



TIMEWISE SECTOR GUIDE

Secure and Flexible Work in the **Health and Adult Social Care Sectors**

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The purpose of this short guide is to provide an introduction to promoting flexible and secure work for employers and industry actors. It offers snapshot insights into the sector-specific challenges and barriers to flexible and secure work, shares opportunities for good practice and identifies priority actions that can be taken by employers and sector bodies to better promote and implement flexible and secure work. It will help you to answer:

- What is the state of play in your industry?
- What can good look like?
- How can you take action now?

The guide has been developed following a 12-month engagement programme with employers, workers, experts and sector representatives.

This guide has been created as part of the Industry Voices for Better Frontline Work programme, supported by the abrdn Financial Fairness Trust, which is seeking to increase the supply of good flexible jobs for low and middle-income workers across key frontline sectors.



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WHAT IS THE STATE OF PLAY?

SECTOR INSIGHTS

Health and adult social care are the UK's biggest employers with 1.5 million workers in the NHS and another 1.5 million in adult social care. Whilst the majority of health workers are in the NHS and benefit from standard pay and conditions, the care sector is far more distributed, with 32 per cent of adult social care workers on zero hours contracts¹.

Health and care employers have significant issues attracting and retaining staff, in roles which are critical and challenging, but sometimes poorly paid. The need for predictable and flexible working in a predominantly female sector is understood, but not always seen as possible to provide, with so many operational constraints and a desire to put patients and service users first.

1. Skills for Care Workforce Data 2023.





CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

It is important to recognise that health and adult social care have different starting points, with the care sector facing significant challenges around contracting and commissioning arrangements which can make it hard for employers to offer stable contracts and fair pay. These issues need addressing as a priority to offer staff security and a reliable income.

Some of the key challenges to the greater provision of secure and flexible work across both sectors discussed in our roundtable discussions include:

- Pressured operational environments and high vacancy rates which limit capacity to innovate.
- An individual ‘request-response’ approach to flexible working. Organisations need to move beyond this to create culture change and shared responsibility for supporting flexible working lives through providing staff with choices over their working patterns.
- Lack of systems / data, support and training for line managers. They need to be equipped with tools to support resource planning and have the right conversations with their team.
- Bank and agency staff can be viewed as a route to flexible working, but face their own challenges around predictability, security and career progression. And these roles still offer the same long, inflexible shift patterns in nursing and medical settings.
- Overcoming complexity. There is a need to standardise practice and make it as easy as possible to implement, whilst recognising individuals want and need different types of flexibility.

WHAT CAN GOOD LOOK LIKE?

VISION FOR WHAT GOOD COULD LOOK LIKE

So what would a more embedded secure and flexible working approach look like?

- Working cultures where employees have greater ownership of and input into their working patterns; and flexibility is not limited to bank and agency staff (health) or via zero hour contracts (social care).
- Shifting from individual-focused ‘request-response’ to team-based cultures and systems change.
- Greater flexibility within the system, meaning people don’t feel the need to move to bank or agency in order to gain control over their working hours.
- Being bold – a trusting culture set by senior leaders, giving managers a safe space to experiment.
- Data-led – understanding the real impact on costs and patient outcomes, and using data creatively to inspire.
- Standardising practice and approaches where there is benefit, but allowing different solutions for different professions, teams and contexts.

CASE STUDY

Norfolk County Council

The Care Careers team at Norfolk County Council are working actively with local care providers, helping them to identify opportunities to offer greater flexibility to their workforces, through training on flexible job design and hiring flexibly.

Timewise delivered a Train the Trainer programme for the Care Careers team at Norfolk County Council to build their knowledge and understanding, and they are now continuing this work with providers, influencing practice and driving more flexible working opportunities for the social care workforce across the county.

OPPORTUNITIES AND GOOD PRACTICE

A real strength within the health sector has been the clear commitment within the People Plan and Long-Term Workforce Strategy to make flexible working a pillar of the employment offer. This has created the strategic imperative for the sector and put it on the agenda in most Trusts and ICSs.

