



2026 NHS STAFF SURVEY SAMPLING HANDBOOK

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1 How to use this document

These instructions explain how to compile your staff list for the NHS Staff Survey (NSS) and NHS Staff Survey for bank only workers (NSSB). Please read through these instructions carefully and follow the steps to compile the staff list. It will be important to allocate sufficient work time to compile and check the staff list carefully before submitting it to your organisation's survey contractor.

NOTE: Throughout this sampling handbook, 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 only workers will be highlighted in light blue.**

2 Preparation of staff lists

Inclusion of bank only workers

Bank only workers' details must be included in the organisation staff list if the organisation meets the eligibility criteria to survey bank only workers. The staff list must clearly distinguish between those staff eligible for NSS and those eligible for NSSB. Eligibility criteria for bank only workers are detailed below.

Occasionally, surveys have been sent to staff no longer working for or not known at the organisation. These surveys can upset the staff who receive them. It is vital that organisations ensure that staff lists are accurate and up to date before sampling.

One of the first steps is to compile a list of all those eligible to participate. **Please note that preparation of this staff list is the responsibility of the organisation, not of the contractor.**

Preparation of the staff list needs to be carried out by a staff member who is familiar with both the structure of staff records and Microsoft Excel. We advise that organisations ensure that staff lists are comprehensive and up to date by 14 August 2026.

If human resources provision is shared between multiple organisations, then it is important that separate staff lists are created for **each organisation**, not one overall sample for the provision. The staff list for each organisation should be consistent with the instructions in this document.

2.1 Who should be on this list?

- All full time and part-time staff who are directly employed by the organisation on **1 September 2026** (even if the sample is drawn after this date);
- Staff on fixed term contracts;
- Student nurses, as long as they are employed by the organisation on 1 September 2026;
- Clinical trainees, as long as they are employed by the organisation on 1 September 2026;
- Staff on secondment to a different organisation, but only if they are still being paid by the participating organisation **and** have been out on secondment for less than one year;
- Hosted staff (staff seconded to the participating organisation from elsewhere, e.g., social care staff seconded from the local authority) who have a substantive contract with the organisation, and are currently being paid by the participating organisation;
- Staff seconded to the participating organisation from another NHS organisation who **do not** have a substantive contract with the participating organisation and/or **are not** on the organisation's payroll **BUT have been seconded to the organisation for at least 12 months**. If the organisation does not hold ESR records for these staff then they should look to identify them by other means. Organisations should notify their contractor if they are unsure how to identify and include any staff who meet these criteria.
- Any staff meeting the above criteria who are on sickness leave of up to 12 months on 1 September 2026.

- Any staff member meeting the above criteria who is on parental leave (e.g. maternity, paternity or adoption leave)
- Any staff member meeting the above criteria who is suspended.

For NSSB:

- Any bank only workers who, in the 6 months between 1 March 2026 and 1 September 2026, have been paid for any work or training at the organisation, either by that organisation or by a collaborative bank of which the organisation is part.
- The above criteria apply to bank only workers who are part of a collaborative. The only difference with the collaborative bank model is that a single organisation holds the bank only worker data (the host organisation). **The host organisation will draw the staff list and supply to each respective organisation within the collaborative.**

2.2 Who should **not** be on this list?

- Staff who started working at the organisation **after** 1 September 2026;
- Staff on **unpaid** career breaks;
- All staff employed by sub-contracted organisations or outside contractors (this includes staff employed through wholly owned subsidiaries);
- All staff working in Trust-run general practice services delivered under a **General Medical Services (GMS), Personal Medical Services (PMS), or Alternative Provider Medical Services (APMS)** contract, including any trainees hosted by these services;
- Locum staff (unless they have substantive organisation contracts);
- Staff who have been on sickness leave of more than 12 months on 1 September 2026;
- Seconded staff who are **not** being paid by the participating organisation **unless** these staff have been seconded from another NHS organisation and have been working at the participating organisation for at least 12 months;
- Student nurses who are not employed by the organisation on 1 September 2026 (unless they are active bank only workers and will form part of the bank sample).
 - Please note: **other ‘student’ and trainee/training staff**, such as student health visitors and midwives **should be included**, as long as they are on the payroll and directly employed by the organisation **and** not classified as student nurses;
- Non-executive directors (e.g. typically “Chair”, “Chairman” are in this category);
- Staff who work under a ‘retention of employment’ (RoE) model – these are staff who hold a contract with an organisation but are paid and managed day to day by an independent contractor.

