



2026 NHS STAFF SURVEY GUIDANCE FOR PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

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1 Introduction

The NHS Staff Survey (NSS) and the NHS Staff Survey for bank only workers (NSSB) provide an opportunity for organisations to survey their staff in a consistent and systematic way. This makes it possible to build up a picture of staff experience and, with care, to compare and monitor change over time and to identify variations between different staff groups. Obtaining feedback from NHS staff and taking account of their views and priorities is vital for improving staff experience which is a key contributing factor to driving real service improvements in the NHS.

The surveys align with the [People Promise](#), which sets out what NHS staff can expect from their leaders and from each other. There are also two themes that some questions within the surveys contribute to: Staff Engagement and Morale.

All NHS trusts in England (foundation trusts, acute and specialist hospital trusts, ambulance service trusts, mental health and learning disability trusts, and community trusts) are required to participate in the NSS. Commissioning Support Units, Social Enterprises, Integrated Care Boards (ICB) and other NHS bodies may choose to undertake the NSS on a voluntary basis. This requirement to participate may be subject to change. Additionally, NSSB is mandatory for trusts with a minimum of 200 eligible in-house bank only workers, and remains voluntary for trusts with fewer than 200 eligible in-house bank only workers.

NOTE: Throughout this guidance document, we will be referring to the guidance for the survey of staff on substantive contracts as 'NSS'; while the guidance for the survey for bank only workers will be referred to as 'NSSB'. This distinction is only to highlight where there are differences between the approaches for each staff group. [Text that is relevant only to bank workers will be highlighted in blue.](#)

2 Immediate preparation for the 2026 survey

Here are some key tasks that should be started as soon as possible to ensure that you are ready to conduct the survey:

- At the start of the process, it is important to identify two people within your organisation who will take responsibility for the survey and for communication with the Survey Coordination Centre and Survey Contractor. The Survey Coordination Centre will send a form to the most recent staff survey lead at each organisation, inviting them to update the contact details for their organisation. This form should be completed as soon as possible once it is received and the link to the form should be retained for updating contact details for your organisation in the future. If no one at your organisation has received the form, please contact the Survey Coordination Centre immediately. Please note: It is your responsibility to keep these contact details up to date. Please also let your contractor know if there are any changes of personnel or contact details. Failure to do so may result in key communications being missed.
- Update the internal staff database (ESR - Electronic Staff Record system), ensuring the accuracy of all information in preparation for selecting the staff list ([see section 12](#)).
- If email invitations are being sent to staff, staff email addresses should be updated and validated on your ESR (see the Sampling Handbook for 2026).
- Find and appoint a contractor to run the survey on your behalf.
- Establish whether your organisation will be mandated to take part in the [NSSB](#), and inform your contractor of this decision.
- Inform the Survey Coordination Centre of which survey contractor you have appointed. This can be done by completing the form sent to your staff survey lead.
- Decide whether to include any local questions ([see Section 10](#)).
- Organisations have the option of two internal breakdowns (directorate / location / site etc.) to be included within the Survey Coordination Centre breakdown reports (formerly known as 'directorate reports') ([see Section 12](#)). Details of the internal breakdowns should be included in the staff list supplied to contractors. [Note that results for bank only workers will be reported separately and cannot be included in breakdown reports for NSS.](#)
- [Organisations planning to invite bank only workers to participate in the NSSB should inform their contractor of their intentions as early as possible. They should also discuss and agree internally:](#)
 - [How to identify eligible bank only workers from the ESR system and other internal records \(see the Sampling Handbook for 2026\).](#)
 - [How best to invite bank only workers to take part \(via email or paper, and with or without optional SMS text notifications\).](#)
 - [How to communicate and publicise details of the NSSB to bank only workers.](#)

3 Key changes to the NHS Staff Survey for 2026

Important amendments to the guidance for the 2026 survey are covered below.

For information about all changes to the questionnaire for 2026, see the [Summary of questionnaire changes](#) document.

3.1 Questionnaire changes

3.1.1 Survey introduction page

The survey introduction text has been shortened this year to reduce the amount of space it occupies in the paper questionnaire. This change has been made to accommodate additional questions introduced this year while ensuring that the paper questionnaire remains the same number of pages.

3.1.2 Line management responsibility

The 2026 survey will include a new question asking about line management responsibility.

3.1.3 Update to the socio-economic background question

In 2025, the survey introduced a set of socio-economic background questions. These questions were only included in the online version of the NSS and NSSB questionnaires to retain the length of the NSS paper questionnaire. For 2026, this question set will be replaced by a **single socio-economic background question** that will be included in both the online and paper versions of the questionnaire. This question is used to understand whether people from different socio-economic backgrounds have different experiences of working for the NHS.

3.1.4 Updates to questions asking about sex, gender identity and gender reassignment

The 2026 survey will include redesigned questions asking about sex, gender identity and gender reassignment. These questions were updated in response to legal and policy changes, including the Supreme Court judgement on the meaning of “sex” in the Equality Act 2010. Compliance with the judgement requires questions asking specifically about sex at birth and gender reassignment as a protected characteristic. The question set also includes a separate, broader question on trans and non-binary identities.

