

Integrated workforce thinking

Practical solutions to support integrated care systems (ICSs)

August 2025

Partners



About us

NHS Employers is the employers' organisation for the NHS in England. We support workforce leaders and represent employers to develop a sustainable workforce and be the best employers they can be. We also manage the relationships with NHS trade unions on behalf of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.

Foreword



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The introduction of 42 ICSs across England represented a change in how we bring together organisations to plan and deliver health and social care services in their localities. Those ICSs are now operational, and you will be trying to make sense of a huge amount of information about health and social care services in your areas. High quality health and social care services are dependent upon a highly skilled and valued workforce. We recognise the vital impact that our workforce has on people's lives and the contribution that each makes to an effective health and social care system. So, we felt it was important that we produced a guide that would help you plan what sort of workforce you will need.

Every day, leaders of social care and health services role model and foster positive culture within and across organisations. Through working together – thinking together – leaders across systems will be able to create a shared culture that builds on our strengths, with a focus on people at the heart of care.

But integrated working isn't just an important step towards sharing expertise, maximising our resources and avoiding duplication of effort, though this will help to create a sense of common purpose and connection between our staff. When people and communities experience a coherent and consistent system, they'll be able to make decisions about their care that are

truly at the core of what's important for them and their quality of life.

Data from Skills for Care's adult social care workforce data set and health statistics support the need for improving how systems work together. With vacancies currently running at 131,000 for social care and 107,865 in health creating an integrated workforce plan that tackles key issues like recruitment and retention, digitalisation, workforce redesign and staff development will mean better outcomes for people. For example, by ensuring they will only have to tell their story once.

This guide doesn't have all the answers, but has been designed to support all 42 ICSs to develop effective integrated workforce plans that will meet the needs of those they serve, wherever they might live and whatever services they will need to live the lives they want.

All the partners who created this guide have generously shared experiences and offered case studies to help workforce leads and others really think about key issues they need to consider when planning an integrated workforce. We will also shortly be publishing a case study based on learning from those with lived experience, as it is vital that the voices of those drawing on care and support are represented.

We're grateful to colleagues from NHS Employers, Skills for Care and Partners in Care and Health, which is a collaboration of the Local Government Association (LGA) and Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS), who have come together to create this guide. In many ways our work mirrors the effective partnership working the ICSs will develop over the coming months.

Danny Mortimer, Chief Executive, NHS Employers
Oonagh Smyth, Chief Executive, Skills for Care
Councillor Ian Hudspeth, Chair of the LGA Community Wellbeing

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Improving outcomes in population health and healthcare is one of the fundamental purposes of integrated care systems (ICSs). To achieve this, partners from across both health and social care must come together to plan and develop a workforce that integrates and connects across all parts of the system to deliver personal, person-centred care to their local populations now and in the future. This guide builds on emerging lessons to support you to do this successfully across sectors and within multi-agency services.

About this guide

This guide provides tips and insight to help system leaders and others who work in the system consider what is needed to plan for and achieve the whole workforce vision.

It is aimed at ICS workforce leads, chief people officers, directors of adult social services (DASS), chief executives, human resource (HR) directors and managers, and elected members including adult social care (ASC) portfolio holders and chairs of health and wellbeing boards, and those who are responsible for integrated workforce thinking across health and social care.

It has been produced in partnership with NHS Employers, Skills for Care (SfC), and Partners in Care and Health, which is a collaboration between the Local Government Association (LGA) and Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS).

This guide will help you to:

- understand what is meant by integrated workforce thinking across systems and how it can support the development of integrated workforce plans
- understand what data is helpful in informing a good integrated workforce plan
- learn from examples and tips from ICSs that have had success with integrating their workforces to deliver better care across their systems
- find external resources on integrated workforce planning.

We recognise that every ICS will be at a different place in their journey to developing a fully integrated workforce plan. Therefore, this guide has been written to support you at whatever stage you have reached.



Foreword

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Every day, leaders of social care and health services set positive examples and promote supportive cultures within and across organisations. Through working together – and thinking together – leaders across systems will be able to create a shared culture that builds on our strengths, with a focus on people at the heart of care.

