

SPF members' handbook



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Welcome to the Social Partnership Forum

The Social Partnership Forum (SPF) brings together the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), NHS Employers, NHS Trade Unions, and NHS England (NHSE) to contribute to the development and implementation of policy that impacts the healthcare workforce.

How this handbook can help national SPF members

This handbook contains useful information about the SPF. It explains the purpose of the SPF, the role of partners and how they can get involved to support its aims. It also provides practical information on the SPF's detailed working arrangements. The handbook will be reviewed annually to ensure content is up-to-date.

This handbook should be used alongside the SPF Partnership Agreement.

Aims of the SPF

The SPF is a forum to discuss, debate and involve partners in the development and implementation of policy with workforce implications. The aims of the SPF are to:

- contribute trade union and employer perspectives to the development of policy

- provide constructive comments on emerging policy at a formative stage
- contribute ideas on the workforce implications of developing policy and implementation
- promote effective communications between partners.

The SPF is built on a framework of positive partnership working. The principles, processes and structures of partnership working are linked to partners' shared goals and objectives. The shared approach and principles for effective joint working are set out in the SPF Partnership Agreement.

Why work in partnership?

There is a body of evidence that shows good staff engagement, such as the partnership approach, can deliver better patient outcomes as well as improve overall organisational performance - see the link between staff engagement and organisational effectiveness on our how we do partnership page.

The NHS Constitution Handbook also emphasises the importance of staff engagement and partnership working and requires the NHS to commit to 'engage staff in decisions that affect them and the services they provide, individually, through representative organisations and through local partnership working arrangements.

Effective partnership working at all levels has the potential to produce some important benefits for all parties. These include:

- delivering improved outcomes for patients/service users
- improved mutual understanding

- an opportunity for partners to contribute their experience and ideas to the development and implementation of the workforce implications of health and social care policy
- an ability to assess the likely impact of emerging policy on the NHS workforce and to mitigate risks
- more effective development and implementation of policy
- ensuring high standards of employment practice
- providing a transparent and streamlined structure for NHS trade union, employer and staff engagement across the health and care system.

What are the benefits for each partner?

The SPF enables partners to work together to promote effective partnership working on the workforce implications of policy and strategy. It brings together representatives from the DHSC, NHSE, and the NHS Trade Unions (representing NHS staff) and NHS Employers (which provides the employers' voice). This model enables early discussion, debate and involvement in the development and implementation of policy that impacts on the workforce.

DHSC perspective: Ministers and the DHSC value the SPF, as it provides a forum which upholds high levels of cooperation and commitment to improve health and social care outcomes for patients. The forum provides valuable input and insight into the workforce implications of policy development and supports the implementation of policies.

Working in partnership across the health and care landscape and engaging with the workforce is key to making the best decisions about

patient care. Evidence shows that engaged, satisfied employees are more productive and that in the NHS, staff and patient experience are closely linked. DHSC believes that engaging NHS staff in decisions that affect them is a crucial factor in the delivery of safe and high-quality care for our patients.

Trade Union perspective: The NHS Trade Unions believe it is in their members' best interests to engage in partnership working with governments and employers, to seek solutions to challenges and problems. Partnership working puts an onus on both employers and trade unions to engage and consult on all decisions that affect staff. Partnership underpins and facilitates sound and effective employer and trade union relations and has a track record of delivering real gains for staff and patients. As a crucial determinant of the quality of healthcare, a growing body of evidence-based research shows that effective partnership working and staff engagement in NHS organisations improves the patient experience and healthcare outcomes.

Employers' perspective: The SPF allows employers to get an early sight of health policy. It also allows them to give their perspective on how policy should be developed and highlight the possible workforce implications of a policy. In particular, the forum allows employers to influence how proposals are implemented and, through discussions with partners, to make sure they are workable and realise maximum benefits for patients.

Roles and responsibilities

To enable effective operation of these partnership arrangements, all partners agree to recognise and respect each other's roles and functions, which are distinct but complementary.

At national level partners recognise that:

- Ministers are democratically elected and have formal accountability to Parliament and the public as leaders of the health and care system for developing and implementing public policy through the DHSC and its Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs).
- Trade Unions have a responsibility to represent the interests of their members.
- NHS Employers has a responsibility to represent the views of employers in the NHS.
- NHSE has a responsibility to discuss and engage with partners on significant policy decisions, which affect the NHS workforce, and to ensure health interested unions understand NHSE's role, reasons for developing specific policies and its evidence base, and regard NHSE a partner with the best interests of the NHS, patients and the workforce at heart.

A range of other organisations, groups and networks exist at a national and regional level with which the SPF liaises and interfaces through the national SPF, its subgroups, and regional SPFs. This includes the Care Quality Commission, UK Health Security Agency and other organisations leading health and care initiatives that impact on the health workforce. The SPF also works with the NHS Staff Council, which is responsible for formal negotiations on pay and terms and conditions issues for staff covered by NHS Terms and Conditions of Service, although SPF itself does not cover these issues.