3.1.5 Questions asking about resident doctors' host organisations

The 2026 survey will include two new questions for those staff who select the ‘Medical / Dental - In Training’ category at the occupational group question. These questions will be included in the online version of the NSS questionnaire only.

The first question will ask whether the organisation that invited them to participate in the survey is the same as where they were working day-to-day on 1st September 2026. If not, respondents will then be asked to select the organisation where they were working day-to-day on 1st September 2026 from a drop-down list.

These questions have been introduced as part of ongoing work to better understand the working experience of resident doctors within the NHS.

The feasibility of separating resident doctors' NSS results from lead employers and reallocating them to host organisations is currently being explored.

The Survey Coordination Centre and NHS England are also exploring the addition of a flag within NSS staff lists to identify resident doctors on rotation at host organisations. Any changes to the staff list requirements relating to this proposal will be confirmed before sampling for the 2026 survey begins.

3.1.6 Additional ESR data

In addition to the ESR data previously provided as part of staff lists, organisations will be required to provide Grade information from ESR this year.

4 Summary of minimum survey requirements

All participating organisations must follow a standard methodology as described in these guidance notes and must fulfil the following minimum requirements.

Note: [these requirements also apply to NSSB where used, unless otherwise specified.](#)

- All participating organisations must appoint a survey contractor.
- All participating organisations are required to conduct a full census survey.
- [If any organisation has at least 200 eligible bank only workers on their staff list as of 1 September 2026, they are required to conduct a census of eligible bank only workers. The NSSB questionnaire will be online only.](#)
- Questionnaires must contain all mandatory questions. Some questions should only be included in online questionnaires. [See section 10](#) for more details about the requirements for paper and online questionnaires
- The survey must be distributed to eligible staff using a unique staff ID or login.
- Six reminders (if email invitation mode) or two reminders (if paper invitation mode) must be sent to non-responding staff ([see section 8](#) for more details on the invitations). [If mobile phone numbers are included, SMS text notifications will be sent to bank only workers as well.](#)
- Organisations and contractors must ensure that their survey has a fieldwork period of at least eight weeks. All staff must therefore receive their questionnaire by **5 October 2026** at the latest.
- The closing date for the survey is **27 November 2026**.

Please note that it is the responsibility of each participating organisation to comply with their responsibilities under the UK GDPR. The legal basis for processing personal data for the NSS and NSSB is “for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the controller” (Article 6(1)(e)). The legal basis for processing sensitive personal data (e.g. ethnicity) is covered in article 9(2)(h) under ‘the management of health or social care systems’.

5 Survey timetable

Please note, contractors may set earlier deadlines for organisations than those set out below. Contractors should liaise with the participating organisations regarding any such requirements and clarify expectations regarding the staff list, survey delivery mode, invitations and reminders. (Note: Text shown in grey below indicates areas that are only applicable to contractors.)

Date (2026)	Step of survey implementation	By whom?	Section in guidance
	Appoint a survey contractor to administer the survey.		
	Confirm whether the organisation will be surveying eligible bank workers.		
By 7 August	Choose at least two individuals within the organisation who will take responsibility for the survey.	Organisation	N/A
	Complete the form sent by the Survey Coordination Centre to confirm your appointed contractor, NSSB participation and contact details.		
By 7 August	Contractors must send their paper version of the questionnaire and a test link for the online survey to the Survey Coordination Centre for approval (including for NSSB if appropriate).	Contractor	N/A
By 14 August	Make sure your staff lists are comprehensive and up to date. If email invitations are being sent to staff, you must ensure staff email addresses are valid and up to date.	Organisation	N/A
By 21 August	Decide on the precise content of the questionnaire and communicate this to your contractor (all organisations must include the mandatory questions).	Organisation	10
By 21 August	Decide on what internal breakdowns (e.g. directorate, department or location) you will use, and make sure this information is included in the staff list.	Organisation	N/A
By 21 August	Organisations agree with their contractor which survey delivery mode (email, paper or mixed mode) is to be used, and whether SMS reminders will be used for bank only workers.	Organisation and contractor	7
By 28 August	Inform the post room(s) of the forthcoming questionnaire distribution and reminders, ensuring that they are aware of the importance of the survey and the likely volume of post.	Organisation	11
31 August	Provide a list of participating organisations to the Survey Coordination Centre, including which organisations will be surveying bank only workers. Note: the SCC will require regular updates on participating organisations prior to this final deadline.	Contractor	N/A

Date (2026)	Step of survey implementation	By whom?	Section in guidance
1 September	Draw your staff list and provide required information to contractor.	Organisation	N/A
17 September	Contractors submit first weekly monitoring data sheet. These should then be submitted every Thursday for the remainder of fieldwork.	Contractor	10.4
By 18 September	Contractors should aim to submit all samples to the Survey Coordination Centre by this date.	Contractor	N/A
By 28 September	Pre-approach letter/email. If you are using a pre-approach letter or email, send these to staff one to two weeks before the first mailing.	Contractor	8
	Paper invitations/reminders The following dates are for the mandatory fieldwork period. It is strongly recommended that fieldwork is started earlier.		
By 5 October	Initial mailing (including questionnaire except for NSSB)	Contractor	8 and 11
3 days after initial mailing	Optional SMS notification (NSSB only)		
2-3 weeks after initial mailing	First reminder		
2-3 weeks after first reminder	Second reminder (including questionnaire except for NSSB)		
3 days after second reminder	Optional SMS notification (NSSB only)		
	Email invitations/reminders The following dates are for the mandatory fieldwork period. It is strongly recommended that fieldwork is started earlier. Time between mailings must always adhere to that specified in section 8 and section 11 .		
By 5 October	Initial email invitation	Contractor	8
1 day after initial email invitation	Optional SMS message (NSSB only)		
By 19 October	First email reminder		
By 26 October	Second email reminder		
By 2 November	Third email reminder		
By 9 November	Fourth email reminder		
By 16 November	Fifth email reminder		

