Strategic workforce planning for sustainable cancer services

Cancer services are under unprecedented pressure, but vacancies are only part of the challenge. Increasing demand, specialist workforce shortages, retirement risk, advanced practice pipelines and fragile multidisciplinary teams are placing increasing pressure on the sustainability of cancer services.

The question is no longer 'How do we fill vacancies?'

It's: 'How do we build a workforce capable of sustaining cancer services over the next decade?'

Why traditional workforce planning is no longer enough

Hidden workforce fragility

Critical expertise is concentrated in small teams or individuals. Traditional metrics don't reveal where vulnerability exists.

Loss of key staff can destabilise pathways and patient care.

A reactive approach to workforce planning

Focus remains on vacancies, recruitment and agency use. This leaves little time to plan for future demand or risk.

Organisations stay in firefighting mode rather than building resilience.

Future capability is at risk

Advanced practice, specialist nursing and diagnostics take years to develop without proactive pipelines.

Gaps in critical capability emerge before they are visible.

Under-utilised workforce capacity

Support roles and multidisciplinary teams are central to releasing specialist capacity but are often underutilised.

Inefficient workforce models limit capacity and productivity.

Limited workforce intelligence

Data describes posts, not capability. It's hard to see succession risks, retirement exposure or future needs.

Decisions are reactive rather than evidence based.

Growing workforce pressures

Rising demand, diagnostic constraints, wellbeing and retention pressures are stretching the workforce.

Without sustainable workforce models, performance suffers.

Strategic workforce planning in practice

Strategic workforce planning helps organisations anticipate future workforce challenges, strengthen resilience and ensure the workforce is aligned to future service demand.



Identify workforce risk	Understand where capability is concentrated, succession risks exist and services are vulnerable.
Plan for future demand	Align workforce supply with changing service demand and models of care.
Strengthen workforce pipelines	Build sustainable pathways into specialist and advanced practice roles.
Optimise workforce capacity	Review skill mix and role design to maximise specialist clinical capacity.
Improve workforce intelligence	Use meaningful workforce data to support investment and planning decisions.
Support workforce transformation	Develop practical workforce strategies that can be implemented across services.

Helping shape the future cancer workforce

Our work has helped define the frameworks, workforce strategies and planning approaches that are supporting cancer services to build sustainable workforce capability.

Developing the national ACCEND Framework

The challenge

Cancer services lacked a nationally consistent framework to support workforce development, career progression and capability across nursing, allied health professions and support roles.

Our contribution

Working with partners across the system, we developed the Aspirant Cancer Career and Education Development (ACCEND) Framework on behalf of NHS England, helping create a national framework that defines career pathways, core cancer capabilities and education requirements for the cancer workforce. The ACCEND programme was designed to support transformational reform of career pathways and workforce development for professionals providing cancer care.

Impact

✓ Nationally adopted framework

✓ Supports workforce transformation

✓ Provides consistent career pathways and capability expectations

✓ Forms the foundation for workforce planning and development across cancer services

Access the framework

Designing a system-wide workforce strategy

Lancashire & South Cumbria Cancer Alliance

The challenge

Growing workforce pressures, fragmented workforce intelligence, and increasing service demand made it difficult to understand workforce risks and plan effectively for the future.

Our contribution

Working with the Alliance and partner organisations, we developed a comprehensive cancer workforce strategy using the Six Steps Methodology to Integrated Workforce Planning®. Combining workforce analytics, stakeholder engagement and strategic workforce planning, we identified workforce fragility, modelled future workforce requirements and developed a practical implementation roadmap to support workforce transformation.

Impact

✓ A single evidence base for workforce planning

✓ Better visibility of future workforce risks and capability gaps

✓ Stronger alignment between workforce planning and future service demand

✓ A practical strategy to support sustainable cancer services

Building workforce planning capability

Cheshire & Merseyside Cancer Alliance

The challenge

The Alliance identified a need to strengthen workforce planning capability across its 13 Trusts, equipping cancer leaders with the skills and confidence to translate workforce modelling insights into effective workforce planning and sustainable service delivery.

Our contribution

We co-designed and delivered a tailored workforce planning development programme for representatives from 11 Trusts. Through interactive masterclasses, practical resources and an ongoing Community of Practice, underpinned by the Six Steps Methodology®, we helped build workforce planning capability while encouraging collaboration and shared learning.

Impact

✓ Improved workforce planning knowledge and confidence

✓ Stronger collaboration and shared learning to address common workforce planning challenges

✓ Practical tools, expert support and an ongoing Community of Practice to embed workforce planning

> *Skills for Health took the time to understand our needs and co-design a programme that was practical, engaging and relevant to our Trusts. The delivery has been outstanding - well organised, interactive and consistently praised by participants for its practical and uplifting approach."* - Isobel Wenn, Senior Project Manager, Cheshire and Merseyside Cancer Alliance

View the case study

Supporting the cancer workforce today

Current projects are helping Cancer Alliances, NHS organisations and national partners strengthen workforce planning and workforce capability:

Greater Manchester Cancer Alliance

Developing a workforce baseline across seven Trusts to identify capacity, capability and future training priorities.

- 7 Trusts
- Workforce mapping
- Training needs analysis

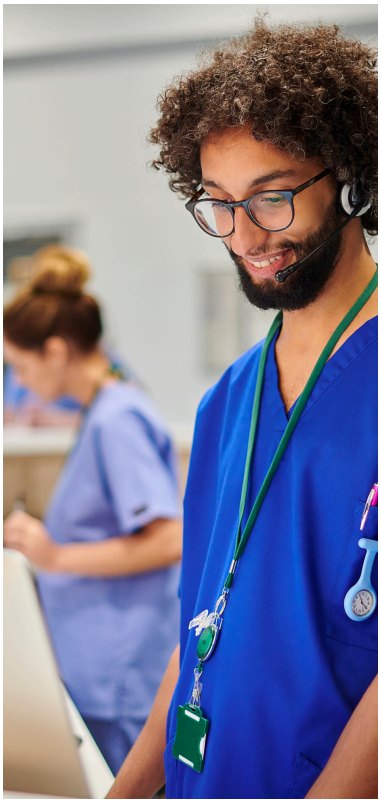
Cancer Research UK

Developing a pathway-based definition of the UK cancer workforce to inform future workforce planning and policy.

- Role mapping
- Pathway analysis
- Workforce fragility analysis

University of the West of England

Delivering workforce planning expertise as part of the Clinical Cancer Leaders programme, helping participants develop the skills to lead workforce transformation and service improvement.



Why Skills for Health?

National expertise

Deep understanding of the cancer workforce across the UK.

System-wide perspective

Working across Trusts, Cancer Alliances and systems to align workforce planning with service priorities.

Proven methodology

Creators of the nationally recognised Six Steps Methodology to deliver evidence-based workforce planning.

Locally tailored solutions

Combining national expertise with local insight to deliver practical, sustainable workforce solutions.

Skills for Health

Explore how we can support your workforce challenges and priorities
skillsforhealth.org.uk

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