Partners recognise that regional level partnership forums provide an arena for overarching confidential discussions and debate between trade unions, employers and the system about strategic issues affecting the NHS workforce. They contribute ideas on the workforce implications of developing policy and its implementation. They take a lead role in promoting good practice and communication between national and local partnership forums to drive up the quality of care for patients and improve staff experience. Further information regarding the different regional partnership forums, can be found on [our regional SPF web pages](#).

At local employer level - the SPF recognises the importance of partnership working between management and trade unions in health and care organisations and the positive contribution it can make to patient care. Partners have a shared aim to ensure that effective partnership working is sustained and embedded in all employer organisations and produce and promote tools and resources, made available on the SPF website, to support a partnership approach.

Members' behaviour

The SPF and its subgroup meetings are conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect even when the partners disagree over a specific issue. The following guidelines provide some agreed ground rules to support a positive and constructive working environment:

- Wherever possible keep the language simple and avoid jargon. If you do not fully understand an issue, ensure that you seek clarification before agreeing or disagreeing.
- Respect other members of the forum as individuals with equal rights.
- Recognise and respect the responsibilities that individuals have as representatives of their respective partner organisations.
- Where appropriate, maintain confidentiality on issues of a sensitive nature and where agreed, do not share confidential papers outside of the meeting. If an issue is potentially sensitive, agree how and when it will be communicated externally. During the meetings individuals have the right to express opinions without having their views quoted outside of the meeting.
- Strive for consensus as far as possible. Sharing of information should be encouraged and enough time allowed for meaningful discussion.

- Where a consensus is not reached but a recommendation still must be made, the divergence of views needs to be clearly noted.

As a member of the national SPF or one of its subgroups, you represent one of the partners i.e. NHS Employers, NHS Trade Unions, NHSE, DHSC (not the SPF as a whole). As an SPF member you should use your judgement, guided by the principles of partnership working, to engage with your own constituents outside the group as and when necessary. Each partner organisation has its own processes in place for gathering wider views to input into discussions.

Representatives should:

- use their judgement to engage with their colleagues and constituents for views/feedback to inform social partnership discussions
- report back agreed messages from the national SPF to their colleagues and constituents
- promote the benefits of social partnership working at a national, regional, system and organisational level
- be involved in the annual programme of regional visits.

The SPF undertakes stocktakes to identify where it is working well and areas for improvement. In 2015, an independent report of the SPF undertaken by the Involvement and Participation Association (IPA) found that it 'remains one of the most advanced forms of industrial partnership in the British public sector'. In a follow-up stocktake conducted by IPA in 2019, they found, in comparison with other social partnerships in the UK public sector, the national SPF remained an exemplar model.

In addition to the stocktake, a review of communications, including the website, is undertaken periodically to identify how the SPF can better communicate information on the benefits of partnership working, the work of the national and regional SPFs and the impact of this work.

Detailed Working Arrangements

National meetings

The SPF Wider Group and the smaller Strategic Group meet quarterly. The Wider Group meetings are chaired by a health minister. The Strategic Group is co-chaired by NHS Trade Unions and NHS Employers and operates under the auspices of the Wider Group.

Conduct of meetings

Items may be placed on the agenda by any of the parties. Secretariat arrangements are led by the DHSC, who liaise with key contacts from NHS Trade Unions, NHS Employers, NHSE. All partners are encouraged to use the forum to showcase effective partnership working in line with the aims of the forum.

The SPF chairs manage business and maintain proper conduct of meetings and are responsible for ensuring that individual members uphold the partnership principles and the co-operative spirit of the forum. There is a quarterly chairs' meeting, which includes the Strategic Group and Workforce Issues Group chairs. This meeting is used to prioritise work areas and agree where partnership activity is required.

Consultation and information

In addition to SPF meetings, consultation and dialogue will continue and partners will meet informally as necessary to discuss specific policy issues.

To help facilitate effective working the partners agree to the following:

- every effort will be made to provide information in good time for discussion and/or consultation
- all parties will undertake to provide a considered, co-ordinated, and timely response to issues on which their views are sought/on which they are consulted

- all parties to respect confidentiality where that is required or requested; and otherwise to conduct their dialogue openly.

Minutes and communications

Minutes of all meetings are produced. Joint key communications from the Wider Group meetings are also agreed by all partners and published on the SPF website.

SPF subgroups

From time to time, as appropriate, the SPF may establish subgroups to develop specific pieces of work or to look at issues in more detail. For more detail on the current SPF subgroups, see the [groups web page](#).

Secretariat support to the subgroups is provided by the SPF Programme Manager. Each subgroup is made up of representatives from partner organisations and has agreed terms of reference, which are reviewed regularly and published on the subgroup's web page.

