

It has been, without doubt, one of the toughest years in the history of the NHS - and yet, where would we be without it?

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Public interest and recognition of the NHS and its workforce has grown immeasurably over the past year, reaffirming the drive to keep our NHS strong and ready to care for the population of England, whatever the future brings.

I am immensely proud to be part of the organisation challenged with shaping the future health and care workforce and consider it an honour that we are entrusted with work which is so fundamental to the lives and wellbeing of so many people, many of whom have not even been born yet.

The job of the NHS has always been to think about today and tomorrow and connecting our predictions for 'tomorrow' with today's actions. The 'tomorrow' part has long presented a challenge, in large part because much of the NHS is rightly focussed on the pressing demands of the present day. That is where we come in; while all of NHS has its own role in shaping the future, we are unique in that we can focus our attention on the future as a priority - it is our role to think ahead, seize the inevitability of change and ensure our NHS workforce changes to match the shifting needs of our population.

Discussions around our health and care workforce are now at the forefront of many conversations happening today, and our HEE mandate steers us to work with our partners and be the convener, holding discussions and bringing everyone together to help people across the system think about the NHS workforce in the short, medium, and long term. We are active in all these spaces, but our role is distinct in each.

In the short and medium term, we are very much partners of the service, convening and supporting in our role. In the longer term, we have the mandate, headspace, expertise, and resources to make key decisions and be part of the leadership determining what health and care services should and will look like in the years to come.

Looking ahead, I have been considering the students who are starting their courses today will be halfway through their careers when the NHS turns 100. At that time, I will be in my 80's and I will be looked after by many people. If we have done our job well, we can expect that this workforce will be quite different to what we see now; ready to meet the future demands of the service, which will also be different to what we see now.

Our work is both around rethinking what the service will look like and delivering the transformation needed, spreading these shifts in thinking across the system. We are technical experts; subject matter experts, and it is essential that we strike the right balance between acknowledging what we can offer and listening to service experience so that we can forge the right future for that service.

Planning the future is incredibly complex and our expert teams consider a number of global drivers of change, including science, technology and innovation, population demographics, service priorities and expectations, existing and future health inequalities we need to address, and the changing social and political environment. Our workforce planning strategy is effectively interpreting based on what we know, taking into account the drivers I have mentioned, answering key questions and integrating the many complex insights we have access to in order to form a bigger picture.

Ultimately, every time we commission a postgraduate place, we are making implicit assumptions about a future we do not yet know, so these need to be founded in the best possible evidence base, which comes not only from our own research and modelling but must also come from across the system as we build a system-wide strategy, including partnership with social care.

We are in the process of developing tools to assess the evidence and are trying to look at what the likely impact will be over three time periods: 0-5 years, 5-10 years, 10-15 years, and the different impacts they will have. This is with the view of coming up with a proposition we will test with partners aiming to develop a consensus about a proposition for the future and what that means for the actions that we take.

All of this is incredibly important - and yet, in order to be successful, we must also equally place a strong focus on collaboration and cooperation with our system partners and among ourselves; recognising where our expertise is and where it isn't, and having confidence in one another's capabilities to produce our best work together - building a foundation of mutual respect for each other and creating a great team dynamic. I really believe the value of this cannot be understated - it does not matter how great we all are individually, but how well we can work together, and as we have seen over this past year in the NHS, we can accomplish so much more when we come together.

Best Wishes

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