Date (2026)	Step of survey implementation	By whom?	Section in guidance
By 23 November	Sixth (final) email reminder		
1 day after sixth email reminder	Optional SMS message (NSSB only)		
By 9 October	Contractors to submit the list of organisations they require historical data for to the Survey Coordination Centre.	Contractor	12
By 16 October	Survey Coordination Centre to share calculations for People Promise element and theme scores and sub-scores with contractors.	Survey Coordination Centre	N/A
By 16 October	Contractors to confirm the outcome of early fieldwork data checks.	Contractor	N/A
16 October	Contractors to submit an interim data submission of all online and paper responses received to date.	Contractor	N/A
By 23 October	Contractors to submit permissions for receiving historical data to the Survey Coordination Centre.	Contractor	12
By 20 November	Deadline for submitting list of leavers/ineligible to contractor	Organisation	15.3
27 November	Close of fieldwork	Contractor	N/A
4 December	Data submitted to Survey Coordination Centre (excluding free text data)	Contractor	N/A
8 January 2027	Free text data submitted to Survey Coordination Centre	Contractor	N/A

6 Mandatory minimum fieldwork period

To increase the quality of data provided to organisations, a minimum mandatory fieldwork period exists.

The minimum fieldwork period for the survey is **eight weeks. Fieldwork closes on 27 November 2026; therefore, initial mailings must be sent by 5 October 2026.**

You should work with your contractor to ensure they receive the staff lists early enough to meet this requirement, allowing time for the necessary sample checks by contractors and the Survey Coordination Centre.

Organisations must ensure that questionnaires are distributed to staff by the start of the mandatory minimum fieldwork period.

Please note: the eight week period is mandatory as a minimum but it is strongly recommended that you start your survey earlier in order to have a fieldwork period longer than eight weeks.

There are two very important reasons to adhere to a minimum mandatory fieldwork period:

- **Representativeness.** It is crucial that all organisations have data that represents the actual demographic make-up of their staff. Shorter response periods are known to have a particular negative impact on response rates from certain groups, such as people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Additionally, in relation to online surveys, staff members who do not ordinarily work at a computer as part of their day job may find it challenging to find time to complete the survey.
- **Comparability.** Due to seasonal variation and the length of time between the sample date and the survey date, any organisation that goes into field late will risk being rendered incomparable with other organisations that have adhered to the fieldwork dates. Delays can also cause higher rates of staff ineligibility, as more staff sampled on 1 September may have since left the organisation, impacting on the number of responses received as well as data quality, representativeness and usefulness.

7 Survey delivery and modes of distribution

Organisations participating in the survey are able to invite staff to take part by either email invitation or by paper invitation.

For staff who do not have an email address, they must be invited to participate via a paper invitation which also includes a paper version of the questionnaire. [NSSB does not include a paper questionnaire but bank only workers may still be invited to participate via a paper invitation.](#)

Regardless of invitation mode (email or paper), staff must be provided with a personalised link or QR code for the online survey to enable their participation online.

Bank only workers:

- The questionnaire for bank only workers will be online only.
- Invitation/ reminder mode can be either a paper letter with a QR code and link/login to the online survey; or email invitations.
- Where mobile phone numbers are provided in the staff list for bank only workers, two SMS messages will be sent alongside the first and final contact attempt.
- Organisations should only provide mobile numbers for bank only workers if they want SMS notifications to be sent.

For eligible bank only workers who do not have a work email address.....

Personal email addresses, home postal addresses and personal mobile phone numbers can be used so long as they are up to date and have been provided by the bank only worker for work purposes. In these circumstances, specific consent for the use of personal contact details for the survey is not required.

7.1 Criteria for email distribution of an online survey

To meet the criteria to invite staff via email to complete the online survey, your organisation **must:**

- Have accurate, up-to-date and active organisation email addresses (for example an nhs.net or organisation specific email address) for all staff groups to whom you intend to administer the online survey (NSS).
- [For NSSB, it is permissible to use personal email addresses if they have been provided by the bank only worker for work purposes.](#)
- Be confident that all your staff access these email addresses on a regular basis and therefore it is feasible to expect to get responses to the survey from these email addresses.
- Allow staff time to complete the survey in work time on a work computer (for staff who wish to do this).
- Be able to implement a communications plan to ensure that staff are aware that they will be receiving a link to the survey by email. [Organisations inviting bank only](#)

workers to participate by email should make particular efforts to publicise the survey through a variety of routes, to ensure bank only workers are aware that they are eligible to take part and will be receiving an invitation by email.