For NSSB:

- The list of bank only workers should exclude staff who also hold a **substantive or fixed term contract with the same organisation** (who will form part of the sample for NSS).

- Externally funded bank or agency workers such as those paid or directly supplied by external bank providers such as NHS Professionals, Bank Partners, etc.

For detail on the reasons some of these staff groups are excluded from the survey, please see [Appendix 1](#).

2.3 ESR reporting tool

In 2024, an ESR reporting tool was introduced to assist with the drawing of staff lists. This optional tool allows ESR users to draw lists of eligible staff ([including bank only workers](#)) via a single dashboard in ESR.

The report is 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](#).

2.4 Format of the staff list spreadsheet

The staff list should be in Excel spreadsheet format, with one person per row.

The first row should be used for column headings (Name, Staff Group, Address etc.).

There should be no blank rows.

Each person should appear only once on the spreadsheet with the following information:

Bank only workers: Note it is the responsibility of the organisation to ensure that each person appears only once on the list. If a member of staff has a substantive contract and works on the bank they must be included as part of the NSS sample ONLY.

- Organisation ID (NHS trust/organisation code).
- Staff ID (generated from organisation records or assigned by contractor).
- Substantive / bank indicator (1=substantive staff; 2=[bank only workers](#)).
- Full name.
- Address – this will need to be sufficiently detailed to enable a questionnaire/invitation to be sent to the individual via the internal mail, or by post if the survey will be delivered to a home address. Questionnaires can be sent to home addresses of staff who do not have a permanent work address, such as some bank only workers and staff on maternity or long-term sickness leave.
- Email address (unless the staff member is being invited by paper invitation only).
- **Bank only workers:** Mobile phone number (if included, SMS text notifications will be sent).
- Breakdowns required in the 'breakdown report'. Up to two directorate breakdowns can be submitted to the Survey Coordination Centre for use in national reporting (and contractors may permit more for use in local reporting). This information is not mandatory.
- Location (if the questionnaires are to be separated into batches for different post rooms).
- Ethnic background – as in previous years, this information is collected so responses from different ethnic groups can be monitored. As usual, the following coding should be used:

White

- A British
- B Irish
- C Any other White background

Mixed

- D White and Black Caribbean
- E White and Black African
- F White and Asian
- G Any other mixed background

Asian or Asian British

- H Indian
- J Pakistani
- K Bangladeshi
- L Any other Asian background

Black or Black British

- M Caribbean
- N African
- P Any other Black background

Other Ethnic Groups

- R Chinese
- S Any other ethnic group
- Z Not stated

- Job title – information on job title will not be included in the standard Survey Coordination Centre reporting but will be used for sample checking.
- Staff group – information on staff group will not be included in the standard Survey Coordination Centre reporting but will be used for sample checking and will be valuable in monitoring response rates. **This field must be complete for all staff and must contain one of the following nine options only:**
 - Additional Clinical Services
 - Add Prof Scientific and Technic
 - Administrative and Clerical
 - Allied Health Professions
 - Estates and Ancillary
 - Healthcare Scientists
 - Medical and Dental
 - Nursing and Midwifery Registered
 - Students
- Please note that ‘Additional Professional, Scientific and Technical’ should be included as ‘Add Prof Scientific and Technic’, as shown in the list above.
- Job role – Please see the [National Workforce Data Set Specification](#) (NWD) for a list of the job roles to include in this field. **All staff must be assigned a valid job role and that job role must correspond to that person’s Staff Group as specified in the NWD.**
- Occupation Code – All staff must be assigned a valid 3-character occupation code. For a list of valid NHS Occupation Codes please visit [here](#).
- Area of Work – please provide the ‘Area of Work’ information taken from ESR. This is a text field. **Note:** this column is called ‘tertiary’ in ESR. See [National Workforce Data Set \(NWD\) guidance documents - NHS England Appendix D](#) for a list of valid Areas of Work.