Integrated working isn't just an important step towards sharing expertise, maximising our resources and avoiding duplication of effort, though this will help to create a sense of common purpose and connection between our staff. When people and communities experience a coherent and consistent system, they'll be able to make decisions about their care that are truly at the core of what's important for them and their quality of life.

Skills for Care's adult social care workforce data set and health statistics support the need for improving how systems work together. With vacancies currently running at 111,000 for social care and over 112,000 in health creating an integrated workforce plan that tackles key issues like recruitment and retention, digitalisation, workforce redesign and staff development will mean better outcomes for people.

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might live and whatever services they will need to live the lives they want.

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About us

NHS Employers is the employers' organisation for the NHS in England.

Skills for Care is the strategic workforce development and planning body for adult social care in England.

The LGA is the national voice of local government, working with councils to support, promote and improve local government.

ADASS is a membership organisation representing directors of adult social services in England, and a leading body on social care issues.

What is integrated workforce thinking?

Integrated workforce thinking is when partners across systems work together to consider population health, health and care needs and their system strategy, so they can plan for a workforce that delivers person-centred care within their communities.

However, integrated workforce thinking is more than just about bringing together what different organisations are already doing; it recognises the complexity of the health and social care system, the challenges, and the need to build on strengths so that new and creative solutions can be formulated through joint working.

The current capacity pressures in the system mean that new ways of working will be paramount to delivering health and social care across our communities. Building relationships across partners within systems, where there is a shared understanding of each organisation's strengths, is key to successful future delivery.

Successful workforce integration provides a positive experience for people who draw on care and support. This is achieved when health, social care, mental health, primary care, voluntary sector, unpaid carers and local partners work across systems and come together, to ensure that people in their communities are always at the centre of their care in the context of their whole lives.

This joined-up way of working is achieved through leaders building strong relationships across systems to create a culture and workforce that champions integration and the opportunities that it provides for both the people who draw on care and the workforce that delivers it.

Integrated thinking should always ensure that the person-centred principles of autonomy, choice, self-determination, freedom, and responsibility are at the forefront of every decision made for the delivery of care.

Any service redesign that informs a reorganisation or reskilling of workforces across systems should be informed by population health and person-centred care. It can be supported by taking into consideration the social and environmental factors that influence our health, such as education and income, and the strengths, talents and assets within individuals and in communities.

Personalised care means that people have the resources and information to look after their own health as well as having control over the way that their care is planned and delivered when needed. Preventative support to maintain the wellbeing and independence of individuals in the community must also play a part in decisions made about use of resources. These person-centred principles will help people live the lives they choose based on what matters to them.

For example, a person living with dementia, a learning disability or autism should be empowered to make decisions about their own care, based on what matters to them. Care and support plans should be created with the individual and a health or social care professional so that they can make decisions about their care, should they need to access emergency treatment. Through doing this, staff have an instant understanding of what care and support that person needs as well as learning about their life and what matters to them in their care. The individual then has confidence that they are going to get access to the best care for them.

Changing the way systems work and think to become more integrated can be a challenge at first. However, understanding

what each sector can bring can significantly improve outcomes for people in our communities and the experience and opportunities for the workforce.

The health and social care challenges that impact workforce thinking

To support workforce thinking, an integrated workforce plan must include and address the key issues currently facing health and social care, including recruitment and retention, workforce redesign and staff development, as well as anticipate the potential demand based on any future service or workforce redesign.

The health and social care sector in England is facing significant pressure, driven strongly but not exclusively by the capacity challenges affecting social care. Like the NHS, adult social care faces significant vacancies and is struggling to recruit and retain the staff desperately needed to keep people well at home, and to support them to leave hospital safely to live in the community, in their own homes, with support from families.

With vacancies currently running at 111,000 for social care and over 112,000 for health, creating an integrated workforce plan that tackles these issues will mean better outcomes for people.

Current vacancies



105,000

Vacant posts in the NHS



165,000

Vacant posts in social care



12,000

Vacant hospital doctors



50,000

Vacant nurses and midwives

The number of people on a waiting list for hospital treatment rose to a record of nearly

6.5 million

in April 2022.



The **18-week target** for treatment has not been met since 2016.

Demand on the health and social care sector continues to grow with an extra **475,000 jobs needed in health** and **480,000 jobs needed in social care** by the early part of the next decade.



