

Written evidence submitted by UNISON (EPW0047)

Introduction

1. UNISON is the UK's largest union, with more than 1.3 million members providing public services – in the NHS, local government, education, the police service and energy. They are employed in the public, private and voluntary sectors. UNISON is also the largest union for both healthcare and social care staff.
2. This short submission is consistent with the union's wider response to the Committee's current workforce inquiry and follows the structure suggested with key points highlighted under each of the government commitments on workforce.

Policy area: Planning for the workforce

Government commitment: Ensure that the NHS and social care system have the nurses, midwives, doctors, carers and other health professionals that it needs.

3. The government is failing to live up to its commitment to provide the NHS and social care system with the workforce it needs.
4. This is most evident in the vacancy figures that are leaving both sectors seriously under-staffed. In the NHS, the latest figures suggest there are over 110,000 vacancies – including more almost 40,000 in nursing.¹ These vacancy figures (for December 2021) are higher than those when the current government took office (December 2019) suggesting that the situation is getting worse rather than improving. The vacancy rate in social care has now hit 10% overall, but this figure is higher for some parts of the country (13% in London for example) and for some parts of the sector (13% in homecare).² The pre-Covid vacancy rate was 7.6%, suggesting again that the government is allowing the sector to go backwards in terms of staffing levels.
5. Those that are working in health and social care also report that shortages are a major problem in the workplace. The most recent NHS staff survey found that only just over a quarter of staff (27.2%) felt there were enough staff in their organisation for them to do their job properly (a decline of 11 percentage points since last year).³ And in UNISON's most recent survey of members working in social care virtually all respondents (97%) reported that their employers were experiencing shortages. Worryingly, nearly a third (31%) reported that staffing levels were dangerously low and affecting the quality of care provided.⁴
6. In terms of the government's headline manifesto promise of 50,000 extra nurses by March 2024, UNISON notes the concerns expressed by the Chief Nursing Officer that while the NHS may be on target to hit this figure, 50,000 more nurses is "no longer enough".⁵ Such concerns are borne out by subsequent analysis from the King's Fund which found that "the supply of nurses into the NHS is not keeping pace with demand", that "increasing the number of nurses is having no substantial impact on the number of vacancies" and that "there is a wide regional variation in the scale of the challenge".⁶
7. In addition, UNISON remains frustrated by the failure of the government to put sufficient ambition and funding into the development of apprenticeships in the NHS, the proper development of which has the potential to greatly expand the NHS workforce of the future.

¹ [NHS Vacancy Statistics](#), England April 2015 – December 2021 Experimental Statistics, March 2022

² [Skills for Care](#), Vacancy Information – Monthly Tracking, April 2022

³ [NHS Staff Survey](#), March 2022

⁴ [UNISON](#), Staffing levels in care 'dangerously low' with dying residents denied dignified end, says UNISON survey, November 2021

Policy area: Building a skilled workforce

Government commitment: Help the million and more NHS clinicians and support staff develop the skills they need and the NHS requires in the decades ahead.

8. The People Plan of July 2020 said many of the right things about the need to develop the skills of the NHS workforce. However, as with many of the other aspects of the Plan, nearly two years on there has still not been enough concrete funded action following on from these laudable aims.
9. The People Plan – and the NHS more widely – pays insufficient attention to skills development for support staff. As Health Education England has previously noted, staff in bands 4 and below make up 40% of the NHS workforce and are responsible for an estimated 60% of direct patient contact, yet this group of workers receives only around 5% of the whole training budget.⁷
10. There needs to be a greater recognition of the role that skills development can play in aiding staff retention. Too often NHS employers are not using the tools that the Agenda for Change pay system gives them to boost retention through a greater focus on areas such as skills development and rebanding. This is particularly relevant for lower-banded staff, many of whom have seen their roles expand in recent years, in part due to the requirements of working flexibly through the Covid-19 pandemic.
11. The NHS would benefit immeasurably from more active government support for skills development and career progression in the NHS. In the most recent NHS staff survey only around half (55.5%) of staff felt their organisation acts fairly with regard to career progression or promotion.⁸ And the latest Workforce Race Equality Standard report found a worrying gap of almost 20% between black and white staff in relation to satisfaction with career progression and promotion.⁹ UNISON would like to see active use of the Job Evaluation Scheme to ensure people are being banded properly for the job they do, which could help to reduce this gap.

Government commitment: £1 billion extra of funding every year for more social care staff and better infrastructure, technology and facilities.

