

Supporting the mental health of NHS staff as part of post-pandemic recovery

Summary document

NHS CHECK is a major study of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the short- and long-term health and wellbeing of all staff working within 18 partner NHS Trusts in England. The project aims to use the evidence it generates to better support the future needs of NHS staff, by informing workforce planning, targeted support for individuals, and more effective strategies for emergency response.

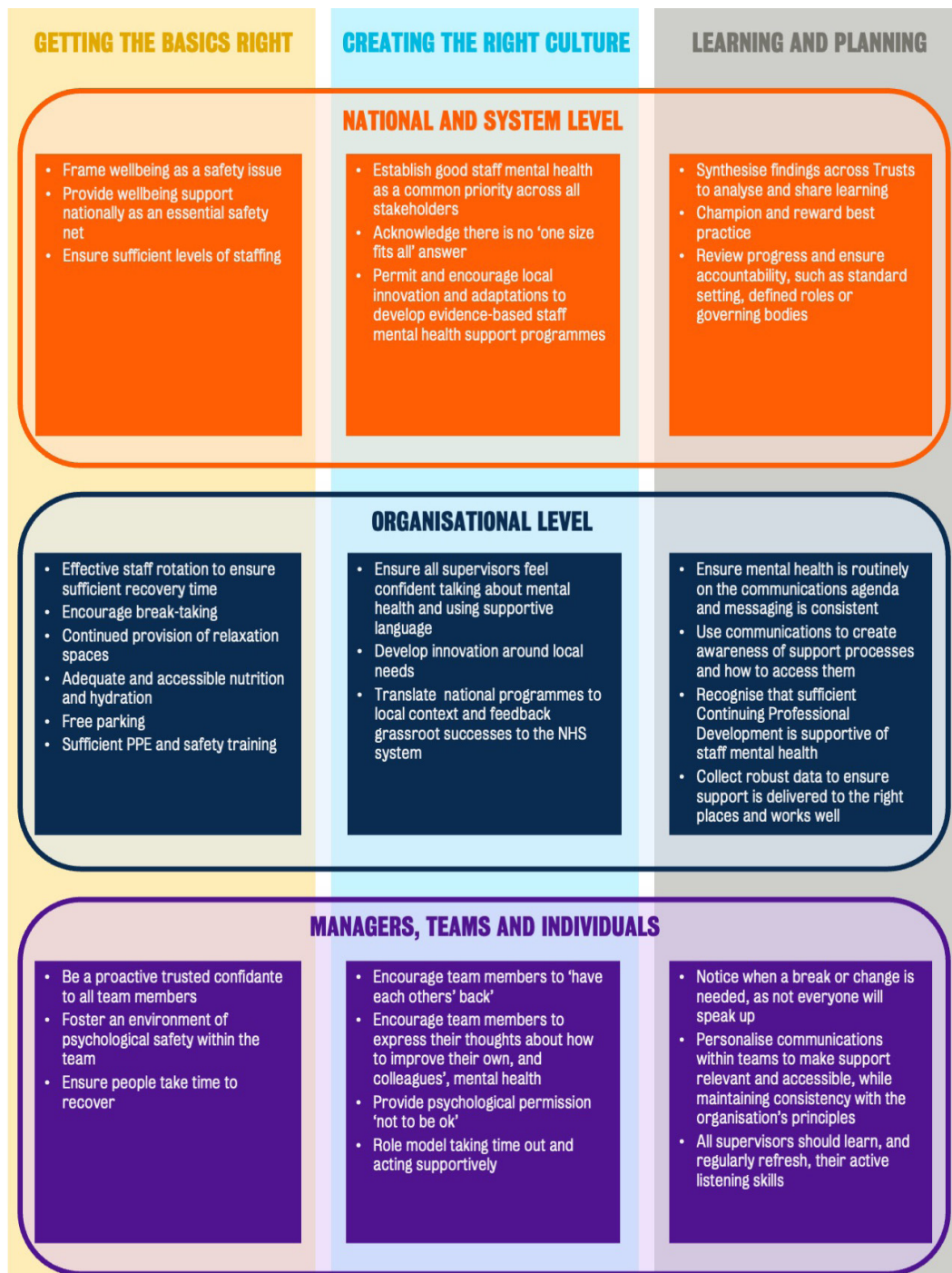
In December 2021, we brought together researchers, NHS staff, professional bodies and policymakers in a Policy Lab¹ to consider the study's implications. We looked at questions around the current needs of staff, the use and effectiveness of available support, likely future needs, and implications for the effective provision of future support. The key conclusions are summarised here, with more detail available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/supporting-the-mental-health-of-nhs-staff-as-part-of-post-pandemic-recovery.pdf>

Principles and actions to support the wellbeing of NHS staff

Supporting the wellbeing of all NHS staff means **reorienting from a model where we primarily detect and treat disorder, to one where prevention is key** and the focus is on good mental health for all. Specific, practical actions and responsibilities can help us do this, as set out in the figure below.