Statistics taken from Chart of the week: [Staff vacancies and shortfalls in the NHS and State of the adult social care sector and workforce in England](#).

ADASS released two crucial reports in 2024 – the Spring Survey and the Autumn Survey – that shed light on the mounting challenges in adult social care across England.

The Spring Survey highlights the unsustainable nature of the current adult social care system, emphasising the following key points:

Financial strain: councils are increasingly relying on one-off funding and reserves to meet budgetary demands.

- Rising care needs: there's a significant increase in individuals presenting with complex care requirements, necessitating more intensive support.
- Workforce challenges: social care staff are taking on tasks traditionally managed by the NHS, often without adequate resources, which is exacerbating workforce pressures.

The Autumn Survey reveals intensifying financial pressures:

- Budget overspends: 81 per cent of councils are projected to overspend their adult social care budgets in the current fiscal year, an increase from 73 per cent in the previous year.
- Demand for savings: councils are tasked with identifying nearly £1 billion in savings for 2024/25, despite the escalating care costs.
- Service limitations: financial constraints are forcing councils to prioritise only the most critical cases, potentially leaving many without essential support.

These reports collectively reveal a sector under immense pressure, grappling with financial instability, surging demand, and workforce challenges that jeopardise the sustainability of adult social care services. ADASS urges immediate and sustained

intervention to address these pressing issues and advocates for the following:

- Long-term funding solutions for effective planning and service delivery.
- Investment in preventative care to reduce future demand and associated costs.
- Enhanced collaboration between local authorities and the NHS to tackle independent challenges effectively.

These pressures have a real human impact on the health and care workforce.

In August 2021 the NHS lost **two million full-time equivalent days** to sickness.

Including more than **560,00 days** to anxiety, stress, depression, or another psychiatric illness.

For social care it is reported that an average of **7.8 sickness days** per employee were taken in 2021/22.

This equates to **12.7 million lost sickness days** over the year and a total of approximately **10.7 million days** were lost to sickness over the year.

Statistics taken from [Chart of the week: Staff vacancies and shortfalls in the NHS and State of the adult social care sector and workforce in England](#).

The challenges facing the sector are not new, with health and care employers struggling to recruit and retain staff for a number of years. However, this has been more acutely felt in the wake of events such as COVID-19 and Brexit, with employers increasingly having to rely on expensive agency staff. Issues are likely to be compounded by spiralling inflation and ever-intense labour market pressures nationally.

While this guide is designed to encourage integrated workforce thinking and support workforce planning across systems, such planning also needs to be coordinated nationally across health and social care to ensure we have a sustainable workforce for the future. As our population grows and ages, many of the challenges faced by health and social care will require more innovative models of care and a more integrated and strategic approach to the workforce required to meet that demand. A decision made to address recruitment and retention issues in one sector may have implications for another, or fail to take advantage of opportunities arising from joint working.

Most recruitment takes place from the same pool of ASC staff and so the pay differentials between health and social care staff result in a one-way flow of staff joining health organisations due to better pay, pensions and terms and conditions. It is important to highlight that the average care worker's pay is 62p per hour less than healthcare assistants in the NHS that are new to their roles.

Challenges not only exist around pay and conditions but also career progression, training and qualifications. Employers and training providers are working to identify the training needs of the workforce going forward and the skills that both health and social care staff will need to fulfil in the new ICS architecture.

There are opportunities for greater collaboration with universities and colleges to improve the narrative around jobs in health and care and for all parts of the domestic workforce to see health and care as a valuable career opportunity.

Similarly, digital information and assistive technology needs to be explored further to identify opportunities to digitalise activities across health and social care. This will provide more time for meaningful interaction with people who draw on care and support, such as shared digital care records so an individual only has to tell their story once.

Checklist of readiness

This checklist suggests things to consider in your integrated thinking to ensure you are ready to embark on your workforce planning journey. While systems and organisations will be at different stages in the development of a workforce plan, the checklist will help to ensure partners are aligned and have a clear shared purpose, vision and agreement on the outcomes they wish to achieve together.

