

Retaining general practice nurses

A guide for GPs and practice managers

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Why is this guide important?

General practice nurses leaving their jobs through dissatisfaction with their role, retirement or burnout presents a significant challenge for GPs and practice managers and has a direct impact on the delivery of clinical care.

CapitalNurse engaged with a focus group of 81 GPNs from 75 practices in seven CCG areas across London to give you an insight into what helps them feel an important part of your team. The GPNs were invited to share their experiences of working in primary care and there was a focus on seeking feedback from nurses who were over 50. This age group is an important one to focus on as it makes up a large part of the workforce and many will continue working into their 60s. The findings and insights, however, apply to the retention of GPNs of all ages and are relevant regardless of the organisational structure supporting your Practice.

Engaging with this feedback and taking action now with your own GPNs will help mitigate the risk of forecast shortages. We hope that it will increase their job satisfaction and loyalty, thus rewarding you, your practice and the GPNs themselves.

Improving retention of general practice nurses will be the result of combined actions taken by GPs and practice managers, underpinned by clear HR policies and procedures.

What general practice nurses said was important to them.

Communication/engagement; feeling valued.

“Make time to listen to me. Be caring and kind. Keep me informed. Consult with me and explain what is happening.”

Terms and conditions pay and sick pay

'Review my pay annually, Pay me for sickness absence. Pay me overtime for extra hours. Arrange hours in lieu.'

Health and wellbeing

"Be aware if I am working extra hours every day. Review my workload and make adjustments."

Training and development

"Map out what I need at various stages of my career and discuss this with me."

Flexible working

"Understand what is going on in my life, in and out of work."

Retirement planning

"Provide an opportunity to have a confidential 1:1 meeting to discuss my plans. Provide information on my NHS Pension and where I go for help."

Retention strategy

"Nurse retention should be a priority and a clear part of our retention strategy."

What makes GPNs leave?

- Staffing shortages
- Work pressure/role overwhelming.
- Not enough time to do the job well.
- Burnout and stress.
- Challenging patients.
- Inequality, notably pay/sick pay/annual leave.
- Poor performance not tackled.
- Poor work-life balance.
- Feeling unsupported.
- Not consulted over changes.

What makes GPNs stay?

- Good relationship with seniors and colleagues.
- Feeling valued/recognised.
- Understanding the practice's objectives.
- Relationship with patients.
- Consistent approach to flexible working.
- The practice being a positive and enjoyable place to work.
- Two-way communication.

GPs and practice managers: Be role models and inspire with your passion and enthusiasm.

- Strive for excellence in everything you do and inspire and motivate others to deliver an excellent service.
- Create an inclusive working environment where all opinions, ideas and challenges are taken into account.
- Remain available and approachable to all.
- Build strong interpersonal relationships and show genuine care for staff.
- Actively seek feedback from patients, colleagues and the wider team about your work performance and demonstrate you value what they say.
- Set realistic, fair, and achievable targets.
- Think creatively and innovatively and look for ways to improve practices.
- Challenge any form of harassment or discrimination and actively encourage staff to report incidents.
- Be enthusiastic about learning and development; encourage others to embrace opportunities.
- Develop your own coaching and feedback skills. Consider training.

Retention strategy

General practice nurse retention policies need to be clear and include a focus on older nurses.

- Introduce staff satisfaction reviews: 'You Said - We Did' approach.
- Recognise service at various milestones: five, 10, 15, 20, 25+ years.
- Employment policies should include a standard checkpoint for discussing GPN retirement via a confidential 1:1 meeting.
- Introduce exit interviews and capture and analyse feedback to inform future actions.

Terms and conditions

- Align terms and conditions offered to GPNs with the broader NHS in areas such as pay, annual leave, maternity pay, and sickness pay.
- Maintain accurate data on what staff are paid.
- Stick to sound official rationale when making pay decisions; ensure that those making decisions are equipped to do so.
- Pay staff equally for equal work – a legal obligation.
- Consider mechanisms where staff can work and be paid overtime with prior approval mechanisms in place.
- Address existing Pay and Sick Pay anomalies

Retirement planning

- Know when your general practice nurses are approaching retirement age.
- Provide guidance on what to do if a nurse is considering retirement: notice periods; timings of informing the Pensions Service; who to speak to in the Practice to discuss Retire and Return options.
- Provide the opportunity for a confidential 1:1 to discuss personal/home and work needs and pressures and thoughts about the future. Carry out the conversation with sensitivity and tact.

- Understand why some GPNs retire for good. Not all want to Retire and Return, but those that do will be heavily influenced by the job and the flexibility they are offered.
- Provide access to a pension advisor, with contact details.
- Provide access to an annual pension workshop.

Flexible working

- Encourage flexible working.
- Make it easy to change an established flexible working arrangement.
- Ask for the request in writing; arrange a face-to-face meeting promptly.
- Recognise each nurse as an individual and tailor your approach/ response to meet their particular need.
- Look for a win/win outcome.
- Follow up decisions in writing within seven days.
- Build in a review period for both parties.
- Review how the arrangement is working at annual appraisals.