SPF website

The SPF website is a resource for members. It provides information on the forum's [priorities](#) and showcases good practice in partnership working through a range of [case studies](#). It also includes resources which have been developed in partnership through the SPF and signposts useful resources to support a positive experience for staff working in the NHS.

Evaluation and review

The SPF partnership arrangements set out in this document will be subject to annual evaluation and review, to ensure they remain relevant and fit for purpose. For more information on these reviews see our [about us web page](#).

Annex A - Membership of Social Partnership Forum

Strategic Group NHS Trade Unions

Helga Pile	UNISON (Staff Side Co-chair)
Nick Entwistle	UNISON (Trade Union Secretariat Lead)
Alice Sorby	Royal College of Midwives
Brian Morton	Royal College of Nursing
Lena Levy/Robert Kidney	British Medical Association
Claire Sullivan	Chartered Society of Physiotherapy
Jon Restell	Managers in Partnership

NHS Employers

Danny Mortimer	NHS Employers (Employers Side Co-chair)
Rebecca Smith	Director of System and Social Partnership
Plus three nominated employer/system representatives	

DHSC

Gavin Larner	Director of Workforce
Mike Haslam	Deputy Director, Workforce Strategy
Andrew Morris	Head of SPF

NHSE

Tom Simons	Chief HR & OD Officer
Angie Walsh	Head of Recognition & Reward
Navina Evans	Chief Workforce Officer - open invitation

Wider Group Chair

Andrew Stephenson	Minister of State for Health
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NHS Trade Unions

Helga Pile	UNISON (Staff Side Co-chair)
Nick Entwistle	UNISON (Trade Union Secretariat Lead)
Lena Levy/Robert Kidney	British Medical Association
Alice Sorby	Royal College of Midwives
Claire Sullivan	Chartered Society of Physiotherapy
Jon Restell	Managers in Partnership
Brian Morton	Royal College of Nursing
Jacalyn Williams	Unite the Union
Rachel Harrison	GMB
Annette Mansell-Green	British Dietetic Association
Sam Aitkenhead	British and Irish Orthoptic Society
Michael Cornes	Federation of Clinical Scientists
Paul Donaldson	Hospital Consultants & Specialists Association
Martin Furlong	The Royal College of Podiatry
Dean Rogers	Society of Radiographers
Alan Lofthouse	British Association of Occupational Therapists
Sian Elliot	Trade Union Congress – observer

NHS Employers

Danny Mortimer	NHS Employers (Employers Side Co-chair)
Rebecca Smith	Director of System and Social Partnership
Plus four nominated employer/system representatives	

DHSC

Matthew Style	Director General, NHS Policy and Performance
Gavin Larner	Director of Workforce
Mike Haslam	Deputy Director, Workforce Strategy
Andrew Morris	Head of SPF

NHSE

Tom Simons	Chief HR & OD Officer
Angie Walsh	Head of Recognition & Reward
Em Wilkinson-Brice	National Director of People - standing invite
Navina Evans	Chief Workforce Officer - standing invite
Mark Radford	National Director - Intensive Support & Deputy Chief Nursing Officer of England
Claire Gore	Director of The Future of NHS HR and OD Programme

Devolved administrations

Chris Wilkinson	Northern Ireland Assembly
Jennifer Martin Nye	Scottish Devolved Administration
Annie Jones	Welsh Assembly

Additional stakeholders

TBC	ACAS
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John Rogers	Skills for Health
Jayne Adamson	ICS/ICB representative
Caroline Corrigan	ICS/ICB representative
TBC	Local Government Association

Annex B - Partners' websites

SPF partners' websites

Social Partnership Forum	www.socialpartnershipforum.org
UNISON	www.unison.org.uk
NHS Employers	www.nhsemployers.org
NHS England	www.england.nhs.uk
Royal College of Midwives	www.rcm.org.uk
Royal College of Nursing	www.rcn.org.uk
British Medical Association	www.bma.org.uk
Chartered Society of Physiotherapy	www.csp.org.uk
Managers in Partnership	www.miphealth.org.uk
Unite	www.unitetheunion.org
GMB	www.gmb.org.uk
British Dietetic Association	www.bda.uk.com
British and Irish Orthoptic Society	www.orthoptics.org.uk
Federation of Clinical Scientists	www.acb.org.uk
Hospital Consultants & Specialists Association	www.hcsa.com
Royal College of Podiatry	www.rcpod.org.uk
Society of Radiographers	www.sor.org

British Association of Occupational Therapists	www.rcot.co.uk
Trades Union Congress	www.tuc.org.uk

Other useful partnership organisations' websites

Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service	www.acas.org.uk
Business Services Association	www.bsa-org.com
Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development	www.cipd.co.uk
Involvement and Participation Association	www.ipa-involve.com
Skills for Health	www.skillsforhealth.org.uk