Checklist of readiness

Understanding the vision

- ☒ Begin with a clear joint statement about the vision, purpose and priorities of the system transformation.
- ☒ Consider what organisations need to be involved to deliver that vision and priorities.
- ☒ Consider involving those who draw on health and care services and their carers in developing the vision and priorities.
- ☒ Do you have a timeframe for delivery?
- ☒ Ensure you have a collective definition of 'workforce' that is shared and understood, and which includes both registered and non-registered professionals, service areas and statutory and independent workforce. This will give a complete picture of the total workforce across the system, to make best use of your resources.

Who needs to be involved

- ☒ Consider appointing someone who has the capability and capacity to develop an integrated workforce plan, implementing it and monitoring delivery.
- ☒ Do you have leaders and champions who are willing and open to challenge themselves to work in different ways and provide the leadership to inspire others to do the same?
- ☒ Consider who the right people are to be involved in developing the plan so that it is co-produced. Include staff groups from the public, private, voluntary and community sectors and their trade union representatives.
- ☒ Identify who from each external organisation you need to engage in the process of development.
- ☒ Ensure to source people with lived experience to engage in the plan.

Developing an integrated workforce plan

- ☒ Do you have a project plan that sets out how you will develop an integrated workforce plan in line with your system or place-based vision?
- ☒ Do you have someone who can project manage the process? Do you need to fund external expertise?
- ☒ Do you have access to data, evidence and insight that

Top tips for integrated workforce thinking

We have pulled together a series of top tips from a range of people across health and social care with some experience of integrating their workforce thinking.

Governance

It is important that the people responsible for integration set out governance arrangements to ensure collaborative working across the system.

Top tips



Agree and model the behaviours of integrated thinking and working.

2

Set and agree a transparent framework and system governance that incorporates risk share and clear ownership.

3

Think about how to incorporate checks and challenges to ensure agility in the process.

4

Do not overcomplicate decision-making. Agree how you will prioritise as a team by concentrating on something that is important to

everybody, for example, getting people home.



Consider pooling funding to bring in external expertise, to maximise resources to achieve the desired outcomes.



Consider identifying a cross-sector project team to lead development of the thinking and planning.



Consider how digital solutions such as virtual wards and digital care plans can support the development and implementation of the workforce plan.

Changing cultures

Culture is an integral part of establishing an integrated working environment. Historically, people and organisations within systems have been working in silo, so culture change must be addressed from the offset when beginning to integrate workforce thinking.

Top tips



Focus on culture change in systems by listening and engaging with leaders and practitioners from each

organisation to agree on how integration can be achieved at a system level.



Understand systems' ICS strategy and population health data to understand how this can impact ways of working.



Take time to build relationships to understand who is who, what each other's contributions are and how organisations can work

together best to deliver better quality care and support population health.



To help build relationships, encourage proactive contact between colleagues across the system who have similar roles, rather than waiting for formal meetings to begin.

Systems need to invest time in creating a culture to support integration across services. To help systems, we have identified 'six ways to create a culture for integration':

1. Be prepared to experiment and learn together by having a test-and-learn mindset.
2. Have a clear shared vision of the aims that your system wants to achieve.
3. System leaders need to set the tone by fostering a shared sense of belonging and holding systems to account.
4. Get to know each other and understand each other's worlds. You will need to understand each other's knowledge and perspectives to be successful.

5. Use data on population health to facilitate conversation and prompt discussion.

6. Bring people together from different parts of the system to share challenges and strengths.

For further information, please read our [Six ways to create a culture for integration](#) resource.

Communication

Communication is key to developing a shared understanding of what an integrated working looks like. We are all new to this way of working so it is important that learning is shared continuously.

Top tips



Communicate across the system at every stage of the process, internally and externally.



Celebrate success and share learning from what has worked locally, within the system and nationally.

Data

Data is crucial to integrating workforce thinking, to provide a shared understanding of the challenges across systems.

Top tips



Ensure a clear understanding of the current and future health, care and support needs of your local population through Projecting Older People Population Information (POPPI) or Projecting Adult Needs and Service Information (PANSI).

2

Identify where the local workforce demographics can be obtained and analysed along with any other complementary data sources, such as the Office of National Statistics, ESR system, NHS Digital, Workforce Disability Equality Standard (WDES), Workforce Race Equality Standard (WRES), NHS Staff Survey and the Adult Social Care Workforce Data Set (ASC-WDS)

3

Consider having a data lead to collect information and share across all partners within the system.