12. The government is failing to provide this level of funding to support the social care workforce. The recent *People at the Heart of Care* white paper commits to only £500 million of funding for the workforce over the next three years.
13. The white paper does contain some recognition of some of the problems faced by the social care workforce and includes some positive proposals, such as the focus on career progression, moves towards registration and changes to the care certificate. But there are no price tags attached to these individual parts of the package and the £500 million will have to be stretched very thin to cover such important work. Worst of all, social care pay receives virtually no coverage in the white paper. Continuing to fall back on an improved National Living Wage is woefully inadequate given the state of crisis in the sector.

⁵ [Nursing Times](#), England's CNO says 50,000 more nurses 'no longer enough', March 2022

⁶ [The King's Fund](#), Is the NHS on track to recruit 50,000 more nurses?, April 2022

⁷ [Health Education England](#), HEE launches first national consultation on a NHS bands 1-4 workforce strategy, 2014

⁸ [NHS Staff Survey](#), March 2022

⁹ [NHS England](#), Workforce Race Equality Standard 2021, April 2022

14. The government appear to have adopted a piecemeal and disjointed approach to workforce issues in social care when what is needed is a properly funded long-term plan. Incredibly there has been no discernible national workforce strategy since the publication of *Working to Put People First* in 2009.¹⁰ Recent work by the Future Social Care Coalition, of which UNISON is a part, has suggested the building blocks for establishing a people plan for social care as a necessary first step.¹¹

Supporting moves towards prevention and support, we will go faster for community-based staff. Over the next three years we want all staff working in the community to have access to mobile digital services, including the patient's care record and plan, that will help them to perform their role. This will allow them to increase both the amount of time they can spend with patients and the number of patients they can see. Ambulance services will also have access to the digital tools that they need to reduce avoidable conveyance to A&E.

15. Anecdotally, UNISON members working in ambulance services are positive about the potential of digital tools to help reduce avoidable conveyance to A&E, but they report concerns that the tools are only as strong as the services such tools recommend as an alternative to A&E – and too often these services are underfunded and/or understaffed.

Policy area: Wellbeing at work

Government commitment: Introduce new services for NHS employees to give them the support they need, including quicker access to mental health and musculoskeletal services.

16. The People Plan included positive plans for all NHS organisations to have a wellbeing guardian and for resilience hubs to be piloted as a way of helping to improve staff mental health. However, it is unclear how much funding has been attached to such initiatives and it is likely that the development of the wellbeing guardian role will vary across England: NHS England's guidance acknowledges that not all NHS settings (such as primary care) have Non-Executive Directors, who are expected to take on the guardian roles in larger healthcare organisations.¹²
17. Although not directly related to this, UNISON is a strong supporter of the 2021 agreement, negotiated through the NHS Staff Council, to give NHS staff a right to request flexible working from day one of their employment. The agreement also removes limits on the number of requests that can be made and strengthens the processes employers must use when considering requests.¹³ For staff that have gone above and beyond during the pandemic, the offer of genuine flexible working is one way of seeking to boost staff wellbeing and retention.

Government commitment: Reduce bullying rates in the NHS which are far too high.

18. Following the proposal in the People Plan, a new toolkit to promote civility and respect was produced in 2021 involving the NHS Social Partnership Forum.
19. When it comes to tackling racist bullying (and racism more generally) it is clear the NHS still has much further to go. The latest Workforce Race Equality Standard report shows that a worryingly high 29% of

¹⁰ [Department of Health](#), Working to Put People First: The Strategy for the Adult Social Care Workforce in England, April 2009

¹¹ [Future Social Care Coalition](#), A Social Care People Plan Framework, June 2021

¹² [NHS England](#), Wellbeing Guardians: Guidance for introducing the role in healthcare organisations, April 2021

¹³ [NHS Staff Council](#), Flexible working in the NHS: Joint statement on behalf of the NHS Staff Council, June 2021

black staff have experienced bullying, harassment or abuse from patients in the last year, a higher figure than for white staff.¹⁴

Government commitment: Listen to the views of social care staff to learn how we can better support them – individually and collectively.

20. There are references in the social care white paper to ensuring that the voices of carers are reflected in the ongoing reform of social care and in the development of Integrated Care Systems, but there is no suggestion that there will be an equivalent focus on listening to the views of the social care workforce.
21. Despite calls from UNISON and others, the government has failed to convene any formal partnership working mechanisms that could seek to replicate the successful way the NHS Social Partnership Forum operates.

Submission produced by the UNISON Policy Unit

May 2022

¹⁴ [NHS England](#), Workforce Race Equality Standard 2021, April 2022