

**NHS staffing
solutions and
strategic partners:
supporting each
other to fix the
nursing workforce**

WHITE PAPER

Executive summary

The NHS nursing workforce currently faces significant challenges, as has been well documented over the last few years. However, it also offers unprecedented opportunity, especially during a period of major government reform.

With nursing vacancies exceeding 112,000 and workforce demand continuing to grow, senior leaders are under pressure to transform recruitment, retention and workforce planning. They are also expected to align with and deliver government policy priorities.

This white paper explores the strategic role of nurse leadership and external partners in shaping a future-ready workforce. It offers insights into the core pressures, transformational priorities, and solutions in practice.

Key themes include:

- **Workforce pressure:** staffing gaps are projected to widen unless strategic action is taken. Retention, wellbeing and recruitment models must evolve to avoid service strain.
- **Leadership imperative:** senior nurses are leading care redesign and workforce transformation. Their role is strategic, influencing policy, digital adoption and flexible staffing.
- **Strategic partnerships:** workforce providers are delivering tangible results, from tech-enabled staff banks to international recruitment and regional collaboration.

To secure the future of nursing, healthcare providers must treat workforce not just as an operational concern but as a strategic asset championed by nurse leaders and supported by forward-thinking partnerships.



Introduction

Nurses are the bedrock of the NHS, accounting for the largest share of the healthcare workforce. Yet they face mounting challenges from staffing shortages to burnout and digital adaptation.

Workforce reform is essential. NHS strategies envision more care delivered outside hospital settings, enabled by digital tools and prevention-based models. Nurses are central to this change.

Transforming the workforce demands more than recruitment drives. It requires rethinking models, roles and partnerships.

It calls for nurse leaders to shape system-wide strategies, and for trusted partners to deliver workforce solutions that are sustainable, scalable and future-focused.

Current workforce landscape

The UK is grappling with one of the most severe nursing shortages in its history. While new nurses are entering the profession, many leave within three years.

Others cite workplace stress, lack of development, or poor staffing ratios as drivers of exit. International recruitment helps but is not a silver bullet.

Meanwhile, demand grows. An ageing population, rising acuity and community care models mean nurses are needed in more settings, with broader skillsets.

Technology is also changing how care is delivered. These shifts highlight the need for new roles, smarter workforce planning and workforce wellbeing.



Strategic workforce challenges

Senior nurse leaders, supported by system executives, face a complex set of workforce demands:

- **Retention and engagement:** wellbeing, career progression and culture are critical to retaining talent.
- **Flexible staffing:** modern services require a blend of permanent, bank, agency and digital solutions.
- **Digital skills:** nurses increasingly need to work with electronic records, virtual monitoring and AI tools.
- **Planning and data:** strategic workforce planning relies on accurate demand forecasting and skills mapping.
- **Education and upskilling:** career frameworks and CPD access must evolve to support role expansion and leadership growth.

These are not HR challenges alone, they are strategic issues that impact care quality, operational performance and long-term sustainability.

Role of nurse leaders in workforce innovation

Modern nurse leaders are more than clinical managers. They are strategic influencers shaping the future of care. From chief nurses and directors of nursing to chief nursing information officers, they lead change across:

- **Workforce strategy:** redesigning staffing models aligned to ICS goals.
- **Digital transformation:** championing technology adoption and upskilling.
- **Staff experience:** advocating for staff voice, inclusion, and wellbeing.
- **Service redesign:** rebuilding pathways for prevention and community-based care.

Their unique combination of clinical insight, operational understanding, and workforce influence makes nurse leaders essential to system reform. When supported and empowered, they can drive workforce innovation from within.



Workforce solutions in action: case studies

Strategic partnerships with external providers are helping NHS organisations implement flexible and scalable solutions.

Here we explore some real-world examples involving medical and nursing staff that demonstrate where NHS leaders have worked successfully with partners in the private sector to find a solution to a local workforce challenge.

Case study 1: Medacs Healthcare – digitally enabled staff bank

Medacs Healthcare partnered with Lancashire Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust to launch a mobile-first medical staff bank.

In just seven weeks, over 840 doctors enrolled, able to self-book shifts and submit timesheets digitally.

The trust improved shift fill rates to 99%, cut agency use by 60%, and projected savings of over £2m per year.

The programme is a model for how technology and user-centred design can modernise flexible staffing.

Case study 2: HCRG Workforce Solutions – international recruitment with integration support

To meet demand, Basildon and Thurrock University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust turned to HCRG Workforce Solutions for overseas nurse recruitment.

While the target was 80 nurses, HCRG successfully recruited and placed 145, providing full onboarding, accommodation support, and mentorship.

This structured approach improved retention, reduced onboarding risk, and enabled workforce continuity. It highlights the value of ethical, end-to-end recruitment models.

Case study 3: HealthTrust Europe – collaborative locum workforce model

HealthTrust Europe brought together 13 West Midlands NHS organisations in a shared programme to streamline medical locum staffing.

By creating a unified supplier framework and centralising data, they achieved 24% savings on agency commission and improved compliance and fill rates.

The initiative underscores how regional collaboration and commercial alignment can deliver scale and efficiency in workforce delivery.

Strategic considerations by leadership role

Effective workforce strategies require coordination across multiple leadership functions. Below are key considerations for executive stakeholders:

- **Chief operating officer:** align workforce flexibility with service delivery and operational resilience.
- **Head of workforce solutions:** leverage external partnerships and internal data to manage supply and demand.
- **Director of healthcare recruitment:** focus on long-term pipeline building and multi-channel sourcing.
- **Head of learning and development:** support career progression and digital skills pathways.
- **Sales director/VP of operations:** ensure service delivery aligns with workforce capacity and continuity.
- **Chief people officer:** lead wellbeing strategy, reduce attrition, and improve workplace culture.
- **Director of workforce/head of partnerships:** collaborate with integrated care systems and strategic suppliers to co-design solutions.
- **Chief commercial officer:** articulate the commercial and reputational value of workforce excellence.

These roles must work in concert, guided by nurse leaders and supported by accurate data, trusted partnerships, and flexible delivery models.

Building a future-ready nursing workforce

A future-ready workforce is not built through crisis hiring, it requires strategic planning and partnership. Key priorities include:

- **Redesigning staffing models:** move beyond agency-dependence through permanent, bank and insourcing strategies.
- **Embracing digital:** invest in platforms, training, and roles that unlock productivity and work-life balance.
- **Supporting nurse leaders:** provide leadership training and decision-making roles that amplify clinical voice.
- **Retention as strategy:** build inclusive, supportive cultures that value staff contribution and career development.
- **Cross-sector collaboration:** share insights and innovations across public and private partners.

These steps require time, investment and bold leadership but the cost of inaction is greater.

Nursing Leaders 2026

As the workforce examples in this paper demonstrate, partnerships between the private sector and the NHS are most effective when they align with policy priorities and embed at the heart of system transformation.

One of the most powerful ways to explore this alignment further is through direct dialogue with the leaders implementing these reforms. Nursing Leaders 2026, taking place on 10 September 2026 in Liverpool, offers that rare opportunity. Bringing together the UK's nurse leaders, the conference is a critical touchpoint for building lasting relationships and shared understanding.

Nursing Leaders 2026 will offer the space to listen, collaborate and lead in a way that supports both business goals and the future of UK healthcare. If you can't wait until then, make sure you attend this year's Nursing Times Workforce Summit in London on 19 and 26 November 2025.

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For further details on Nursing Leaders 2026

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