

NHS Staff Survey results 2020

Introduction

Today, NHS England and NHS Improvement published the annual [NHS staff survey results](#). The survey ran from September to December 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey included new sets of questions relating to the COVID-19 context, staff feeling safe at work, and feeling able to speak up about concerns. 595,270 staff responded, with responses from 280 NHS organisations (including all 220 trusts). This briefing provides a summary of the national level findings and NHS Providers view.

Key findings

- Two-thirds of staff (66.3%) would recommend their organisation as a place to work. This is a strong increase from 2019 (63.3%) and over the past five years (59.9% in 2016).
- A higher proportion of staff in 2020 felt they had opportunities for flexible working (57%, up from 54% in 2019). There has been a 4.1% increase this year in staff who reported that their trust takes positive action on health and wellbeing (33.4% in 2020, up from 29.3% last year).
- The experience of Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff continues to fall far below that of white staff, with higher levels of discrimination, and bullying, harassment and abuse experienced and a lower proportion of Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff reporting equal opportunities for career progression and promotions.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic a greater proportion of Black, Asian and ethnic minority staff worked on COVID-specific wards (49.4%, vs 40.4% for white staff), and a lower proportion worked from home or remotely (29%, vs 37.7% for white staff).
- The proportion of staff who feel they are well paid has decreased this year for the first time since 2017, now at 36.7%. This is down from 38% in 2019, which was the highest level in five years.
- 44% of staff reported feeling unwell due to work-related stress in the past year, a substantial increase on 40.3% in 2019. Three-quarters of staff still regularly experience unrealistic time pressures at work (74.9%, down from 77.1% in 2019).
- There has been a 6% increase in the proportion of staff who report their organisations are adequately staffed (38.4% in 2020, up from 32.4% in 2019). 18.2% are considering leaving the NHS (down from 19.6% in 2019).

Experiences of working during the pandemic

While the majority of the NHS staff survey questionnaire remained the same for respondents in 2020 allowing for trend analysis and comparisons with past years, a specific new section sought to draw out the experience of staff working in response to COVID-19. The survey found:

- 34.2% of staff worked on a COVID-19 specific ward this year, with the proportion understandably highest in acute or acute and community trusts (39.3%) and lower (around 20%) in other trust types.
- 18.5% of staff were redeployed (highest in acute/acute and community at 20.6%, and around 12% in other trust types).
- 36% of staff were required to work remotely or from home, with the proportion highest in Mental Health and Disability trusts, or combined mental health/learning disability and community trusts (64.3%), and lowest in ambulance trusts (18.1%).
- 10.4% of staff were at some point shielding.

The findings show a high level of variability in remote working based on job role, with social care and “other staff groups” (including general management and commissioning staff) more likely than not to have done so (66.4% and 53.4% of these groups, respectively, having worked remotely), and ambulance staff, and nursing and healthcare assistants significantly less likely to have done so (8.8% and 10.6%, respectively).

The results contain significant findings about the working experiences of staff during the pandemic (non-COVID discrepancies and trends are also covered in a section below). Significantly, Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff are significantly more likely to have worked on a COVID-19 specific ward (47%, vs 31.1% for white staff), and are less likely to have worked remotely or from home (29%, vs 37.7% for white staff).

Levels of stress and related illness have been affected by staff working patterns during the pandemic:

- 49.6% of staff working on COVID specific wards reported feeling unwell as a result of work-related stress, while this number was lower (40.9%) for those on normal wards.
- 50.7% of redeployed staff reported feeling ill, vs 42.3% of those who have not been redeployed.
- There were smaller gaps between illness related to stress between those working remotely (42.4%) and those not working remotely (44.7%), and those staff shielding (45.2%) and not shielding (44.7%).

Quality of care and safety culture

There have been improvements from the 2019 survey findings and over a five-year period for staff experiences of safe working and quality of care:

- An increased proportion of staff report their organisation acts appropriately to respond to reported incidents from staff (73.4% in 2020, up from 71.1% in 2019 and from 68.7% in 2016). An increased proportion also say their organisation acts on concerns raised by patients (74.8% in 2020, up from 73.8% in 2019).
- A larger number of staff also say their organisation provides feedback on changes made in response to incidents (62.7% in 2020, up from 61.1% in 2019 and 57.1% in 2016).
- Crucially, 72.5% say they would feel secure raising concerns about unsafe clinical practice (up from 71.7% in 2019 and 70.4% in 2020), while 60.4% are confident their organisation would address their concern (increase from 59.8% in 2019 and 57.9% in 2016).
- 79.5% say that care of patients is their organisations top priority (up from 77.3% in 2019).

New findings were released this year showing a large majority of staff (80.1%) feel safe in their work, while only 6.2% of staff do not. This positive finding is slightly lower, however, for Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff (78.8% feel safe, vs 80.9% of white staff). Separately, 65.6% of staff feel safe to speak up about concerns within their organisation and only 13.3% disagree. Again, the majority who feel safe to speak up is smaller for Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff (62.1%) than for white staff (67%).

