

# **REPORT OF: THE JOINT HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (HOSC):**

## **Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust People Plan :**

**REPORT BY: HEALTH SCRUTINY OFFICER, OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL, DR OMID NOURI**

**REPORT TO: Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust**

### **INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

1. The Joint Health and Overview Scrutiny Committee considered a report by the Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust (OH) Chief People Officer on the Trust's People Plan in its public meeting on 30 January 2025.
2. The Committee would like to thank Charmaine DeSouza (Chief People Officer, Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust); Zoe Moorhouse (Head of HR, Oxford Health NHSFT); and Amelie Bages (Executive Director of Strategy and Partnerships, Oxford Health NHSFT) for attending the meeting on 30 January and for answering questions from the Committee on the OH People Plan.
3. The Committee received a report on the Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust People Plan in April 2024, and was keen to receive an update on the Oxford Health People Plan to examine the measures taken by the Trust to improve workforce recruitment, retention, and staff wellbeing.
4. This item was scrutinised by HOSC given that it has a constitutional remit over health and healthcare services as a whole, and this includes the initiatives taken by NHS providers to enhance recruitment, retention, and wellbeing of staff. When commissioning the report for this item, some of the insights that the Committee sought to receive were as follows:
  - How the NHS People plan had shaped the direction of the Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust People Plan.
  - What the overall objectives of the People Plan are.
  - How the plan was formulated (and whether this included engagement with stakeholders).
  - How the Trust's workforce will be recruited and retained.
  - How the wellbeing of staff will be supported and maintained.
  - Whether there is any public communications work around the plan.
  - The extent to which there is sufficient resource to implement the plan.

- Any evidence of how effectively the plan has been delivered thus far.

## SUMMARY

5. During the 30 January 2025 meeting, the Chief People Officer presented the People Plan's development, emphasising its alignment with the Trust's broader objectives. The Head of HR overviewed workforce demographics, noting 80% female employees, 25% from a BAME background, and 7.4% with declared disabilities. It was also highlighted that there is extensive collaboration with universities for recruitment purposes. The Executive Director of Strategy and Partnerships explained the strategic context, explaining that the NHS long-term workforce plan strongly influenced the development and objectives of the OH People Plan.
6. The issue of workforce recruitment and retention was raised by the Committee, and the Trust explained that it was enhancing workforce planning, recruitment, and retention to support service delivery. They focused on ensuring a well-planned and stable workforce to maintain the quality and availability of their services.
7. The Committee inquired about how Oxford Health NHSFT supported continuous professional development (CPD) for clinical and administrative staff. For clinical staff, the Trust provided CPD through a well-established education centre and collaborated with Oxford Brookes University for postgraduate and master's modules for nurses. They also offered apprenticeship schemes allowing staff to pursue further education, including leadership and management apprenticeships.
8. The issue of support for staff wellbeing and mental health compared to other NHS Trusts was also discussed. The Executive Director of Strategy and Partnerships explained that the trust had provided a 24/7 Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) and a robust occupational health service that was available for self-referrals or manager referrals. Health and wellbeing representatives in all teams offered proactive support.
9. The Committee raised concerns regarding reliance on agency staff and how well integrated such staff were in Trust teams. It was explained that the Trust had heavily relied on agency staff but aimed to reduce this by promoting permanent or bank roles. In the previous year, approximately 100 agency staff transitioned to permanent or bank positions. To ensure patient care, agency staff were integrated into teams and provided with continuous professional development. This was done to uphold Trust principles and maintain the quality of patient care.
10. The discussion also emphasised technology's role in improving workforce efficiency, and how digitalisation could impact patient care and interaction. The Trust explained that integrated systems streamlined administrative tasks, enhancing staff satisfaction and efficiency by simplifying processes. It was discussed that there should be caution when implementing AI (Artificial Intelligence), ensuring that any AI applications were piloted within a defined

framework to avoid compromising safety or quality. In terms of patient interaction, the Trust was aware of digital exclusion and ensured that digital tools were integrated with face-to-face services to maintain accessibility for all patients.

## KEY POINTS OF OBSERVATION & RECOMMENDATIONS:

11. This section highlights four key observations and points that the Committee has in relation to the Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust People Plan. These four key points of observation have been used to determine the recommendations being made by the Committee which are outlined below. It is important to note that the Trust may somewhat be implementing the substance of the recommendations being issued by the Committee, although the Committee had not received as much information as to the extent to which this is the case. The Trust will be provided with an opportunity to respond to these recommendations with further evidence as to how they are being implemented.

