



**NHS Employers**

Part of the NHS Confederation

**BEST PRACTICES AND  
SHARED LEARNING OF  
INTERNATIONAL  
RECRUITMENT  
THROUGHOUT COVID-19**

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# INTRODUCTION

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International recruitment has been, and continues to be, a key focus in helping the NHS to meet increasing workforce demand. Facilitating international recruitment during the pandemic has been a challenge, however, quite remarkably, despite travel bans, quarantine restrictions and travel disruptions, organisations across the country can demonstrate real success.

In this briefing, we highlight some of the many great examples of how trusts have adapted their international recruitment approaches to facilitate timely, smooth, and long-lasting benefits both for their organisation and their international recruits.

We hope this briefing acts as a starting point to share some of the learning trusts have been through over the past year, and that the top tips can help others to adapt and transform their international recruitment efforts during and after COVID-19.

## COLLABORATIVE INTERNATIONAL RECRUITMENT

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Maintaining international recruitment throughout the pandemic can be very challenging, especially if trusts are working individually. Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust is an excellent example of using a collaborative and partnership approach for its international recruitment.

### Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust supported by a recruitment agency

#### Overview

Supported by a recruitment agency, Chelsea and Westminster's international recruitment programme was launched in 2017. International recruitment activity continued throughout COVID-19 as there were concerns that if the trust did not have a cohort of nurses in the pipeline, the vacancy rate before COVID-19 would increase and lead to an increasing vacancy rate month-on-month.

#### Overcoming challenges

The trust was faced with the challenge of continuing international recruitment to address shortages in its nurse pipeline, while under significant travel restrictions.

While there were plans to travel to the Philippines in mid-March 2020, flight restrictions meant adaptations had to be made. The trust needed to find a way to engage with potential international recruits virtually, so pre-screening candidates to be shortlisted and Zoom interviews were introduced and took place over a two-week period.

Virtual interviews greatly benefited pre-screening potential candidates before agency interviews. It was also useful having someone with previous international recruitment experience attending the interview.

The arrival of international nurses was initially limited by the capacity of teaching rooms due to social distancing rules and limited accommodation for quarantining. Therefore, Chelsea and Westminster could only accept six nurses per deployment. However, financial support from NHS England and NHS Improvement has enabled the procurement of more off-site accommodation and larger off-site teaching venues, which has meant that cohorts of twelve nurses have been arriving every three weeks since the beginning of November 2020.

### **Key benefits and outcomes**

During this period, 75 candidates were appointed.

In May 2017, the Band 5 vacancy rate was 21 per cent. As of November 2020, this had dropped to 5 per cent following three years of international recruitment and deployments.

Chelsea and Westminster was also able to adapt quickly to new ways of working, including adjusting the hours of working days to start interviewing at 6:30am to account for local time differences.

### **Next steps**

The next steps include focusing on continuing international recruitment and retaining these staff to ensure staffing and safety levels are maintained. This includes offering career progression advice and an internal transfer policy, by which staff can move between posts of the same banding within reinterviewing.

#### **Top tips**

- Ensure interviewers are experienced with overseas recruitment to get the most out of interviews.
- Pre-screen candidates to streamline the process where possible.
- Develop a strong relationship with your recruitment agency to enable rapid changes to new ways of working.

#### **For more information contact:**

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# PASTORAL CARE

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Meeting the emotional, social, and spiritual needs of new international recruits is essential, and even more so at a time where physical interactions are limited, combined with the ever-mounting pressures of the COVID-19 response.

Both Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust (BHRUT) and the Queen Elizabeth Hospital King's Lynn NHS Foundation Trust are great examples of organisations that are working to ensure international recruits are supported both inside and outside of work while they transition to a new country in the middle of a pandemic.

## **Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust (BHRUT): Best International Recruitment experience at the Nursing Times Awards 2020**

### **Overview**

Three years ago, Beverly Sawyer became BHRUT's dedicated recruitment nurse. Beverly's role was centred on implementing a consistent recruitment experience and to implement a senior intern team to support newly qualified nurses and new international recruits.