Working contribution and great place to work

Over the past year there have been mixed results on sense of ownership and workplace satisfaction for staff. There has been a strong increase in the proportion who would recommend their organisation as a place to work (66.8%, up from 63.3% in 2019, and 59.6% in 2017). However, there have been negative trends in the following areas:

- 72.1% of staff say they have frequent opportunities to show initiative in their role, down from 72.9% in 2019.
- 73% say they are able to make suggestions to improve the work of their team or department, down from 74% last year.
- 55.2% say they are able to personally make improvements happen in their area of work, down from 55.9% in 2019.

Burnout, health, and wellbeing

In the face of COVID-19, trusts have focussed on staff wellbeing as a key priority across the past year. There are some encouraging reflections of this heightened focus in the staff survey results.

- There has been a 4.1% increase this year in staff who reported that their trust takes positive action on health and wellbeing. There is also a notable increase in staff who are satisfied with flexible working opportunities in their organisation (57%, up from 54% in 2019). These indicators have both improved across all trust types.
- There has also been a 6% increase in staff saying their organisations are well-staffed, enabling them to do their jobs properly (38.4%, up from 32.4% in 2019). This is likely to be a reflection of the impact of [flexible working and deployment in the pandemic](#), the boost provided by returners and fast-tracked students to help with the COVID response, and signs that some broader investment initiatives to support NHS recruitment are beginning to take effect.

Health and wellbeing will stay at the top of the agenda for trust leaders as we move towards a recovery from the pandemic, particularly given the staff survey's indicators that the physical and emotional impact of the past year on staff wellbeing remains concerning. Unsustainable levels of workload and burnout have been a constant issue, with an [NHS Providers survey](#) finding that 99% of trust leaders were either extremely or moderately concerned about levels of burnout across the workforce in October 2020. The staff survey showed that:

- Despite a notable improvement in the metric this year, nearly two-thirds (61.6%) of staff do not feel there are enough staff at their organisations, with three-quarters of staff in the NHS still regularly facing unrealistic time pressures in their jobs (74.7%, down from 77.1% in 2019). 47.7% of staff are able to meet all the conflicting demands on time within their work, which is a 1.6% increase from 2019 but still under half of total respondents. This indicator has, however, improved each year since the 44.5% finding in 2017.
- There has been a steady year on year decline but far too many staff are still working additional hours, whether these are paid (33.5%), or unpaid (55.2%). It is noteworthy that in ambulance trusts, 72% of staff reported working additional paid hours – well over twice the national average – but 39.2% reported working unpaid hours in comparison to the 55.2% national average.
- 44% of staff reported feeling unwell due to work-related stress in the past year, which is a substantial increase on 40.3% in 2019, and most notable in acute/acute and community trusts and acute specialist trusts. This indicator has increased steadily since 2016 (36.8%) and is particularly concerning. 29.3% have also suffered from musculoskeletal problems because of work activities in the past year, a 1.3% increase from 2019 and continued upward trajectory since 2016 (25.2%).

- 46.4% of staff had gone to work despite not feeling well enough in the three months prior to the survey. This is a sizeable 12.6% fewer than last year, (likely due to encouragement to isolate if presenting with possible COVID-19 symptoms,) but still a worryingly high figure at almost 50%.

Racism and racial inequalities

The survey results this year again show some concerning trends relating to the variable experience of staff at work in the NHS. A particular discrepancy exists for Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff who are disproportionately subject to abuse and poor behaviour from colleagues and patients, and do not have access to the same positive opportunities as their white colleagues:

- 48.2% of staff who experienced discrimination at work cited ethnic background as a reason. This is by far the most common reason for discrimination and an increase from last year (45.6% in 2019) and significantly higher than five years ago (41.4% in 2016).
- Overall, the proportion of staff experiencing discrimination at work is at its equal highest point in the past five years (7.2%, identical to 2019 and up from 6.2% in 2016).
- 28.9% of Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff have personally experienced bullying, harassment or abuse from patients, their relatives or the public in the past 12 months. The finding for white staff is 25.9% and the gap (3%) is slightly larger than it was in 2019 (2.4%).
- 28.8% of Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff have personally experienced bullying, harassment or abuse from managers or other colleagues over the past year. Again, the finding is lower for white staff (23.2%) and equates to a 5.6% gap. This is also slightly larger than it was in 2019 (4.8%).
- Only 69.2% of Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff say their organisation provides equal opportunities for career progression and promotion, versus 87.3% of white staff who say their organisation does. This sizeable and concerning gap (17.8%) is larger than last year's (15.7%), when a slightly higher proportion of Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff felt there were equal opportunities (71.2% in 2019).

Pay, recognition, and management

The [ongoing context of NHS pay review processes](#) gives an interesting [perspective](#) to staff survey responses on recognition and reward.

- The proportion of staff who feel they are well paid has decreased this year for the first time since 2017, now at 36.7%. This is down from 38% in 2019, which was the highest level in five years. It is vital that staff are soon offered the meaningful, real terms pay rise their efforts have so clearly warranted.