- Where it will help encourage response amongst specific staff groups who do not regularly access work email addresses and who have provided personal email addresses which they use for work purposes, these personal addresses can be used to deliver survey invitations to staff, so long as they are known to be up-to-date.
- Commit to providing your contractor with updates to email addresses throughout fieldwork.
- Send written confirmation to your contractor, signed by your survey lead, that your organisation meets all the above eligibility criteria for running an online survey.



Eligible staff who are on temporary leave (e.g. staff on maternity/parental leave, staff on long-term sickness leave, and suspended staff) must have a personal email in order to be sent an online survey (where this email address was provided for work purposes).

- Work email addresses can only be used for staff on temporary leave where:
 - the staff member has agreed to NHS Staff Survey materials being sent to their work email in advance, and
 - the staff member is notified in advance that the NHS Staff Survey will be sent to their work email (including the time frames of when they should be expecting it).

7.2 Staff who have never received a survey email

Contractors are required to provide the Survey Coordination Centre with data throughout the fieldwork period identifying the number of staff who have so far never received a survey email. The Survey Coordination Centre will monitor this data to identify organisations that have a high level of undelivered surveys. Data quality can be substantially impacted by an organisation having a high proportion of staff who never receive a survey email. Therefore, organisations must act to resolve this issue by providing their contractor with updated email addresses.

7.3 (NSSB only) SMS text notifications

SMS text notifications can be sent to bank only workers, to supplement the email or paper delivery of the survey invitations and reminders. This has been found to improve response rates.

These text messages will be sent at two points:

1. immediately after the initial survey;
2. and immediately after the final reminders.

The SMS element of the contact approach is optional. However, if a mobile phone number is included in the staff list provided to a contractor, it will be used for sending SMS text reminders. Your organisation should not provide mobile phone numbers for bank only workers if they do not want them to receive the SMS text reminders.

SMS text notification requirements:

- If a mobile phone number is included in the staff list for bank only workers, SMS text notifications will be sent;
- Your organisation is responsible for ensuring that mobile phone numbers are valid and up to date;
- Your organisation is responsible for ensuring they have permission to use mobile phone numbers for work purposes;
- Must include a personalised link to the online survey;
- Must **not** be the sole mode of delivering the survey invitation.

7.4 Switching survey modes (NSS only)

For staff who do not have a valid email address (as provided in the staff list) contractors must ensure that staff receiving a paper invitation can opt to complete the survey online instead if they choose. In the paper invitation that accompanies the paper questionnaire, staff must be provided with a personalised link and QR code to the survey.

If a staff member takes part in the survey through both methods (i.e. paper and online), the first response should be used and their second response should be treated as a duplication.

Organisations who wish to provide the option for staff members receiving an online survey to switch to paper completion have been advised to speak to their contractor to see if it might be possible.

7.5 ESR reporting tool

Since 2024, an ESR reporting tool has been introduced to assist with drawing lists of eligible staff (including bank only workers) via a single dashboard in ESR, this report is updated in line with any changes to staff list requirements. The reports are available through ESR Business Intelligence within the NHS National Returns Dashboard. The NHS National Returns Dashboard is only available to ESR BI Administration users and HR Administration and Management users. For more information, please visit the [ESR hub](#).

8 Covering emails / letter and reminders

8.1 Covering and reminder emails/letters

Templates are provided for invitation and reminder emails and letters relating to the survey. Each member of staff should receive all communications by the same mode (email or paper). Please note that the NHS logo in the top left of the letters can be removed if it is repeated in the logo for the organisation.

Bank only workers: The NSSB questionnaire is only available online and not in paper format. Bank only workers can be contacted either via email invitations/reminders or via paper letters/reminders including a QR code and link/ login linking to the survey. As above, each bank only worker should receive all communications by the same mode (email or paper). In addition to the invitations and reminders two text/SMS notifications can be sent. This is to improve awareness and contact rates amongst bank only workers (see below).

There are eight email templates that have been created for the online survey:

- A pre-approach email (optional): this should be sent out one to two weeks before the first mailing to inform people that they will be taking part in the survey.
- An initial email, which will be sent out with a survey link.
- Six reminder emails to be sent with a survey link to non-respondents.
 - The first of these should be sent two weeks or more after the initial email. This gap allows time for the correction of email addresses found to be incorrect through bounce-backs received following the initial email.
 - The following reminders should be spaced at least a week apart.
 - The final email reminder should be sent on 24 November at the latest.

There are four letter templates:

- An optional pre-approach letter
- A covering letter
- A first reminder letter
- A second reminder letter

Note: paper letters should have a minimum font size of 11.

For bank workers only, there are two optional additional text/SMS notification messages:

- An initial notification message
- A final reminder message

The text for these covering and reminder emails/ letters (and texts) has been prepared by the Survey Coordination Centre and is downloadable from the [survey documents page](#) of the Survey Coordination Centre website.

Certain parts of these emails/letters require or allow editing by organisations and/or contractors. These are indicated on the template letters in blue text. A contractor helpline number and email address must be inserted in the correct location. In addition, it is possible to:

- Use personal salutations in covering emails/letters - i.e. addressing staff by name ('Dear Dr Smith'). Please note that the decision to use personal salutations should

only be made if the organisation is certain that ESR records are complete and allow for the use of staff names without error.