BHRUT implemented many measures to support its international recruits. This included, cascading newsletters with pictures of the local area and details of local Filipino shop, as well as facilitating the cohorts to meet each other in the few days before their flights to the UK which helped to form a small and close-knit community.

After greeting the recruits at the airport and taking them to their accommodation, a welcome package would be waiting for them and included items such as a Filipino newspaper, foods from the local Filipino markets, and kitchen gadgets such as rice cookers so they can prepare home cuisine. The packs also included information on the different local faith groups and local faith leaders were invited to speak to the nurses directly soon after arrival.

BHRUT also supports transgender recruits, largely from the Philippines, while balancing differences in culture with other recruits from countries such as India and Africa. The trust is able to support and welcome LGBTQ+ staff with help from pride advocates while assisting other members of the workforce to adapt to the new and different culture.

### **Overcoming challenges**

BHRUT used the challenges of COVID-19 as a learning experience and adapted its ways of working. Representatives still welcomed recruits at the airport and took them to their accommodation (wearing the appropriate PPE). While the welcome get-togethers with existing and senior staff members had to pause, this didn't stop BHRUT from doing everything it could to help ensure new international nurses feel part of the organisational family.

Maintaining communication during the first few weeks was key. The senior team set up WhatsApp groups so newly arrived nurses could call anytime, including evenings and weekends, and speak to

someone if they had any questions. This enabled the recruitment team to respond to any issues in a timely manner, helping to reassure and diffuse many stressful situations.

BHRUT also worked in partnership with local hotels so the nurses could quarantine safely, worked with local supermarkets to top up their supplies at no extra charge, and loaned the nurses laptops so they could access the intranet for training and virtual meetings. Counteracting the boredom of quarantine was made easier through this, as well as having access to playing cards and games.

### Key benefits and outcomes

A survey found that 99 per cent of international recruits were happy with their recruitment process and new work family. So far, 189 nurses have arrived and an additional 160 by March 2021.

As a result of its efforts, BHRUT won in the Best International Recruitment Experience category at the prestigious Nursing Times Workforce Awards.

The team continues to make every overseas nurse feel part of the organisation from the moment they are successful at interview, treating them as colleagues from day one and keeping them informed throughout the whole process.



### Top tips

- Preparation and organisation are key. Have resources ready in a welcome basket and involve existing staff from the same background in the onboarding process to enable recruits to feel welcomed.
- Meet recruits at the airport by wearing PPE to enable a smooth and welcoming transition to the UK.
- Personalised and consistent communication, especially in the first few days, helps alleviate unwanted stress for both the new member of staff and the recruitment team.

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## The Queen Elizabeth Hospital King's Lynn NHS Foundation Trust: INK (Indian Nurses in Kings Lynn) Network

### Overview

For a relatively small hospital, with approximately 500 beds and over 4000 staff, the Queen Elizabeth Hospital (QEH) in King's Lynn has made a great investment in improving its onboarding process, with a focus on retaining its Indian nurses.

Co-chair of the BAME Network, Samuel Jude, and resourcing business partner, Julie Sherwood, understood that if international nurses had a pleasant transition into team QEH, with strong pastoral and onboarding support, this would lead to increased retention in the long-term.

Before COVID-19, the recruitment team would welcome recruits at the airport, facilitate appropriate accommodation and provide support to complete objective structured clinical examinations (OSCEs). The pandemic has since made this support more structured and virtual, while maintaining a human connection.

### Overcoming challenges

QEH offers tailored and personal support, including:

- strong communications before new colleagues leave their home country
- finding accommodation
- highlighting cultural and religious differences to their new communities
- providing welcome packages while they are in quarantine. These packages contain familiar ingredients and treats, which last around four or five days, and can be restocked from local Indian markets with no delivery fee via a simple phone call or an online catalogue system.

Maintaining communication with new QEH colleagues before they leave their home country and while they are in the UK is essential. WhatsApp groups are used to touch base, talk with peers when there is limited physical interaction, and connect with previous cohorts through a buddy system that helps with OSCE preparation and academic support. This example of peer-facilitated learning has been greatly appreciated and proved to be successful for many nurses.

