being taken forward across England to tackle workforce challenges. These include ringfenced funding for apprenticeship posts, developing community-based career pathways and considering new potential career pathways. Additionally, NHS Employers has seen a recent increased focus on harnessing the talent of the neurodiverse workforce and in recognising the value that diverse perspectives and skills can bring to the health and care sector, particularly as the context of the workplace changes and technology and innovation spark advancements. Given the complexity of pressures facing Northern Ireland's Health and Social Care system, Caroline emphasised the importance of taking the time to think about what can be done now to tackle workforce issues.

HSCNI context: Department of Health

Rodney Redmond, Head of the Workforce Strategy Unit in the Department of Health outlined the context for Northern Ireland's HSC workforce. The workforce strategy was published in May 2018 with the aim to meet workforce needs and the needs of the workforce by 2026. A second action plan⁶ was developed in Summer 2021, after the initial stages of the pandemic, which provided flexibility in the delivery of the strategy. Published in June 2022, this second action plan covers the period 2022/23 to 2024/25 and contains some 34 actions and 100 associated outputs.⁷ Rodney outlined that achievements have been made in attracting, recruiting, and training additional staff due to the strategy, increasing availability of high-quality training and development and effective workforce planning. In addition, the strategy

⁷ Compared to 24 actions and 40 associated outputs in the first action plan

has commenced initiatives to progress and embed new, multi-disciplinary roles as well as a greater focus on staff health and wellbeing post-pandemic.

Despite these achievements, however, there was acknowledgement that serious challenges, including funding shortages, continue to impact on Northern Ireland's ability to implement the actions and improvements set out in the plan.

What does this mean for Northern Ireland?

Following these insights and noting the current system wide pressures, participants were asked to consider the information and what it means in terms of opportunities in Northern Ireland.

- There was a general sense of excitement around the opportunities and possibilities for wider, new ways of thinking and nurturing and growing new people within the HSC.
- It was noted that many issues are covered in the current HSC workforce strategy however, visibility across the system should be increased. There is a need to bring the workforce along on this journey, to share the vision and ensure workforce engagement.
- There was agreement that the world has changed significantly in recent years and although the HSC has developed on a number of fronts in this regard, this needs to be embraced on a continuous basis to ensure that the HSC remains fit for purpose for the workforce it seeks to retain and attract, as well as the population it serves.
- The HSC can be inflexible with approaches focused on localities rather than thinking about who and where the workforce is. Different thinking is required to tackle these issues and ensure that more is done to create new roles, capacity is built in the digital space, and visibility of workforce planning increases.

3. Maximising our workforce now

Opportunities based on varying levels of available resources were considered. Further details on this element of the discussion are listed in Annex A. From this, seven key actions were identified to take forward as priorities. These are:



4. Becoming ‘Fit for the Future’

Building upon the key actions to prioritise now, opportunities that must be embraced for the future include:



Additionally, a series of mechanisms that would enable the HSC workforce to become fit for the future were identified. These are opportunities that would require longer term investment and merit further consideration.

- 1 Improve workplace experiences** through cultural change. Investing time and resources into improving team cultures, embodying organisational values, and embracing best practice will add intrinsic value to HSC career paths and empower the workforce. A positive work culture can significantly improve attraction and retention, leading to better continuity of patient care and better health outcomes for Northern Ireland's population.
- 2 Investment in new and changing roles** will be required to ensure that the system harnesses the benefits of new technologies to improve efficiencies and access to care, adapting to future patient needs.
- 3 Working as one system:** Adopting a whole system approach, akin to the 'provider collaborative' model adopted by NHS Trusts in England,⁸ to collectively address workforce gaps; train staff in new roles; follow best practice pertaining to recruitment and retention strategies; and promote HSC careers. This would enable a unified approach and result in a system that works in collaboration, rather than in competition, which will be of particular importance as we seek to transform and reconsider the current configuration of services.
- 4 Resource spending and redirection** is an ongoing focus throughout Northern Ireland's HSC system. With positive advances already being made in reducing off-framework agency spending for the social care, nursing, and midwifery workforce, it is essential to capture evidence of successful savings and ensure that these resources are redirected to improve workforce outcomes across the system.
- 5 Equip the workforce to progress the prevention agenda.** By ensuring that the HSC engages with local communities around employment and development opportunities via apprenticeships and early school leaver pathways, there is considerable potential to not only improve career prospects for the population and improve capacity across the system, but also to enhance equity of health outcomes.⁹

6. Conclusion and next steps

At a time of significant pressure across the system, senior HSC leaders joined together to collectively reflect, review, and refocus on what can be done to tackle workforce issues now and for the future. With a joined-up approach, this highlighted the importance of collaboration across all professional groups to agree a shared vision for the future and to identify the mechanisms required to ensure that the workforce is best positioned to deliver high quality care for Northern Ireland's population.

To ensure the vision for Northern Ireland's future HSC workforce is achieved, consideration of next steps is required to identify the best way forward to implement the agreed key actions and to identify leadership mechanisms for success.

7. Annex A: Actions according to available resources

The group examined what actions could maximise the HSC workforce today, based on limited resources, as well as opportunities that could be taken forward with significant additional resource.

With limited or no additional resource:

- Collaboration across the system, working towards shared priorities and towards the benefit of all HSC staff and patients in Northern Ireland
- Positive messaging to staff that shares the vision and engages and encourages everyone to work towards improved workforce outcomes
- Improving the narrative and language used around workforce concerns and opportunities
- Improving the culture across the system to increase retention and attraction to roles
- Working in partnership to develop more flexible roles and explore new career pathways
- Better onboarding, mentoring and support to improve retention
- Building career pathways for the workforce
- Partnerships that allow pooling of resources: working with schools and other partners to engage in long term workforce planning
- Opportunities to review job specifications and requirements and to consider new approaches
- Exploring apprenticeship schemes
- Attracting school leavers through new career avenues
- Developing leaders and teams at all levels across the HSC
- Peer support mechanisms for leaders to positively influence culture
- Improving the ease of movement for the workforce across Trusts through an HSC passport arrangement.
- Increased HR business partner support for service areas to identify and support workforce planning, improved culture, team building etc. to improve attraction and retention.

With significant additional resource:

- Improvement in recruitment shared services for efficiency in the recruitment experience
- Innovative systems using new technology and exploration of the opportunities associated with AI
- Service and hospital reconfiguration plans; ensuring that service transformation is aligned to the workforce strategy and adequately considers the workforce pressures and opportunities that require attention.

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