There are already many organisations within the health and adult care sectors who have adopted initiatives to try and improve the options their staff have to introduce different working arrangements. Some of the examples of good practice we have noted are:

- Trialling team-based rostering, in wards and in social care teams, to involve staff with development of roster which best meets their own needs and those of their care users.¹
- Adoption of self-rostering technology to allow staff to input their preferences for when they want to work.²
- 'Any Hours' option to take on additional cover shifts, but with shorter hours rather than a 12.5 hr shift.³

- 'Suits You' shifts offering a choice of working patterns to encourage returners back to the NHS, including term-time and part-time options.⁴
- Trialling AI solutions for building intelligent rosters, taking into account personal preferences as well as optimal shift arrangements.⁵

1. Caring by design (Timewise 2017) <https://timewise.co.uk/article/caring-by-design/>
2. Improving joy at work – electronic self-rostering (The Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust) <https://www.england.nhs.uk/looking-after-our-people/the-programme-and-resources/we-work-flexibly/improving-joy-at-work-electronic-self-rostering-the-royal-free-london-nhs-foundation-trust/>
3. <https://timewise.co.uk/article/how-shift-based-innovation-boosted-one-trusts-midwifery-capacity/>
4. <https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Suits-You-Shifts-Case-Study.pdf>
5. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38582024/>



CASE STUDY

Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust

Since 2022, Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust have been operating an ‘Any Hours’ approach in Midwifery & Neonatal. Recognising that staff might be interested in working additional time but could not commit to another 12.5 hr shift, Any Hours allows midwives to choose the number of additional hours they want to work, and when they would like to work them.

The scheme has been an outstanding success. Trust data shows that since the Any Hours Scheme was enacted, it has enabled, on average, 300 hours of shifts to be filled each month, equalling two whole-time equivalent midwives. This has reduced reliance on agency staff, and increased satisfaction within the team.



HOW CAN YOU TAKE ACTION NOW?

FOR THE HEALTH SECTOR

For the NHS and health sector to more widely continue to progress, we have identified key actions to take at national level, across the sector bodies and for individual organisations.

EMPLOYER PRIORITIES

1. CLEAR LEADERSHIP ACCOUNTABILITY

The NHS Staff Survey provides very transparent information about the staff experience of flexible working down to department level. It is important to hold senior leaders to account in their objectives on ensuring that the commitment to increasing opportunities for flex reaches every part of the organisation.

2. MONITORING AND ADDRESSING INCLUSION

It is often not enough for an organisation to have a policy on flexible work. Staff have to know about it, feel it is available to them and that they can request a change without it having a negative impact on their employment or progression. Ensure there are communication channels to reach all employees and monitor demographic data to ensure access to flexible working options is fair.

3. MANAGER SUPPORT AND TRAINING

Managers need to feel equipped to resource and run their service, and deliver for their patients. This means providing them with the tools and training to resource plan, the permission to flex the resourcing in their team, and the skills to handle individual conversations. Employers can help provide a clear framework, but allow decisions to be made locally by the managers who know their service and their team.



SECTOR PRIORITIES

FOR ROYAL COLLEGES, NHS EMPLOYERS AND UNIONS

1. CREATING COMMON TOOLS AND A STRONG EVIDENCE BASE

There is a continued role to share what is working and to equip managers with the tools and business case to embed new ways of working. This includes developing the case for linking improvements to working patterns on patient safety and outcomes.

2. IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS FOR EACH PROFESSION AND ROLE TYPE

The flex options, and solutions, available vary considerably by the location, setting and nature of the work. We need to develop understanding of the flex options for each role and build up a wide bank of case studies. A ‘discipline to discipline’ peer mentoring approach would be valuable for spreading good practice.

There are also opportunities to embed the agenda around flexible working more strategically, and reinforce its importance as a pillar of the long-term

workforce strategy. This would include considering the need for staff time to identify and recognise staff preferences and resourcing plans to enable people to have choice in their shifts and time out when they need it.

3. DESIGNING SERVICES AND ROSTERS AROUND HOW PEOPLE WANT TO WORK

With a high demand for different working patterns and in many cases, shorter shifts, there is an opportunity for a fundamental reset – not starting with a fixed mindset around 12.5hr shifts and 37.5hr weeks as the default. An example is ‘Suits You Shifts’ which have been advertised by Mid Yorkshire NHS Hospitals. These offer the opportunity for nurses to choose from a range of shifts from term time to shorter days to jobshares. This needs to be considered through the employee lifecycle – from recruitment to training to how work is designed.