The network didn't just target one band of nurses but rather recruited from a variety of experience levels to facilitate professional support, mentorship, and post-registration career development. A counselling support system is being arranged to help recruits cope with the stresses of moving countries and pressures from work.

### Key benefits and outcomes

Since its inception in March 2020, the Indian Nursing Network has managed to flourish into a support network of more than 180 nurses. As a result of working in close partnership with other groups such as BINA (the British Indian Nursing Association), and FAWN (the Filipino Association of West Norfolk), they work to foster a caring, family environment that encourages staff retention by providing welcome guides, checklists to support their arrival, and contact sheets in case of emergencies.

#### Top tips

- Implement a structured pastoral support programme focused on pre-arrival experience and what recruits can expect when they arrive in the UK.
- Create a handbook that will house all their main points of contact for both easy access and ease of mind.
- Create a welcome hamper featuring bits of home, supported by links to local supermarkets, and items that are less thought of but still important such as SIM cards.

### For more information contact:

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# MAINTAINING HIGH LEVELS OF INTERNATIONAL RECRUITMENT

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International recruitment has been an essential element of many trust's workforce plans since well before the onset of COVID-19. The pandemic has led to travel bans and restrictions that brought international travel to all but a standstill.

University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust is a great example of how to maintain high levels of international recruitment despite these challenges.

## University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust

### Overview

University Hospital Southampton focused on a range of steps to continue its international recruitment programme through the pandemic.

### Overcoming challenges

There was an emphasis on increasing communication to international recruits and external partners. This included focusing on communicating with existing pipelines through direct contact (email updates) and agencies, calling all direct applicants during lockdown to reassure them and understand their situation, as well as maintaining regular contact with partner agencies to ensure they were able to restart onboarding as soon as is feasible.

University Hospital Southampton also rescheduled incoming cohort dates to support the earliest opportunity to onboard from overseas and redeployed staff who were shielding and could not come to the hospital to work to carry out virtual interviews.

Understanding the frequent changes, which were not fully communicated to the trust to prepare the new candidates, was one of the challenges. Another key challenge was to understand how the objective structured clinical examination (OSCE) could change and how they needed to prepare the international nurses for this. It is harder for candidates taking second attempts who had previously been through the standard process, but due to COVID-19 changes to the process were expected. University Hospital Southampton continued to support and tried to understand the impact this may have on its international nurses, as well as collaborated OSCE support with Hampshire and the Isle of Wight Sustainability and Transformation Partnership (STP) by participating in the good practice group, pooling resources where appropriate, sharing insights and tools and problem solving collectively

Other challenges included the additional cost of flights to recruits once small numbers became available. To solve this, University Hospital Southampton offered to reimburse additional cost in the first salary with a reasonable repayment period. The quarantine period also led to unused induction time, so the trust loaned laptops to enable online training via Microsoft Teams during the two-week isolation period.

### Key benefits and outcomes

The trust's efforts resulted in 57 offers. Cohorts adapted well to the transition and were able to quickly provide patient support and become part of the team.

### Next steps

University Hospital Southampton will maximise the number of registered nurses and overseas doctors it can onboard from overseas during this period, taking into account the restrictions caused by quarantine, flights, visa appointment availability, education capacity and social distancing requirements.

#### Top tips

- Maintain communication with your talent pipeline, as a lack of communication is an easy way to lose interest from your identified recruits.
- Collaborative action, such as working together to support recruits through the OSCE process, benefits not only all trusts involved but also recruits.

#### For more information contact:

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## CONCLUSION

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In this briefing we highlighted four examples of how trusts across the NHS have adopted to international recruitment during COVID-19.

We hope trusts and other NHS organisations can use these top tips to embrace the ideas of collaborative working, prioritising pastoral care, and changing the ways of working to continue to bring large numbers of international recruits to the NHS.

We will continue to highlight case studies and shared learning examples of international recruitment during COVID-19. If your trust would like to share their story and any lessons learned, please contact [workforcesupply@nhsemployers.org](mailto:workforcesupply@nhsemployers.org).