- Add a short paragraph to explain how your organisation will use the results to track progress towards the People Promise and how it has used results from previous surveys. It is very important you publicise the action you will or have taken; otherwise staff cannot appreciate how the survey can improve working conditions. On the paper invitation, this should not be so long as to push the QR code onto page two and thus we recommend using around three lines.
- Add information about incentives, if applicable.

Bank only workers: Note that the text of emails/letters must be the same for all staff at an organisation, including bank only workers. The only difference is that the letters for bank only workers will not include reference to an enclosed paper questionnaire.

All letters should be printed on paper headed with the NHS and participating organisation logos and have a minimum font size of 11. The inclusion of the organisation logo assures staff that the organisation is supporting the survey and provides clarity for any staff working in multiple organisations about which organisation they should be answering questions about. Please note that the NHS logo in the top left of the letters can be removed if it is repeated in the logo for the organisation.

A first-class reply-paid envelope must be sent with every paper questionnaire. These envelopes should be printed with the address to which questionnaires are to be returned (i.e. that of the survey contractor).

It is a requirement that all paper used in the publication of the NHS Staff Surveys, including questionnaires and corresponding letters, must conform to government requirements for the use of 100% recycled paper with a minimum post-consumer waste content of 80%. It is further recommended that the paper used is uncoated and of standard A4 size (except for the questionnaires, which should be printed as A4 booklets on A3 paper).

Emails should be as concise as possible. Contractors may use links within the body of the email to provide further information for staff.

8.2 Email subject lines

Organisations and contractors are encouraged to carefully consider the subject lines used for emails which are sent to staff. It is important to make sure that these are easily understood by staff. Possible subject lines include: *2026 NHS Staff Survey*, or *[Organisation Name] Staff Survey*, or *NHS Staff Survey: Invitation*, or *NHS Staff Survey 2026*. Similarly, it is important to consider the email address from which the survey gets sent to staff, as if this does not look relevant, some staff may not open the email.

Consideration should be given to the possible impact of subject lines and email addresses on the likelihood of emails getting stopped by spam filters and firewalls. For example, if the inclusion of 'NHS' in the subject line or from address is likely to prevent delivery, contractors may use *2026 Staff Survey* instead. Contractors should take advice from NHS England when emails are checked prior to mailing ([see Section 9.4](#)).

Organisations may also wish to notify staff of the subject line and sender email address through internal communications, so that staff know what to look out for.

8.3 Chief Exec emails/letters

In previous years, some organisations have opted to include an additional email/letter from their CEO or other high-level management. Such communications can be beneficial if they

emphasise the importance of the staff survey to the organisation's management and discuss the impact the survey can have. If such a letter or email is to be used, the following guidance must be followed:

- If a chief executive email is sent along with survey mailings, this must be accessed via a link embedded in the official survey email. It is not acceptable for the chief executive letter to be added to the bottom of the official email, as this makes the email too long. It is also not acceptable for the letter to be included as an attachment to the official survey emails, as including attachments increases the file size of the email and risks reducing email deliverability.

If a chief executive letter is sent along with paper survey mailings, the envelope must be packed such that the official covering letter is seen first when the respondent opens the envelope.

9 Supporting staff to take part

It is essential that all eligible staff, of all types and in all roles, have a fair and equal opportunity to have their say. Providing this opportunity to all eligible staff will ensure that the results are representative of the workforce and are therefore reliable. Organisations must ensure that the delivery of the survey and all internal communications around the survey seek to support and encourage as many staff as possible to take part. Aiming for a high response rate from all staff groups is a good way to ensure that the results are of high quality and value.

Please note however that a high response rate is not in itself an indicator of good organisational performance and organisations are strongly advised against reporting a high response rate as a “good result”. While organisations should do what they can to support engagement with the survey, given ongoing pressures in the NHS, there should be no pressure on HR or OD teams to commit resource which may be better used elsewhere, merely to drive higher response rates.

Some information about increasing response rates is provided below, and further resources are available on the [NHS Staff Survey website](#).

9.1 Promoting the survey

The best way to improve response is to promote the survey to staff through an organisation's own internal communications and engagement channels. Good communications can raise awareness and encourage participation, by explaining the value that the organisation and the NHS get from the data collected, how the data is used to improve staff experience and by reassuring staff about confidentiality and how their responses will be used. This will be particularly important for bank only workers.

To help support organisations to promote the survey, NHS England's Staff Engagement team have produced a communications toolkit, which includes posters, social media cards, key messages and other assets. The 2026 toolkit will be available on the [NHS Staff Survey website](#) from around the end of July.

9.2 Confidentiality concerns

One of the key barriers to achieving good response rates is concern among staff members about the confidentiality of the survey and the need for the staff member to be identified via a personal login or a bar code on the paper questionnaire. It is therefore recommended that all organisations include information about the following in their communications to staff, and that managers are encouraged to discuss this with staff using the template responses below:

Q: If I complete the survey, will my response be kept confidential?

