Retaining your health visitor workforce

By 2015, the health visiting workforce will be larger, rejuvenated and providing levels of support targeted to individual needs. The Health visitor implementation plan 2011–15: a call to action, commits to recruiting an extra 4,200 health visitors and developing the service offering.

The number of health visitors has been in decline in recent years. The implementation plan states that health visitors employed in post have fallen from 10,137 in 2004 to 8,017 in 2010. It recognises that in order to meet this target, the existing health visitor workforce needs to remain motivated and retained.

This document brings together suggestions and tips to help HR, line managers and staff side representatives work together to develop a retention strategy for your health visiting workforce. These approaches will often mirror the staff pledges in the NHS Constitution. Any work you are undertaking locally to embed the pledges are likely to reinforce your retention strategies.

When underpinned with robust workforce intelligence and information, these tools and resources can help NHS organisations reduce turnover, increase stability and meet the needs of children and their families.

**Key points**

- Retaining your health visiting workforce is essential to meet the 4,200 target.
- Some turnover is healthy but too much is damaging.
- High vacancy rates can affect staff morale.
- Difficulties in retaining staff make it more difficult to recruit.
- When promoting the profession, one of the biggest marketing tools is your staff. Ensuring they are engaged and motivated adds to your organisation’s reputation.

**Understanding your health visitor workforce**

Before you develop any retention solutions it is essential to have collected and reviewed relevant information and data so you can understand what your local issues are.

Data can be grouped into two categories: workforce information that provides quantitative data on the size and shape of your health visitor staff and workforce intelligence that gives softer, qualitative data. As there are a number of causes of turnover among health visiting staff, collecting both types of information will provide the foundation for any strategy you develop.

**Workforce information**

Collecting quantitative workforce data will provide the background detail on your health visitor workforce that will enable you to start highlighting issues around retention. This information is typically already available through the Electronic Staff Record (ESR) or your local HR systems. The box overleaf
provides examples of workforce information that will be valuable to collect.

It’s important that information is up to date and accurately reflects your workforce. A data cleansing exercise that HR and line managers undertake in partnership at the beginning of your retention project will ensure you have accurate data on which to make well-informed decisions.

### Examples of workforce information
- number of health visitors in post
- pay bands
- working pattern
- age profile
- turnover rates
- sickness absence
- referrals to occupational health
- length of service
- vacancy rates
- vacancy time to fill.

Once all the information has been collected, it can be reviewed and cross-referenced to identify any trends. While it is important not to draw absolute conclusions from the data at this stage, the information may be useful when collecting and putting workforce intelligence into context.

### Workforce intelligence
It is necessary to use the workforce information you have gathered alongside more qualitative workforce intelligence, as statistics alone cannot provide the whole picture. The reasons people choose to stay or leave are complex. An amount of turnover is normal and healthy but understanding what your workforce are thinking and feeling about their role, the organisation and working environment can identify trends that may be causing staff to leave.

The majority of organisations use some form of exit interview or questionnaire to identify and explore reasons for leaving. This may be a good opportunity to review what information you collect to ensure the data provides enough detail to inform your strategy and that the process feeds into a regular review of retention issues.

As well as reviewing information from leavers, collecting information on factors that are causing employees to consider leaving is valuable as a preventative measure.

The NHS staff survey provides information on employee satisfaction. Reviewing answers by the health visitor staff group in your organisation on intention to leave, ability to deliver the level of patient care they aspire to and rates of working above contracted hours can highlight some broad areas for concern. See our [NHS staff survey web pages](#) for more information. Other ways that employers can identify areas of dissatisfaction are through completed appraisal data, attitude surveys or grievance systems.

Line managers are best placed to identify issues for concern that might be causing staff to consider leaving. Day-to-day conversations, observations and feedback from team meetings and informal reviews should be collected and considered along with other workforce intelligence.

### Options, tools and resources for retention
There is no single solution or quick fix to successfully retain staff. Collecting workforce information and intelligence will allow you to identify trends and issues affecting health visitor retention in your organisation. From these you will be able to use some of the following tools and resources to find a solution that meets your needs.