***Reliance on agency staff:*** The Committee was pleased to hear that agency staff were integrated into teams and provided with continuous professional development by the Trust. This would help to ensure that agency staff are working in accordance to the principles that the Trust stands for, and would help create consistency in the quality of clinical care that patient receive. Nonetheless, the focus should be on reducing reliance on agency staff in general. Having said that, the Committee does recognise that agency staff would be required for a variety of reasons and circumstances which are unavoidable. However, it is inevitable that excessive dependence on agency staff can lead to inconsistencies in the quality of care provided. To mitigate this issue, it is crucial to work toward reducing reliance on agency staff and ensuring that the care they provide meets the standards of the Trust.

In one 2009 study published in the *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, it was found that reducing reliance on agency staff involves a multi-faceted approach; focusing on recruitment, retention, and efficient workforce planning<sup>1</sup>. This three-pronged model could potentially be utilised by the Trust to achieve reduced reliance on agency staff:

- ***Robust recruitment practices:*** The Trust could implement effective recruitment strategies to help attract permanent staff. This includes offering competitive salaries, robust benefits packages, and opportunities for career advancement. Partnering with educational institutions to offer internships and placements can also create a pipeline of potential permanent employees.

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<sup>1</sup> [A review of workload measures: A context for a new staffing methodology in Western Australia - ScienceDirect](#)

- *Enhancing Employee Retention:* Retention programs are vital in maintaining a stable workforce. Regular professional development, recognition programs, and supportive management can improve job satisfaction and reduce turnover. The Trust should also continue to enhance employee well-being initiatives, such as flexible working hours and stress management programs, which could also contribute to higher retention rates amongst clinical or administrative staff.
- *Effective workforce planning:* Strategic workforce planning by the Trust is also essential in predicting and managing staff shortages. Utilising data analytics can help in forecasting staffing needs and planning accordingly. Developing a flexible staffing model that includes part-time and temporary staff could also be conducive toward reducing the need for agency staff.

While working to reduce reliance on agency staff, it is equally important that the Trust takes specific steps to ensure that the quality of care they provide is up to standard. This could potentially be achieved in three ways. Firstly, agency staff should undergo thorough orientation programs to familiarise them with the Trust's policies, procedures, as well as its culture. This helps in aligning them with the Trust's standards and its expectations of its clinical and administrative staff. Secondly, ongoing training and regular evaluations are crucial in maintaining high standards of care. Agency staff should have access to the same training opportunities as permanent staff. Regular performance reviews or even potential feedback sessions can help identify areas for improvement and ensure consistent quality of clinical care. Thirdly, the Trust should establish clear communication channels between agency staff, permanent staff, and management. This would ensure that agency staff are well-informed and integrated into the team, promoting a cohesive working environment.

**Recommendation 1:** *To work toward reducing reliance on agency staff where possible. It is recommended that processes are in place to ensure that the quality of care provided by agency staff is appropriate and up to standard so as to ensure consistency in the quality of care for patients.*

**Supporting a positive work environment for staff:** The Committee firmly believes in the importance of supporting the wellbeing of healthcare staff. Particularly given the pressures they could face in the work environment in the context of a nationally stretched health service. It is commendable that the Trust provides a 24/7 Employee Assistance Programme as well as an occupational health service that staff or their managers could refer them to. The fact that the Trust has health and wellbeing representatives in all its teams is also a positive development.

A positive and supportive work environment is essential for the well-being and productivity of the Trust's employees. It would not only enhance job satisfaction but also fosters a sense of belonging and loyalty towards the

Trust. An important aspect of creating such an environment is to ensure that staff can also easily make complaints or express legitimate grievances.

Encouraging open communication is the cornerstone of a supportive work environment. The Trust's employees should feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, ideas, and concerns without fear of any negative consequences. This can be achieved by; establishing regular team meetings and one-on-one check-ins; creating an open-door policy where employees can approach managers at any time; or even using anonymous suggestion boxes or digital platforms for anonymous feedback.

Acknowledging and celebrating employee achievements can also significantly boost the morale and motivation of Trust staff. This could be exercised in a variety of ways including monthly or quarterly awards for outstanding performance, public recognition during team meetings, or even personalised thank you notes from management.