A: Yes. You will submit your response, or post your questionnaire, directly to the independent survey contractor appointed by *<insert name of your organisation>*. *<Insert name of your organisation>* does not have access to the responses/questionnaires or to any personal data (including names and addresses). The report that is sent back to *<insert name of your organisation>* presents the survey findings in summary form and does not reveal the identity of the staff surveyed.

Q: Why does the survey need a personalised login / identification number / bar code/ QR code?

A: Survey contractors use the personalised logins / ID numbers to ensure that reminder emails or letters are only sent to staff who have not already completed the survey.

As staff send their responses directly to an external survey contractor, there is no way that anyone in an NHS trust/organisation will be able to link data with a particular individual. Organisations will only receive reports of the summary survey findings. Note that if a paper questionnaire is returned with the ID number obscured or removed, data cannot be included in the survey findings as, without the ID number, it is not possible to assign data to the correct NHS trust/organisation.

For further information, see the [FAQs](#). You can also find further information on confidentiality in the documents on the [NHS Staff Survey website](#).

9.3 Safeguarding

It is imperative that contractors are aware of, and adhere, to the safeguarding protocols of the organisations they work with.

9.4 Incentives

Some organisations use incentive schemes to encourage staff to complete the survey. The use of such schemes is at the discretion of the organisation. However, organisations must fully consider the possible risks of any incentive scheme prior to implementation.

Most importantly, if an organisation wishes to use an incentive scheme linked to survey completion by specific members of staff (e.g. a prize draw that rewards a specific member of staff for completing the survey), they should be aware this can undermine the perceived confidentiality and anonymity of the survey, as it can be taken to suggest that the organisation has access to the survey data. Organisations that are providing an incentive scheme must ensure that any communication around such schemes reassure staff that their responses are confidential and anonymous i.e. that organisations use an external contractor to administer the survey, all surveys are returned directly to the external contractor and therefore that the survey responses would be considered anonymous in relation to the organisation.

Please note, prize draws **MUST** be handled by the contractor, and it is recommended that communications to staff note that this is the case. It is important to note that the administration of incentive schemes can be very resource intensive for contractors, particularly when multiple prizes are offered or draws take place at several points throughout the fieldwork. Contractors may impose restrictions on the configuration of such schemes to allow them to focus their resources on the delivery of the survey and reporting of results. Restrictions may include, but are not limited to, a maximum number of prizes or a limit on the number of draws. Please note that contractors may make additional charges for the administration of such schemes.

A more inclusive alternative to incentive schemes that identify specific respondents is to use a scheme that rewards groups, rather than individuals. For example, incentives could be given to departments, or a 'thank you' could be given to all staff, such as a free drink or snack, based on completing the staff survey.

Contractors may add a question at the end of the online survey asking whether staff consent to taking part in any prize draw offered as part of an incentive scheme. This question should only be asked:

- For staff whose organisation is offering a prize draw, details of which are included in the optional paragraph on the covering letter/email, so staff are aware.

- After the completion and submission of the main survey and any local questions. Staff must not be able to backtrack and change answers or 'unsubmit' their response on sight of this question.

For staff completing the survey online, this will allow contractors to select prize draw winners from those providing consent, rather than having to make separate contact with winners subsequently and pass their details to the organisation for the distribution of prizes. However, no equivalent consent question will be included on paper questionnaires. The prize draw question should not mandate a response (i.e. it can be skipped). The wording for the prize draw question is included in the guidance for contractors available to download from the survey documents page of the [NHS Staff Survey Coordination Centre website](#).

9.5 Online surveys: email deliverability

One of the key factors in supporting all eligible people to take part if running an online or mixed mode survey is ensuring that the survey emails are received by staff.

Email accuracy

It is vital that organisations ensure the accuracy of email addresses they provide to their contractor for use in the survey mailings, and make sure that only active email addresses are provided. NHSmail accounts, including those with an @nhs.net address, are deactivated if not used for 30 days. This checking process should be started in good time before the survey commences and should be repeated each year, even if an online survey was run the previous year.

Following the initial survey mailing, there will be a two-week gap before the first reminder is sent out. Organisations must use this time to provide correct email addresses to their contractor for any staff members whose email addresses did not work in the initial mailing (i.e. a bounce-back was received).

Please note, when survey email addresses are updated, it is strongly recommended that the organisation also updates this in their ESR (Electronic Staff Record) system. This can save a substantial amount of time in future surveys and help with other organisation activity such as the National Quarterly Pulse Survey.

Mailbox space

Staff should be encouraged through internal communications to ensure they have sufficient space in their mailboxes to receive the email. This is likely to be particularly an issue for groups of staff who do not use their email accounts as part of their day-to-day work.

Firewalls and spam filters

To avoid survey mailings being stopped by firewalls and spam filters, organisations should liaise with their IT departments about these prior to the survey and make all possible efforts to ensure the survey emails are allowed through. To help with this process, it is recommended that contractors confirm relevant details including the email subject lines and sender email address that will be used with all organisations prior to the start of the survey.

Contractors must liaise with NHS England directly, prior to their first mailing, to ensure that survey mailings will be accepted by NHS servers. Details of how to do this will be provided to contractors in August by the Survey Coordination Centre.

