

## Improving staff retention – case studies

# ‘Grow your own’ – a proactive approach to retaining nursing staff

Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust

## What was the problem?

The trust forecast in 2013 it would lose many registered nurses in its mental health and learning disabilities specialties over the next few years, as – in addition to the usual attrition reasons – a significant proportion turned 55 and became eligible to retire.

There were too few newly qualified nurses available to fill the potential gaps the trust had identified by examining the age profile of its workforce. Nor could it support the university fees for putting large numbers of potential internal recruits through nurse training.

## What was the solution?

The trust resolved to ‘grow its own’ nursing workforce rather than rely exclusively on external recruitment of existing nurses. This was part of its 2014-19 nursing strategy to keep dedicated members of the trust community engaged and progressing in their careers.

The introduction of the apprenticeship levy enabled staff to enrol on an apprenticeship and attend university to study nursing, using the levy to pay the funding.

The trust developed a scheme with Sunderland University that allowed for a three or four-year apprenticeship, where staff could be released on a part-time supernumerary basis.

As a result of work from 2014 to equip support staff with National Vocational Qualifications, functional skills and foundation degrees, the trust had over 150 nursing support workers qualified to enter the new nursing apprenticeship.



## What were the challenges?

The trust had to work with Sunderland University and other partners to get the course validated by the Nursing and Midwifery Council, which took time.

Seconding trainees for such long periods can be costly. But retention rates for these staff are predicted to be excellent as they are settled in the area, so the cost of investment is offset by savings from not having to replace them.

There were other small but important challenges: for example, many staff did not have access to the ward computer, so the trust invested in laptops for those completing the apprenticeship to ensure they could uphold their academic commitments.

## What were the results?

By June 2019 the trust was six months into the first cohort, with no dropouts. This is significant: national data shows the first six months at university are when most dropouts occur. The second cohort is now underway.

The apprenticeship has resulted in an improved retention package that develops staff who have been with the trust for some time. It shows that the trust values them and is willing to support them, while meeting workforce needs and providing a supply of registered nurses to meet clinical need.

## What were the learning points?

Although securing the finance for a scheme such as this can be arduous, it is worth it to avoid the cost of agency fees and vacancies later. This is an 'invest to save' initiative. Instead of asking 'can we afford it?' ask 'can we afford not to?'

Get commitment from all levels. In this case, senior managers and the trust board were kept up to date and championed the initiative.

Be aware that apprenticeships are sometimes relatively unknown: many people do not realise their potential, so can resist them initially.

## Next steps and sustainability

Recruitment for the first cohort began in August 2018 and the programme began in January 2019. Recruitment for Cohort 2 was launched as soon as Cohort 1 started, and another recruitment process began in August 2019 for January 2020. The trust expects cohorts of 15 to 20 twice a year for the coming years.

## Want to know more?

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