Improving staff retention – case studies

Narrowing the front door to close the back door – hiring from within to improve retention of newly appointed staff

Stockport NHS Foundation Trust

What was the problem?

Comments from graduate nurses suggested they were frequently on shifts without a Band 6 or 7 nurse on duty to support them, which had caused concern during their preceptorship and transition to practice. Feedback from experienced ward-based Band 5 nurses indicated that Band 6 career progression opportunities were limited.

In 2018, the trust had a higher than peer average registered nurse (RN) turnover rate: 15% in February 2018, with 195 RN vacancies (whole-time equivalent). It was invited to join Cohort 2 of NHS Improvement’s Retention Direct Support Programme. After incorporating NHS Improvement’s data into a workforce diagnostic exercise, the main goal of the trust’s retention improvement plan was to ensure that nursing areas were safely staffed.

What was the solution?

The trust decided to uplift 17 Band 5 nurse ward positions on day duty to a Band 6. The aim was to ensure an experienced Band 6 or 7 nurse would be on day duty for most shifts, to support newly qualified staff and international staff who had recently joined the trust. This initiative formed part of the trust’s wider retention strategy to reduce adult nursing turnover by 1.5% within 12 months.

Alison Lynch (pictured right), recently appointed as Chief Nurse and Director of Quality Governance, saw this as an opportunity to redesign and improve the Band 6 recruitment process. The new process involved a full-day recruitment event in the trust’s onsite education centre at the weekend.
In the morning, all candidates took part in a group communication exercise hosted by Corporate Nursing to ensure objectivity. Each completed a written assessment; those achieving the agreed pass rate were invited to attend an interview in the afternoon. This was significantly different to previous recruitment practices.

Staff who did not achieve the agreed pass rate could receive support in a breakout room. This maintained confidentiality for unsuccessful candidates, some of whom were anxious after hoping to be shortlisted for interview.

The next stage was the interview panels. Each ward’s Band 7 nurse was accompanied by two other nurses independent of the ward, to ensure objectivity. This had previously presented significant problems where ward managers had strong opinions about who they favoured as their new Band 6 nurse before a fair application process.

After the interviews, a ‘moderation’ exercise ensured consistent marking of interview papers throughout all panels. Where one panel appeared to consistently score high or low, it was challenged by members of other panels. Some panels found this daunting, but all agreed it showed fairness and objectivity.

What were the challenges?

- This objective process helped greatly with post-interview queries. Two challenges were made about the process – one from an unsuccessful candidate who felt they should have been selected, and one from a ward manager who disagreed with the process. This ward manager felt they should have been able to make the final decision about who would be the Band 6 nurse on their ward. After review, neither challenge was upheld.

- On one ward, there were some shortlisted candidates that did not attend their interviews, and on another there were two applicants that did not pass the interview stage.

- One ward had (unknown to the recruitment team) recruited independently before the central event. This needed to be addressed at a later stage, as those who had to go through the central recruitment process felt it was unfair.

A significant problem was that some Band 5 nurses applied for more than one ward. The trust had therefore to stagger informing successful candidates, so those with more than one offer had their choice of wards, and to release positions in a managed fashion. One Band 7 nurse needed a lot of individual coaching after the appointment of the new Band 6 nurse, as
the ward staff had expected another staff member to be appointed. Initial disquiet on the ward took a couple of months to settle, but the trust persevered with the original decision. The ward now has a harmonious atmosphere, and at no time did the disquiet impact on patient care or ward culture.

One newly appointed Band 6 nurse was placed in a large ward that already had two Band 6s and a Band 7. After three months, the new Band 6 nurse felt the position offered too little managerial experience, so they moved to a vacant position in a different area with more capacity for leadership development. This staff member is still in post.

What were the results?

- Fourteen staff members were appointed.
- All 14 remain in post after 12 months.
- One has since been promoted to an acting Band 7 role.
- The recruitment process was successful within budget.
- Only one appointment was made externally.
- Turnover in the trust reduced by 0.9% in 12 months, and this initiative was one of five areas that contributed to the reduction.

Initially the trust shortlisted 27 applicants: four did not attend and two were unsuccessful after the written and communication exercise.

“I have been a deputy ward manager now for just over a year. I can honestly say it was the best decision I have made for myself and career. I have developed my management skills and learnt so much during this time. I have been fully supported in my new role.” Leah Balmer

“This role has enabled me to work as a Band 6 in three areas in the last 14 months, which has consolidated my clinical knowledge whilst exposing me to different managerial challenges.” Rita Sankoh
What were the learning points?

Overall the event was deemed a success. The process was significantly different to the format that trust staff were familiar with, and this caused some anxiety – particularly among some Band 7 ward managers who felt they should be able to choose who was promoted on their ward. The new process was fair, objective and values-based, and the chief nurse could be assured the most appropriate staff were appointed. For those requesting feedback, the trust provided it at their convenience, so they could work towards developing their skills, be more confident and able to apply for similar opportunities. (One applicant did not request feedback until 12 months after the interview.)

The two unsuccessful staff initially indicated they would leave the trust, but with support from colleagues both remained and continue as valued Band 5 nurses. One hopes to apply for a future Band 6 post.

The communication and written exercises, and involving objective staff, were successful aspects, so the trust would repeat them in future. To have so many senior staff away from clinical areas for an entire day was taxing on the rest of the hospital, and this would need to be mitigated in future. To recruit 17 senior positions at once was a logistical challenge.

To improve a similar future event, the trust would:

- make written guidance available for ward managers taking part
- organise a meeting in advance to review plans and ‘workshop’ the process
- ensure all staff involved understand the moderation process, to reduce confusion on the day.

Next steps and sustainability

In summer 2018 the trust undertook several off-duty compliance ‘deep dives’ and reviewed how many day duty shifts were not covered by a Band 6 or 7 nurse. Results in some areas were disappointing and a ‘reminder’ to the wards that the rationale for funding the uplift was to ensure support on day duty for less experienced nurses. This exercise will need to be regularly repeated to ensure compliance.

A review of night duty Band 6 coverage has been requested by one of the business group matrons where vacancies are persistent and graduate nurse applications are lower than the trust average. The matron will prepare a business case for recruiting two to four Band 6
staff, but the prospect of a wider initiative is limited as vacancies on night duty and shift coverage are higher than night duty (NHS Digital/Unify verified figures).

Now that the Band 6 tier has had 12 months in post to become familiarised with ward managerial routines, a development programme has been proposed so that the trust can ensure a clinically and managerially skilled nursing workforce and plan succession into future Band 7 roles.

The finance (approximately £30,000 per year) to support the uplift plus a £1,000 one-off uniform cost were well controlled. These costs are now in the 2019/20 budgets as business-as-usual funding.

**Want to know more?**

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**To see the other case studies in this series:** visit the NHS Improvement website at: https://improvement.nhs.uk/resources/improving-staff-retention/
Appendix: Three-tier Band 6 recruitment plan

Adverts out January 2018
NHS Jobs, Twitter, Facebook, internal poster

Closing date 1 February

STAGE 1

Corporate Nursing
shortlisting 5 February and invite successful candidates to moderation panel 10 February

STAGE 2

10 February, Pinewood House

Candidate to register and refreshments
09:30 to 10:00
Chair – Alison Lynch, Chief Nurse and Director of Quality Governance

Communication session and written paper – 1 hour
Break – 1 hour 30 minutes while moderation panel scores and selects for interview

STAGE 3

Reconvene in Pinewood

Unsuccessful candidates: matrons to support with career development

Successful candidates

Interview

Moderation panel

Offer