Furthermore, investing in employee growth would indicate that the Trust appreciates the contribution of its staff and is committed to their professional development. This can be facilitated through offering training and development programs, encouraging attendance at relevant health-related conferences and seminars (in the case of clinical staff), as well as providing mentorship programs of some sort to guide career progression.

Moreover, it is crucial that the Trust's employees feel safe and supported in voicing their concerns, and that there are clear and effective processes for handling complaints and grievances. This could be achieved in the following ways:

- *Developing a clear staff complaints policy:* A clearly defined policy on complaints and grievances should be communicated to all Trust employees. This policy should outline the types of issues that can be reported, the steps involved in filing a complaint, and a potential timeline for addressing and resolving staff complaints:
- *Providing multiple reporting channels:* Employees should have access to various channels for reporting their concerns. These can include direct communication with supervisors or HR representatives or anonymous online reporting systems.
- *Ensuring confidentiality and protection:* Confidentiality is paramount in handling complaints and grievances. The Trust's employees should be assured that their concerns will be kept private and that they will be protected from any form of retaliation or negative consequences. The Trust could potentially reinforce this by clearly stating confidentiality policies in employee handbooks, training managers and HR staff on the importance of confidentiality, or

implementing strict measures to prevent retaliation against complainants.

**Recommendation 2:** *To create a positive and supportive work environment for staff, and to foster an environment and processes where staff can easily make complaints or express legitimate grievances.*

***Harnessing the use of technology:*** The Committee is pleased to hear that the Trust's use of integrated systems is helping to streamline administrative tasks and that this is having a knock-on effect on enhancing staff satisfaction and efficiency. In today's fast-paced digital environment, the integration of technology into the healthcare workplace is imperative for enhancing productivity, communication, and overall efficiency. For the Trust, leveraging technological advancements is essential not only to improve the working environment for staff but also to ensure the continuity and reliability of services being provided to patients. In a 2020 study published in the Journal of *International Health*, it was found that advancements in the use of IT maximises efficiencies in a way that improves healthcare staff satisfaction and makes them feel strongly supported in their roles; and that the increased staff productivity helps improve patient experiences, satisfaction, and outcomes<sup>2</sup>.

Technology can offer the Trust a plethora of tools that can foster seamless communication and collaboration among staff members. Staff should make as much use of platforms such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom to enable real-time messaging, video conferencing, and file sharing, as this can enhance interaction between staff in ways that creates more efficient planning for treatments for patients or for other administrative tasks.

Advancements in IT have also meant that data can be stored securely and accessed from anywhere at any time. The Trust should make use of this flexibility to not only enhance data management (including patient data) but to also ensure that critical information is protected and easily retrievable (including in cases of emergencies).

To ensure that the Trust's staff can effectively utilise new technology, continuous training and development programs should be implemented. Workshops, online courses, and hands-on training sessions can help employees to remain updated with the latest technological platforms and tools available to them.

The Trust has also recently been the subject of cyber-attacks. The Committee has routinely called on the Trust to do as much as it can to recover from such attacks. It is also vital that patient records are securely maintained and that these are not lost. According to a 2024 study published by the *National Center for Biotechnology Information*, 'the healthcare industry is the perfect cyber-attack victim because it depends

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<sup>2</sup> [ihaa007.pdf](#)

on technology for patient care', and that this potentially places healthcare providers in a state of vulnerability<sup>3</sup>. It is therefore pivotal that the Trust takes every measure feasible to work with local or national partners/bodies to explore collaborative ways to reduce the occurrences of such attacks. The Trust should regularly maintain and update its IT systems to preclude outages. This could include software updates, hardware checks, and network security assessments. The Trust should also ideally schedule maintenance windows to minimise disruption. Continuous monitoring of IT systems can help with early detection of potential outages or cyber-attacks impacting the Trust. Implementing alert systems that notify the Trust's IT staff of any anomalies or failures can allow for swift responses and resolutions to any cyber threats.