Demonstrate how data analysis has informed any decisions, and particularly potential biases of the data sets, to ensure any data gaps. For example, make sure geographical or ethnic indicators are noted and considered during decision-making.

Data and integration



Every day, information and data are used to inform decision-making across health and adult social care in England. Workforce leads, local authorities, and ICSs use data to gain insight on the local labour market; future demand for care and support services in their areas; and trends

and patterns in workforce issues such as turnover and pay rates. ICSs need to know their market and the workforce that supports it to help shape it. At a strategic level, data is essential to gain a shared understanding of challenges and opportunities.



True integration and genuine person-centred care and support is underpinned by collecting and sharing this data effectively. A health and social care system where someone can access high-quality care and support is reliant on data being accessible, accurate,

reliable, and readily available between sectors and organisations.



Integrated workforce planning presents both the opportunity of thinking across the whole system, as well as the challenge of bringing incomplete and distinct data systems together across ICSs. If comprehensive, accessible and robust data flows support

informed decisions, then standardisation is needed in the collection, full sector(s) coverage and interoperability of data architecture. This will give decision-makers a more complete picture of local needs and therefore more certainty on potential outcomes when planning for population health or workforce requirements.



Data collection and reporting for ASC providers is currently not as accessible as it is for health, and at present, there is no central data set combining health and social care workforce information. However, the adult social care workforce data set collects information from

around 20,000 social care providers, offering an overview of the adult social care workforce in England. NHS workforce data is held in the ESR system, Office of National Statistics, POPPI or PANSI, NHS England, WDES, WRES, and the NHS Staff Survey (see resources section below).

Facilitated discussions about data, evidence and insight help to forge connections and trust between partners as well as generate a shared narrative.

Good practice and learning from ICSs

A variety of ICSs across the country have shared their good practice examples of integrating their workforce thinking. While there is not a one-size-fits all solution for ICSs, these examples aim to give an idea of what can be achieved.

ICS workforce board at South Yorkshire ICS

South Yorkshire ICS established an ICS workforce board that brings together a range of people from across healthcare, social care and local government to create a culture that values contribution. Through meetings, the board addresses the significant workforce challenges across South Yorkshire and encourages the system to think in an integrated way, and ultimately how they can make things better for the people who live and work in their community.

The group collated a range of principles to address practical things that the system can carry forward, such as integrated care pathways for people within their communities going from care to health.

The board is now planning to co-design and update its development and workforce strategy to ensure that it is as integrated as possible.

For more information read about the South Yorkshire ICS workforce strategy on their [website](#).

One Devon

Devon ICS has established the One Devon partnership, which is a collaboration between the NHS, social care, local councils, voluntary communities, the social enterprises sector and people who use services in the community. The partnership aims to ensure that services are joined up to tackle health inequalities, help communities thrive and that everyone in Devon has access to the best care to live the best life possible.

One Devon is currently working on a series of projects to improve the health, wellbeing and care for local people and communities, these include:

- establishing a set of five principles for everyone across the system to adhere to
- addressing future thinking with NHS England to develop scenarios that reflect what the system could look like
- establishing an integrated programme of work called LoveCare, which brings together both local and national partners to test, learn and develop local care systems and workforce in Devon.

For further information, you can read our full case study on Devon ICS: [One Devon](#)

Integrated Workforce

In January 2019, Greater Manchester ICS created an integrated workforce planning model and approach by setting up a virtual workforce information system (VWIS). VWIS is a free bespoke online tool that enables organisations and localities in Greater Manchester to:

- understand the current position of the workforce
- identify areas of concern through the visualisation of aggregated data and trends
- recognise the characteristics, population health and labour market of the communities they serve
- have access to information governance legislation
- export and download workforce dashboards.

This system has trained clinical and non-clinical practitioners who are already competent in workforce planning, to gain intelligence that supports workforce planning activities in their system.

The programme to develop an integrated working model and approach has evolved and now has a clear vision to develop a health and social care workforce where they:

- have limited vacancies
- make the most of their diversity and rich talent
- ensure they are highly skilled
- work in a culture of collaboration and integrated working.