4. INVESTMENT IN TECHNOLOGY WHICH SUPPORTS STAFF TO WORK FLEXIBLY

Rostering technology which allows staff to input their preferences is being adopted in nursing, but not widely used in other disciplines. It is also important that the systems are evaluated in terms of helping staff meet their working pattern preferences as well as creating resourced and safe rosters.

5. CHANGING THE LANGUAGE

‘Flexible working’ is often associated with individual arrangements and fixed working patterns. To create broad ownership it needs to be positioned around increasing opportunities for staff to have predictability, choice and input to their working pattern. It may be beneficial to have a survey question which explicitly asks about how staff feel about getting a choice about their working pattern / working hours.

HOW CAN YOU TAKE ACTION NOW?

FOR THE SOCIAL CARE SECTOR

Social care has been identified as a priority for the new Government, with a commitment to developing a ‘fair pay agreement’ for the sector. In order to support secure and flexible working, we recommend the following key actions:

EMPLOYER PRIORITIES

1. EXPERIMENT WITH TEAM-BASED ROSTERING AND SELF-ROSTERING

The technology which supports rostering is developing all the time and AI can help balance the need to create a safe level of cover with individual working preferences.

2. CROSS SKILLING

Upskilling existing team members to be able to cover for each other and increase their ‘deployability’ to a range of roles can help build more resilience into the schedule and increase the opportunity to provide ad hoc time off.

3. TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR ROSTER MANAGERS

The role of those liaising with carers is critical and often undervalued. Increased recognition and support helping them to feel valued can impact how they relate to the carers and ensure they’re making use the technology available to help develop the rosters.





SECTOR PRIORITIES FOR SECTOR BODIES AND UNIONS

1. DEVELOP A PEOPLE PLAN, AS RECOMMENDED IN THE WORKFORCE STRATEGY PRODUCED BY SKILLS FOR CARE

This should look at working patterns as a key element, in the way the NHS plan includes flexible working as a key pillar.

2. HELP AGREE STANDARDS

The sector bodies and unions need to come together to have a shared view of what is needed to improve standards for fair and flexible work, potentially through the Fair Pay agreement which will also cover non-wage aspects of employment. It is vital that, to tackle the recruitment issues and sector image, this agreement needs to examine working practices and how employers can offer greater security.

3. PROMOTE PEER-TO-PEER LEARNING

Create forums where providers can share learning with their comparable peers from similar parts of the system. This will help spread good practice.

4. CONTINUE TO ADVOCATE FOR IMPROVED COMMISSIONING ARRANGEMENTS

These need to be standardised and improved so that packages are more stable and can be advertised with greater notice. Outcome-based models may enable delivery of shift-based pay with more predictable hours rather than pay by hourly slots / number of visits.

5. FURTHER INTEGRATION WITH HEALTH TO PROVIDE MORE COMPARABLE TERMS AND CONDITIONS

The best way to ensure staff feel valued as part of the wider care system, and more likely to stay and progress within it, will be greater parity with their NHS colleagues.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the following organisations for their participation in our industry roundtable discussions:

- NHS Employers
- Royal College of Nursing
- Unison
- Royal College of Midwives
- NHS Professionals
- NHS England
- Guys & St. Thomas NHS Foundation Trust
- The Care Provider Alliance
- The Royal Free NHS Foundation Trust
- Skills for Care
- The Society of Radiographers
- Norfolk Care Careers Team
- Right at Home UK



Timewise's mission is to create healthy, equitable and inclusive workplaces for all by widening access to good quality, flexible work. We are the UK's leading experts on job design and we tackle barriers to change with both policymakers and employers. Through our research, we evidence the need for good flexible and predictable work to boost the living standards of low and middle earners. We believe good flexible jobs enable employees to gain increased autonomy and control over how much, when or where they work. Through our programmes, we trial practical solutions and scale these through consultancy and campaigns.

If you would like more information on this guide or to work with us, please email: info@timewise.co.uk.