The Committee remains slightly concerned regarding the utilisation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the NHS; as this could potentially raise issues around patient safety and safeguarding. It is therefore crucial that if the Trust is to make further use of AI (particularly for dealing with patients or maintaining records), that there are clear governance or safety processes in place so as to increase reassurances as to the appropriateness of its use. Utmost caution should be applied by the Trust if it is increasingly resorting to AI use. In a 2023 research piece published in the *British Medical Journal*, it was outlined that whilst there are clear benefits to UK-based healthcare providers maximising the potential of AI, it is important for there to be national and local processes, protocols, or procedures around the use of AI so as to reduce any potential risks to patient safety<sup>4</sup>.

Overall, by harnessing the power of technology, the Trust can create a better and more efficient working environment for staff. Taking proactive steps to prevent IT outages and providing evidence of these efforts not only ensures the reliability of IT services but also fosters a culture of continuous improvement and innovation. Investing in technology is not just about upgrading systems; it is about empowering the workforce to increase their productivity. This can have a knock-on effect on improving patient care.

**Recommendation 3:** *To harness the use of technology to create a better and more efficient working environment for staff. It is also recommended that the Trust takes steps to avert the prospects of future IT outages inasmuch as possible, and to provide evidence of this.*

**Campaign for an Oxford salary weighting:** As part of the initiatives undertaken by the Trust to support its staff, the Committee firmly believes in the imperative for an Oxford Salary Weighting that would support healthcare workers. Indeed, the influx of talent and the city's growing economy have driven up housing costs and other living expenses, making it increasingly challenging for individuals to make ends meet on

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<sup>3</sup> [Cyber Attacks on Interoperable Electronic Health Records: A Clear and Present Danger - PMC](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Validation framework for the use of AI in healthcare: overview of the new British standard BS30440 - PMC](#)

standard salaries. Healthcare workers in the City have also been increasingly feeling financial strains as a result. In order for healthcare staff to undertake their role as effectively as possible, it is vital that they are not subjected to immense stresses and strains beyond the already existing pressures they could face in undertaking their roles. The introduction of an Oxford salary weighting would serve as a crucial step towards alleviating this financial pressure.

Oxford's housing market is among the most expensive in the UK, with property prices and rental rates continuing to climb. For many workers, especially those in public sector roles such as education, healthcare, and local government, salaries have not kept pace with these rising costs. An Oxford salary weighting would help to bridge this gap, ensuring that employees can afford to live and work within the city without undue financial strain.

Providing competitive salaries that reflect the cost of living is essential for attracting and retaining talent. Oxford's reputation as a hub of academic and professional excellence should extend to the wellbeing of its workforce. By implementing a salary weighting, employers can enhance their attractiveness to potential candidates and reduce turnover rates, fostering a stable and motivated workforce. The Committee is therefore recommending that the Trust works with system partners to campaign for an Oxford salary weighting. The Committee had also issued this recommendation to Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust last year, and is willing to provide any support it can in pursuit of this.

**Recommendation 4:** *To work with system partners to campaign for an Oxford salary weighting.*

## **Legal Implications**

12. Health Scrutiny powers set out in the Health and Social Care Act 2012 and the Local Authority (Public Health, Health and Wellbeing Boards and Health Scrutiny) Regulations 2013 provide:
  - ☐ Power to scrutinise health bodies and authorities in the local area
  - ☐ Power to require members or officers of local health bodies to provide information and to attend health scrutiny meetings to answer questions
  - ☐ Duty of NHS to consult scrutiny on major service changes and provide feedback on consultations.
13. Under s. 22 (1) Local Authority (Public Health, Health and Wellbeing Boards and Health Scrutiny) Regulations 2013 'A local authority may make reports and recommendations to a responsible person on any matter it has reviewed or scrutinised'.
14. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 and the Local Authority (Public Health, Health and Wellbeing Boards and Health Scrutiny) Regulations 2013 provide that the committee may require a response from the responsible person to



whom it has made the report or recommendation and that person must respond in writing within 28 days of the request.

15. The recommendations contained in this report were agreed to by the following members of the Committee:

Councillor Jane Hanna OBE – in the Chair  
District Councillor Katharine Keats-Rohan (Deputy Chair)  
Councillor Yvonne Constance OBE  
Councillor Jenny Hannaby  
Councillor Michael O'Connor  
Councillor Freddie van Mierlo  
Councillor Mark Lygo  
District Councillor Paul Barrow  
District Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt  
District Councillor Susanna Pressel  
District Councillor Dorothy Walker

#### Annex 1 – Scrutiny Response Pro Forma

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