For more information you can read our full case study on GM ICS: [Supporting integrated working through blended roles](#)

Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland (LLR) ICB

The three people leaders from the NHS organisation in LLR ICS came together in 2019 as a workforce team to discuss regularly the workforce issues impacting the system. Since then, LLR has developed a range of initiatives to assure that the ICS is working in an integrated way:

- developing a 'Home First' board that brings together a range of people across health and social care within the system to discuss their strategy and assure that they are on plan to get people out of hospital and supported to receive care at home, as well as ensuring the population can receive care in the community. The board has a range of sub-groups across the system, including:
 - virtual monitoring board
 - virtual wards
 - and operational delivery team (including discharge hub of multi-disciplinary team)
 - integrated care team.
- developing a risk and finance share agreement, with a disclaimer for everything put in place across the ICS signed by all the organisations in the system. This has created shared ownership across the system and understanding that the risk is shared if things don't go to plan.
- creating a legally sound workforce sharing agreement across the system that allows organisations to share staff across health and social care organisations both in a crisis and as business as usual. This agreement includes three upper-tier local authorities, 12 district councils, primary care,

the ambulance service and the police. This was particularly useful during the Omicron surge, allowing for deployment across sectors and professional groups.

From all this foundation work, LLR has been able to set up 124 virtual wards with the ambition to expand to 250. LLR has had great success in this space and is continuing to develop to work in a more joined-up way across the system to provide the best care for the people within the community.

For more information, contact Alice McGee, chief people officer for LLR ICS: Alice.Mcgee@nhs.net.

Further resources

Key resources and guidance to support workforce planning

Gov.uk - [Integrated care partnership \(ICP\): engagement summary](#)

Greater Manchester health and social care partnership - [Health and care collaborative](#)

NHS England - [Workforce planning within a system](#)

NHS England - [Building on the mental health support workforce: a central resource toolkit](#)

NHS England - [Career Framework for Nurses](#)

NHS England - [Long Term Workforce Plan 2023](#)

NHS England - [Guidance for the planning process](#)

NHS England - [Recipe for good workforce planning](#)

NHS England - [Multidisciplinary Team \(MDT\) Toolkit](#)

NHS England - [Data collection and improvement service](#)

NHS England - [Workforce planning and intelligence](#)

Local government - [Social care, health and integration](#)

NHS Scotland - [An Integrated Health and Social Care Workforce Plan for Scotland](#)

NHS Scotland - [Workforce planning and projections NHS Scotland](#)

NHS England - [Priorities and operational planning guidance 2025/26](#)

NHS England - [Building strong integrated care systems everywhere: guidance on the ICS people function](#)

NHS Improvement - [Improving workforce planning and intelligence: Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust](#)

NHS England - [Retention hub: looking after our people](#)

NHS Improvement - [Operational workforce planning: a self-assessment tool](#)

NHS England - [Digitise, connect, transform](#)

Skills for Care - [The Principles of Workforce Integration](#)

Skills for Care - [Workforce planning, transformation and commissioning](#)

Skills for Care - [Workforce productivity and quality](#)

Skills for Care - [How the workforce strategy supports the government's three shifts](#)

Skills for Care - [Building trust between social care and health organisations](#)

Skills for Care - [Adult social care workforce data and publications](#)

Skills for Care, Skills for Health and Health Education England - [Person-centred approaches: core skills education training framework](#)

Skills for Care - [Person-centred and community-based working \(strength based approaches\)](#)

Skills for Care - [Delegated healthcare activities](#)

Skills for Care - [Supporting sector bodies with workforce intelligence](#)

Skills for Care - [Adult Social Care Workforce Data](#)

Skills for Care - [The state of adult social care report 2023/24](#)

Skills for Health - [Six Steps Methodology to Integrated Workforce planning](#)

Social Care Institute for Excellence - [Integrated care workforce](#)

Social Care Institute for Excellence - [Integrated care research and practice](#)

Social Partnership Forum - [Principles for social partnership for workforce change in integrated care systems](#)

Social Partnership Forum - [How we do partnership](#)

The Health Foundation - [Integrated care systems: what do they look like?](#)

The King's Fund - [The NHS workforce in a nutshell](#)

NHS England - [Staff survey results 2024](#)

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