10 The questionnaire

For 2026 there are two versions of the survey questionnaire:

1. NSS (online/paper) - for staff on substantive or fixed term contracts
2. NSSB (online only) – for bank only workers

Each questionnaire has a set of mandatory questions, which all participating organisations must include, in full, in their questionnaire. The online NSS questionnaire will include questions about resident doctors' host organisations. [There are also two optional free text questions on the NSSB questionnaire.](#) Organisations may also include additional local questions in either questionnaire (optional). These should be discussed and agreed with their contractor.

Introducing too many questions may have an adverse impact on response rates, therefore organisations should limit the number of additional questions so as not to make the questionnaire too long.

10.1 Permission to recontact question

The permission to recontact question helps support recruitment for cognitive testing to develop future surveys.

This question is only included in the online version of the survey, not for staff completing via the paper questionnaire. This question is separated into two parts, with the first part asking if respondents would like to be recontacted and the second part allowing respondents to enter their name and email address where they wish to be contacted.

11 Distribution and receipt of questionnaires, and prompting non-respondents

Organisations sending both email and paper invitations to staff should distribute the first email and paper mailings as close to each other as possible, and they must be distributed to staff by the first day of the mandatory fieldwork period.

Bank only workers: personal email addresses, home postal addresses and personal mobile phone numbers can be used for the survey so long as they are up to date and have been provided by the bank only worker for work purposes. In these circumstances, specific consent for the use of personal contact details is not required.

Emails

Survey emails should be sent to staff members' organisational email addresses where possible, but it is acceptable for non-work email addresses to be used if necessary, for example for staff on parental leave or long-term sickness leave, provided that staff have provided this email address for work purposes.

Paper

Survey documents should be distributed to employees with permanent work addresses using the internal post (or other internal distribution mechanisms). Where staff members do not have permanent work addresses, or where there is no primary address (e.g. staff that work across multiple sites), survey documents may be distributed to home addresses. When sending staff survey documents to home addresses, only the name and home address of staff should be displayed. It is the participating organisation's responsibility to ensure that no reference to employees' job title or work location is included in such address fields, i.e. to ensure that such information is not displayed on envelopes posted to home addresses.

Please note that a copy of the questionnaire and reply-paid envelope must be sent with the initial covering letter and the second reminder letter. Each questionnaire must be marked with a unique identification number, in order to monitor response and target reminders.

It is recognised that many organisations are based in multiple locations, each with its own post room, and in these cases it is preferable that survey packs be arranged into separate batches for the separate locations. It is the responsibility of organisations to ensure the contractor has sufficient information (provided with the staff list) to enable them to do this.

Post room(s) play a crucial part in the internal distribution of paper questionnaires and reminders. Therefore, it is important that organisations inform their post room(s) that their workload will increase over the survey period and give them good notice of the dates they will receive each survey mailing.

In previous years, the organisations with the best response rates had survey leads within the organisations who took ownership of the distribution process themselves and kept in close contact with the post room staff, to ensure that distribution went smoothly and according to timetable.

12 Reporting

12.1 Suppression

NHS Staff Survey results published by the Survey Coordination Centre are subject to suppression. This means that results based on small numbers are removed from reports. This is done for two reasons: to prevent the risk that individuals could be identified, and to prevent reporting of unreliable results.

In publishing survey results, the Survey Coordination Centre adheres to guidance from NHS England regarding data suppression. This suppression guidance outlines that results for groups of less than 10 should be suppressed for publication. This is in line with other NHS England surveys.

To align with the national reporting, contractors should apply a suppression threshold of less than 10 to their reporting.

Small differences may occur between contractor reporting and Survey Coordination Centre published data, due to differences in suppression rules applied for published data. Where this happens, no attempt should be made to reidentify individuals. Additionally, the Survey Coordination Centre advises organisations that attempts should not be undertaken to reverse engineer contractor or Survey Coordination Centre data reports to reidentify suppressed data.

If contractor reporting is to be published (i.e. made publicly available with open access), we recommend adherence to the new guidance for suppression in published data, details of which will be provided on the NHS Staff Survey website.

12.2 Breakdown of results by directorate / department / site etc.

NSSB only: please note that the results for bank only workers will be reported separately and cannot be included in the organisation's breakdown report.

The 'breakdown report' produced by the Survey Coordination Centre can include up to two breakdowns by directorate, department, location or any other staff categorisation or grouping the organisation wishes to include. The breakdown reports provide People Promise element and theme scores for each group, comparing them to the organisation mean.

For the Survey Coordination Centre to produce a breakdown report for an organisation, sufficient and accurate information needs to be included on the staff lists supplied to the contractor and the Survey Coordination Centre. It is the responsibility of the participating organisation to ensure that the information provided is accurate and that they provide the correct information to their contractor.

In general, we recommend a limit of 12 groups to a breakdown (e.g. 12 directorates in the first breakdown; 12 locations in the other breakdown). If there are substantially more than this, we suggest combining some of the smaller categories. This will ensure that less data is suppressed due to low numbers, and an organisation still receives useful breakdowns. The maximum number of categories permitted in each breakdown is 50, including any 'other' group, but this number would only be suitable for very large organisations and organisations should bear in mind that large base sizes give more robust results.