### Retention project team
Creating a project team, incorporating staff from HR, workforce, children’s and families services and staff side representatives, that facilitates an ongoing conversation, will help to ensure that retention of health visitors continues to be improved.

You might do this by creating a project team or identifying a nominated person to review the workforce information, ensuring they have an awareness of relevant governance procedures so risks can be raised through the appropriate channels.
Staff engagement
The staff pledges in the NHS Constitution require staff to be given the opportunity to be included in decisions that affect their working lives. Our work on staff engagement has shown that high levels of engagement has a positive impact on staff health and well-being, sickness absence levels and patient outcomes. Engaged employees are also more likely to be advocates for your organisation. A staff engagement strategy should therefore underpin all of your work on retention.

The role of the manager is critical in leading the team through the change process and enabling a culture of two-way communication and commitment. Encouraging staff to get involved in decisions about how the new service should run and joint development of job roles to deliver the new service are just two ideas that, if successfully embedded, can lead to improved morale and retention rates.

You can access further information from our staff engagement web pages, including a staff engagement toolkit, briefings, tips for line managers, webinar summaries and latest research and information. See www.nhsemployers.org/staffengagement

Promoting and communicating the changes
The Health visitor implementation plan 2011–2015: a call to action commits to offering existing health visitors the opportunity to refresh and develop their skills. The new service will help re-energise health visitors, refocusing their work on public health and prevention.

Some employers report morale is low among health visiting staff. By communicating the changes and benefits, involving them throughout implementation and encouraging promotion of the profession, they are more likely to feel proud of their career and continue in their role.

Flexible working
Flexible working opportunities bring benefits to retention and morale, and employers can realise these by accommodating individual preferences wherever possible and making sure staff and managers are aware of the options available to them. Find out more by visiting our A-Z of flexible working and information on developing a business case for flexible working. See www.nhsemployers.org/flexible

Flexible retirement options
Ensuring staff considering retirement are aware of and understand the flexible retirement options available to them, can retain skills and provide additional flexibility within your service. There are various approaches to flexible retirement which include reduced hours/days; stepping down to a lower grade; retire and return to work; and draw down some pension and continue in employment.

Employers can communicate the various options available by using posters in the workplace, cascading the message via managers and talking to staff about these important personal decisions. Further information on flexible retirement, including information on the removal of the default retirement age and best practice is available on our pensions pages. See www.nhsemployers.org/pensions

To help you review the age profile of your health visiting staff, NHS Employers has developed an age profiling tool which allows you to project the age of your workforce based on different scenarios.

Health, work and well-being
The Boorman NHS health and well-being review (2009) states that where staff health and well-being is prioritised, retention is higher. The review presents a series of recommendations that include organisations having a prevention-focused strategy in place, embedded accountability for well-being and ensuring early interventions occur for staff with musculoskeletal and mental health conditions.

Work-based stress is believed to account for up to 30 per cent of sickness absence, and those suffering from stress are less likely to stay with the organisation. Managers need to have the skills to recognise the causes of stress (such as work environment, organisational change, lack of support and relationships) and be supported to develop an action plan to manage the issues.
Our health, work and well-being web pages include top ten tips for implementing the Boorman strategy, mental health awareness and stress management resources and many other tools to support a well-being strategy. See www.nhsemployers.org/healthyworkforce

Additionally, our NHS well-being at work website compiles many well-being resources, including those for managing stress. See www.nhsemployers.org/wellbeing

Developing staff
The development of the new health visiting service as described in the Health visitor implementation plan provides an ideal opportunity to start discussing individuals’ development opportunities.

Staff development can be achieved through carrying out regular appraisals, encouraging ongoing personal development, further education and training, coaching and mentoring. It is important to ensure your equality and diversity policies are followed when designing staff development initiatives.

Staff appraisals lead to improved staff performance and morale, which can aid retention. NHS Employers provides further information on appraisal, including the simplified Knowledge and Skills Framework. See www.nhsemployers.org/SimplifiedKSF

Partnership working between individuals, line managers and HR, sharing the responsibility for staff development, can make a big difference to morale and retention. While promotion may not always be possible, employee opportunities can be maximised by offering varied experience and diverse roles.