¹ Policy labs are an approach developed by the Policy Institute to narrow the gap between evidence and policymaking. For further details, see: Hinrichs-Krapels, S et al. (2020). Using policy Labs as a process to bring evidence closer to public policymaking: a guide to one approach. *Palgrave Commun*, 6(1), 1-9.

FIGURE 1: SUPPORTING STAFF MENTAL HEALTH THROUGHOUT THE NHS

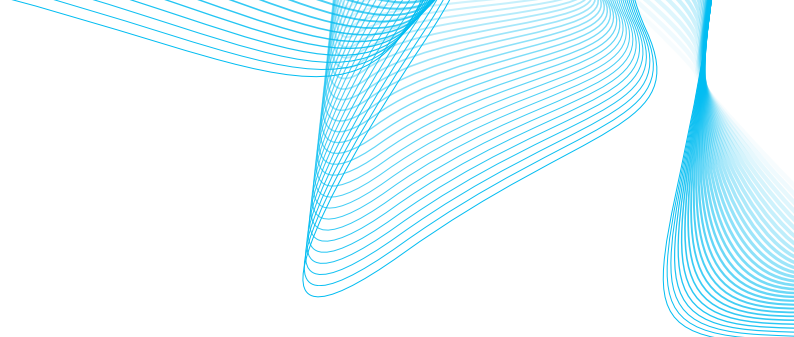


Some of these actions can be implemented most effectively at a national or system level, some in individual organisations, and others by managers, teams and individuals.

These practical actions are underpinned by three key principles that span all levels of the system and are critical in guiding our approach.

1. Getting the basics right

This refers to the many practical things that serve to keep people well and prevent or mitigate harm in pressured situations. These include, for example, appropriate levels



of staffing, regular breaks, nutrition and hydration, access to parking/transport, and the provision of sufficient PPE. While individually some of these may appear obvious or even trivial, we should not underestimate their importance or take their provision for granted. Ensuring that the basics are consistently in place can reduce distress and help prevent a fundamentally stressful work environment from contributing to the development of more serious disorder.

2. Creating the right culture

A strong, supportive and compassionate working culture throughout the NHS is critical to staff wellbeing. While this may seem both less tangible than implementing specific programmes of mental health support and take longer to get right, there are concrete actions that can help develop and maintain an effective culture. These include establishing a coherent common focus on wellbeing at all levels from the board down to the ward floor, encouraging staff to express their ideas and innovations locally, clear and honest communication between colleagues, and modelling of supportive behaviours by managers at all levels. It is vital that senior staff only promise to deliver what is possible; false narratives and broken promises will significantly damage staff engagement and risk contributing to poor mental health.

3. Learning and planning

Learning and planning effectively allows experience and good practice to be shared, encourages accountability for staff wellbeing, and facilitates good workforce planning. It relies on suitable monitoring of staff needs, and reflection on the effectiveness, awareness and accessibility of support to ensure that change is sustained over the longer-term. It also needs good, consistent communication throughout all levels of the system.

Looking ahead: bigger challenges but new opportunities

While the Covid-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented and extended pressures for NHS staff, it has also sharpened the attention of organisational leaders, policymakers, politicians and the public on the wellbeing of the NHS workforce and prompted the collection of vital data on mental health.

The Covid-19 response in Trusts around the country has involved radical changes to working practices and there is much we can learn from this. We should not miss this opportunity to build a longer-term culture and programme of prevention, early detection, support and prompt access to evidence-based care where needed – particularly given that the impact of the pandemic on the workforce is likely to continue long after the acute pressures of the virus itself have passed.

In time, we hope that insights from studies like NHS CHECK can support a cultural shift towards the prevention of mental ill health and – while there will certainly always be the need for targeted, tailored interventions for serious disorder – help create a work environment that supports the mental health of all NHS staff.

For more on NHS CHECK see: <https://nhscheck.org>



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