Communication, engagement and feeling valued

- Make it clear that communication channels are open, encouraged, and two-way.
- Use staff meetings as a way of motivating, encouraging, and connecting with GPNs.
- Introduce full staff meetings quarterly.
- Provide feedback from all meetings.
- Offer coaching support, feedback, and appreciation in order to motivate GPNs to give their best.
- Give praise for a job well done, reinforcing positive behaviour.
- Use staff engagement methods to gather feedback from GPNs.

- Communicate in a clear, honest, and enthusiastic way to build trust.
- Explain complex issues in a way that is easy to understand.
- Cut down on emails and introduce more face-to-face communication.
- Welcome and respond to viewpoints and challenges, despite any conflicting pressures to ignore or to give in to them.
- Remain open-minded and impartial in discussions whilst respecting the diverse interests and opinions of others.
- Be open and honest about issues and the challenges you face.
- Have the difficult conversations when necessary; tackle poor performance.

Monthly all-staff forums – engagement

- Ask for ideas and check for team preferences; ask for volunteers to help set up.
- Let team members own the responsibility for organising an event.
- Consider how you communicate and how effective forums are; invite feedback.

Communicating and managing change

- When decisions are being made consider what impact they will have on your GPNs.
- Involve them in discussions early and listen to their opinion before changes are implemented.
- Listen to their views and give careful consideration to what they are saying.
- Take responsibility for putting changes and improvements in place to improve patient care and the service you provide.
- Review how the change is working and act on feedback.

Training and development

Teaching and training result in increased competence, knowledge, and confidence.

The diverse training programmes on offer sector-wide allow for continued learning; the networking opportunities they present are a further reward. This, and a nurturing and developmental relationship, is linked to positive Practice environments and increased retention. Where it is not provided, nurses may leave in anticipation of greater input and support elsewhere.

- Ensure patient needs and demands are met by the right person. Consider tasks that other healthcare workers can do to free up GPNs to use their skills more appropriately.
- Provide GPNs with opportunities to share their knowledge and skills to help build organisational effectiveness.
- Consider what training opportunities are currently available to GPNs; ask for their feedback on any training for future reference.
- Consider a flexible range of opportunities that will strengthen the message around keeping experienced GPNs in the workforce for longer, e.g., new roles, different ways of working.
- Provide opportunities for career advice.
- Allow GPNs to complete professional updating and clinical supervision in work time.
- Consider GPN requests to pursue a personal interest (not always what the Practice wants).
- Regularly assess the GPN's workload with respect to training needs, CPD and supervision.
- Map out what GPNs want at different stages of their career: new starters; mid-career; later career; nearing retirement. Do you offer those things?
- Not all nurses are keen on e-learning - ensure access to various methods of learning, e.g., classroom, observational and coaching.
- Ensure appraisal/development chats are regular occurrences and that they focus on what will keep them in the workplace.
- Introduce frequent staff awards/recognition of excellence schemes.

Health and wellbeing

Nurses often work in a highly pressurised environment, constantly under public scrutiny, with a workload that is physically and mentally demanding. Healthy employees are three times more productive than those with poor health.

Timely investment in health and wellbeing programmes and adequately managing ill health can save money and improve patient care.

- GPs and practice managers have a defining role in encouraging wellbeing and creating a culture where an employee can be open about problems.
- Introducing stress risk assessments sends a clear message that the Practice is serious about staff health and wellbeing.
- Introduce a free annual health check.
- Provide opportunities for nurses to get away from their desks and have a break.
- Hold an annual health and wellbeing day.
- Make staff aware of what is available to them and how to access information.
- Invite an occupational health lead to one of your meetings to make staff aware what is available, e.g., how to manage stress and self-care strategies.
- If you become aware that a member of staff is struggling with stress, musculoskeletal problems, or issues at home, talk to the staff member about what is available and help with referrals.
- Provide access to an occupational health and wellbeing service focused on intervention and prevention.
- Speak with your peers; they might have a programme in place that you could replicate, e.g., menopause support.
- Demonstrate sensitivity to the likelihood that some nurses in their later career will be more vulnerable to conditions associated with ageing, such as diabetes, arthritis, and heart disease.

Sickness

- Review how sickness absence is managed. Is it fair and consistent?
- Are return-to-work interviews carried out promptly and with empathy?
- Consider fast-tracking nurses for mental health counselling or physiotherapy if they have problems.

Considerations around health and wellbeing

- Be aware if a nurse is putting in extra hours every day.
- Listen to why they are staying late.
- Review the workload and where adjustments can be made.
- Consider time off in lieu or paid overtime as compensation.
- Thank them and let them know you are aware of their contribution.
- Tell them you are there for them if things get too much.

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CapitalNurse: Retention of general practice nurses report

Staff retention is the biggest single challenge facing the NHS and replacing experienced GPNs, given the current national shortages of nurses, is extremely difficult. CapitalNurse commissioned Kathy Gillman, an HR consultant, to produce a report on retaining GPNs. The work began in June 2019 and concluded in January 2020.

For further information contact:

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Useful links

www.hee.nhs.uk

www.rcgp.org.uk

www.qni.org.uk