To preserve confidentiality neither contractors nor the Survey Coordination Centre report results from any group if there are 9 or fewer responses in that group. Therefore, it is important that enough staff are included in each group to ensure that there are enough

number of responses for results to be displayed. Organisations should consider their response rate when making these decisions.

Breakdowns groups submitted to the Survey Coordination Centre must have a minimum of 10 staff.

Care must be taken by the organisation and contractor to provide the Survey Coordination Centre with only those breakdowns the organisation wishes to be included in the breakdown report, which will be publicly available.

As part of the data submission, contractors must provide the Survey Coordination Centre with the name of each group. The length of these should be sufficiently short to fit into the report format as it is. Due to the format of the reports, breakdown category names should be 36 characters or fewer (including spaces). Longer names may be cut off.

It is the responsibility of a participating organisation to confirm with their contractor precisely which breakdowns/groups will be included in the Survey Coordination Centre breakdown reports.

Organisations may not request changes to these breakdowns/groups once fieldwork has closed and contractors have submitted the data to the Survey Coordination Centre. Amendments can only be accommodated if the report does not contain the groupings previously agreed between the organisation and the survey contractor.

12.3 Early release of results under embargo

IMPORTANT: The results of NSS are an official statistic and the results of NSSB are an official statistic in development. The results are produced and reported under the UK Statistics Authority code of practice. As such, NSS and NSSB results **must not be made public prior to their respective national publication dates**, which are determined by NHS England.

To allow organisations that participate in the survey to make the best use of their survey results for action planning, these organisations are granted early (pre-release) access to their own results so they can receive and start to use their results ahead of the official publication date. However, it should be noted that any survey data released to participating organisations before the official publication date, either by the Survey Coordination Centre or by their own survey contractor, is provided under embargo and must not be shared with any person or organisation external to the participating organisation. The following link contains useful information regarding embargo guidance: [NHS Staff Survey Embargo Guidance](#)

12.4 Reporting free text comments

Redacted free text comments must be submitted to the Survey Coordination Centre by 8 January 2027.

If a contractor is providing free text comments to a participating organisation the contractor must review all comments and remove any identifying information. At a minimum, contractors must remove the following data from all comments that are to be passed to a participating organisation.

- Names
- Dates of birth
- ID numbers (e.g. a payroll number)
- Addresses
- Email addresses

- Phone numbers

If an organisation requests a more detailed breakdown of free text comments, for example split by site or department, contractors may provide such breakdowns only where there are 9 or more free text comments (not respondents) in the requested sub-group. Note that if multiple breakdowns are provided, within or across reports, to prevent the risk of the staff member who provided a comment being identified, it is the contractor's responsibility to ensure that an individual comment cannot be traced back to a sub-group of less than 10 staff.

12.5 Data transfer for organisations who change contractors

As part of the contractor reporting process, organisations generally desire year-on-year comparison data. If an organisation has recently changed contractors, their new survey contractor may require previous years' data to do appropriate analyses.

To receive previous years' data, the new contractor must contact the survey lead at the organisation and explicitly request permission, which must be sent to the old contractor along with any other required details (for instance, if multiple years are required). It is also possible to request such permission as part of the contractor's sign-up process. The organisation contacts should be fully informed and aware of which data they are releasing (e.g. if it is two years instead of just one). Upon receiving the organisation's permission, the contractors can then arrange for the data to be transferred between themselves. If any issues are encountered in this process, please contact the Survey Coordination Centre for assistance.

Alternatively, if contractors only require the previous year's data from the questionnaire, this can be arranged through the Survey Coordination Centre. There are two deadlines which need to be met to receive organisation data in such a way, these are outlined below:

- By **9 October 2026**: Contractor to confirm to the Survey Coordination Centre the list of organisations they are requesting data for.
- By **23 October 2026**: All permissions to be received by the Survey Coordination Centre. These can be sent by the contractor or directly by the organisations.
 - Data for outstanding permissions on this date might not be processed until after reporting is complete.

Data for organisations whose permission is received in such a way will be shared with the appropriate contractor during **w/c 26 October 2026**.

Note: NHS Staff Survey datasets at respondent level must never be provided to participating organisations. Datasets must remain only with contractors and the Survey Coordination Centre, to preserve respondent confidentiality.

12.6 Data transfer for organisations working with multiple contractors

If, in addition to their primary survey contractor, an organisation wishes to work with a secondary contractor for delivery of survey reporting, they should notify their primary survey contractor as soon as possible. Any data sharing between the primary contractor and the secondary (reporting) contractor must be agreed locally, between the two contractors and the contracting organisation. With the explicit consent of the contracting organisation, the primary contractor may share case-level data with the secondary contractor, in the same format as that submitted to the Survey Coordination Centre. The primary contractor may charge for any additional processing or cleaning of the data, or other support that may be required by the secondary contractor. It is the responsibility of the contractors and the participating organisation to ensure that IG and data protection requirements are met.

Note that secondary contractors receiving NHS Staff Survey data to provide reporting to a participating organisation must adhere to the reporting requirements detailed earlier in the section regarding suppression, embargo and free text comments.

Note: NHS Staff Survey datasets at respondent level must never be provided to participating organisations. Datasets must remain only with contractors and the Survey Coordination Centre, to preserve respondent confidentiality.