- 57.2% of staff are satisfied with the recognition they receive for good work, which is slightly lower than last year (58%). Of particular note is the finding that less than half (48%) of staff say that their work is valued by their organisation, and only 50.1% of staff are involved in decisions on changes that affect their work. This has deteriorated since 2019 (52.0%). 71.6% now report that their manager values their work, which has declined – albeit slightly – from 73.3% in 2019, having previously increased steadily since 2016 (71.4%).
- However, 70.3% feel encouraged by their immediate manager, 70.4% said they take a positive interest in health and wellbeing (up from 69.8% in 2019), and 70.2% were satisfied with the support they get from their immediate manager. The latter measure has been seeing year on year improvement since 2016 but was slightly lower this year (down from 71.0% in 2019). 62.1% of staff said that their immediate manager gave them clear feedback on their work, a decline of 0.8% since 2019 (62.9%) but higher than results from 2016–2018. Just over half of staff (55.8%) said that their manager asks for their opinion before making decisions that affect their work, another slight decrease since 2019 (56.2%) which nevertheless remains higher than results from 2016–2018.

Staff engagement and motivation

The overall score for the survey's staff morale section is the highest since its introduction. There have been encouraging signs of improvement in some areas of staff motivation and engagement.

- 66.8% of respondents would recommend their organisation as a place to work, a 3.5% increase from 2019 (63.3%) and continued upward trend since 2017 (59.6%). Results for Ambulance Trusts have improved hugely since 2016, but they remain the only benchmarking group below the national average in this metric.
- Numbers of staff reporting strained relationships at work have continued to decrease, with 47.1% saying they are never or rarely strained, compared to 46.6% in 2019 and 45.1% when the question was introduced in 2018. In addition, the vast majority (71.4%) of staff say that they receive the respect they deserve from colleagues (though this is slightly lower than 72.3% in 2019).
- 60.3% of staff have adequate materials, supplies and equipment for their work, which is a 4% increase on 2019 (56.2%). This measure is also seeing year on year improvements across all trusts, with community trusts in particular up from 61.2% in 2019 to 68.5% this year, making them the best performing benchmarking group on this measure.

However there remain outstanding concerns.

- Most worryingly, 26.5% of staff report often thinking about leaving their organisation. Whilst this lower than 28.4% of staff who said the same last year, it remains an unsustainably high percentage. Year on year trends are continuing to improve on this marker, but not rapidly enough. We must

also not take for granted the likelihood of large numbers of staff leaving the service once they feel they have made it through the worst of the pandemic.

- There has been a slight decline in staff who look forward to going to work, now 58.7%, compared to 59.5% in 2019, and 2% fewer staff are enthusiastic about their job (73%, down from 74.8% in 2019). Interestingly, staff in patient-facing roles are less enthusiastic about their job, while those with no patient contact have increased enthusiasm.

NHS Providers view

Responding to the 2020 NHS Staff Survey from NHS England and NHS Improvement, the deputy chief executive of NHS Providers, Saffron Cordery, [said](#):

“The last year has been the toughest in the NHS' history and we have to pay tribute to how staff have time and time again stepped up and delivered.

“We're pleased to see that there have been improvements in the number of staff recommending their organisations as a good place to work and the ongoing commitment by trusts to staff health and wellbeing is clearly an important factor.

“The significant increase in staff feeling their organisations are well-staffed can in part be attributed to the huge amount of work that has been carried out by trusts to provide flexible working and deployment of additional staff to respond to the pandemic. National funding to sustain this much needed flexibility remains important in the long term.

“But it is not surprising that the last year has taken a major toll on the mental and physical health of staff and more staff have reported that they have been unwell as a result of a stress-related illness. This is why trusts are continuing to put staff health and wellbeing front and centre of their priorities.

“Much more needs to be done to improve the experience of Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff which is consistently worse than their white colleagues. Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff have faced a greater exposure to COVID-19 this year, with 47% of Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff working on COVID-19 wards during 2020, as opposed to 31% of white staff. Tragically, many have died through working on the frontline. We cannot – and should not – ignore the fact that on a day-to-day basis, our colleagues from ethnic minority backgrounds face considerably worse experiences in the NHS and face more obstacles as they seek to make progress in their careers.

“It is also a stark reality that staff working within the NHS feel they have unsustainable workloads and burnout is a constant concern. In our survey of trust leaders in October 2020, 99% expressed concern over staff burnout and the survey findings today show that nearly two-thirds of staff do not feel there are enough staff at their organisations and three-quarters of staff in the NHS still regularly face unrealistic time pressures in their jobs. More than half of staff are working additional unpaid hours.

“In a week in which the debate over NHS pay has dominated, today’s survey shows a fall in the number staff who feel they are well paid. This further underlines the need for the government to confirm meaningful real-terms pay rises for staff in the coming months.

“The NHS people plan, released last year, has provided a useful guide for trusts and other employers in the NHS as they seek to ensure their organisations remain a great place to work. But it is clear that more support is needed to create genuine, lasting improvements for staff as we ease out of this pandemic. This must be underpinned by a fully costed plan, funded by the government, to deliver the workforce we need for the future of the NHS.”