Our talent management briefing, Talent for tough times: how to identify, attract and retain the talent you need, provides practical advice on what good talent looks like, discusses why it is important and how you can get started. See www.nhsemployers.org/talentmanagement

Recruitment, selection and induction
If health visiting staff are leaving within a year of appointment then it may be worthwhile to review your recruitment, selection and induction processes. Presenting a realistic view of the job role and environment during the selection process is essential to manage individuals’ expectations of a role.

Induction provides an opportunity to start your staff engagement early. It helps embed staff in the role, getting them up to speed quickly and making them aware of organisational processes, culture and values. Induction can be a valuable channel to promote and communicate many of the other strategies in this section such as health and well-being policies, development opportunities, communicating progress around the health visitor implementation plan, flexible working and preceptorship. Our staff engagement toolkit provides information about making the most of the opportunity presented by induction. See www.nhsemployers.org/staffengagement

Preceptorship
Offering a preceptorship programme can be particularly important for those who have completed health visiting programmes immediately after qualifying as a nurse or midwife. You may also wish to consider offering the same preceptorship support to all recently qualified health visiting staff. This can assist retention, particularly if staff are leaving after a short period of employment.

Evaluate and review
Ensuring that your health visiting staff remain engaged, motivated and retained is an ongoing process. Collecting and reviewing data on a regular basis and evaluating the impact of your initiatives and interventions will allow for continuous adjustment and improvement.

It is essential for the existing health visiting workforce to be motivated and retained in order for employers to achieve the target of an extra 4,200 health visitors by 2015 and ensure the best service for children and their families. Health visitors themselves are ideally placed to be champions of the profession and new service vision.
Health visitor retention checklist

1. Understanding your health visitor workforce
Data will help inform any plan you employ to increase retention. Ensuring the data is accurate at the start of the exercise is essential and should be updated and reviewed on an ongoing basis.

**Workforce information**
- Turnover rates
- Numbers in post
- Whole time equivalent
- Referrals to occupational health
- Pay bands
- Working patterns
- Age profile
- Length of service
- Age profile projections
- Vacancy rates
- Vacancy time to fill
- Sickness absence

**Workforce intelligence**
- Collate exit information
- Review appraisal data
- Review attitude surveys
- Collect grievance data
- Review NHS staff survey results
- Review exit interview process
- Collect feedback from managers and staff

2. Retention strategies
Effective retention strategies will depend on the challenges you face at a local level. The following list contains some of the options that will help you meet these.

- Establish retention project team
- Ensure effective appraisals are completed
- Promote flexible retirement options
- Communicate implementation plan
- Review education and training
- Develop strategies for managing stress
- Offer development opportunities
- Redesign induction process
- Communicate flexible working options
- Embed staff engagement
- Implement coaching and mentoring
- Review health, work and well-being strategies
- Review flexible working
- Review preceptorship programme
- Review recruitment and selection procedures

3. Evaluate and review
Review the success of your initiatives and the impact it has made on your retention. Collect and review data. Update, amend and implement new retention strategies if necessary.

NHS Employers will continue to provide tools, guidance and updates to support you with the health visitor implementation plan. If you found this briefing useful, would like to provide comments or have suggestions about how else we can support you please get in touch. Visit [www.nhsemployers.org/healthvisiting](http://www.nhsemployers.org/healthvisiting) to find out more.
NHS Employers

The NHS Employers organisation is the voice of employers in the NHS, supporting them to put patients first. Our vision is to be the authoritative voice of workforce leaders, experts in HR, negotiating fairly to get the best deal for patients.

We help employers make sense of current and emerging healthcare issues to ensure that their voice is front and centre of health policy and practice. We keep them up to date with the latest workforce thinking and expert opinion, providing practical advice and information, and generating opportunities to network and share knowledge and best practice.

We work with employers in the NHS to reflect their views and act on their behalf in four priority areas:

1. pay and negotiations
2. recruitment and planning the workforce
3. healthy and productive workplaces
4. employment policy and practice.

The NHS Employers organisation is part of the NHS Confederation.

Contact us

For more information on how to become involved in our work, email getinvolved@nhsemployers.org

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