- Parental leave – please identify staff on parental leave in the list. Please note: this data will be used by the contractor to ensure staff on parental leave have been included.
- Long-term sickness leave – please identify staff on sickness leave of between 90 days and 12 months on 1 September. This data will be used by the contractor to ensure staff on long-term sickness leave have been included and by the Survey Coordination Centre to review response rates from this group.
- Grade information – the following three data items should be provided:
 - Pay Grade (text field)
 - Pay Scale (text field)
 - Pay Scale Description (text field)

Bank only workers: Where a bank only worker has multiple assignments, provide the **Pay Grade**, **Pay Scale** and **Pay Scale Description** that is mapped to their Primary Assignment.

2.5 Checking the staff list

Before submitting the staff list to a contractor, it is important that it is checked carefully. The list should contain the above sampling fields as well as meeting the eligibility criteria outlined in the above sections.

Please ensure that:

- No eligible staff members have been omitted from the list. This could potentially happen if, for example, staff records are kept separately for different departments or sites within the organisation. The Chief Executive should be included if they meet all other eligibility criteria.
- The list does not contain duplicate or redundant names and email addresses.
- For collaborative banks, it is possible that bank only workers may appear across different individual organisations' lists as they may work in more than one organisation in that collaborative. This is acceptable. **De-duplication between staff lists should not be undertaken for collaborative banks.**
- Bank only workers eligible for NSSB are clearly distinguished in the list from staff eligible for NSS, and no individual is listed for both surveys. **Staff with a substantive or fixed term contract must be identified as part of the NSS sample even if they also work on the bank.**
- All ineligible staff have been excluded from the list.
- All staff seconded to the participating organisation for at least 12 months are included.
- All staff on sickness leave, including those on long term sickness leave of between 90 days and 12 months, are included.
- Each member of the sample has an allocated ID number and there are no duplicates.
- The sample is in a random order (i.e. it is not structured so that all occupational groups are together, or is in alphabetical order).

3 Final sampling inspection by the Survey Coordination Centre

Contractors are required to undertake checks on sample files to help to ensure that the eligibility criteria have been correctly applied by participating organisations. Queries should be raised with organisations when contractors find a potential error.

Please note that it is not a requirement to identify staff on parental leave within the sample file submitted to the SCC. However, contractors should use the data provided by organisations to check that such staff have been included as eligible and notify the SCC of this when the sample file is submitted.

Once a contractor is satisfied that a sample is correct, they must submit an anonymised sample file (staff list) to the SCC prior to the first mailing. This is to allow us to make final quality control checks. Contractors are responsible for submitting sample files to the SCC on behalf of the participating organisation.

Contractors should submit samples via the Survey Coordination Centre online sample submission platform (This link will be provided to contractors by the SCC).

The SCC will follow up any issues arising from these final checks with the contractor.

Please note it is not possible to identify all sampling errors from an anonymised file and therefore it remains the responsibility of the organisation and contractor to ensure that sampling is undertaken in accordance with this handbook and the guidance manual. Please contact the Survey Coordination Centre if any assistance is required.

All items detailed below must be submitted, but no other variables should be included in the file sent to the SCC, i.e. name, postal and email address details, mobile phone numbers etc. must be removed.

For contractors:

Details to submit for sample checking by the SCC are:

- Organisation ID
- Staff record number (unique to each staff member)
- Survey indicator (NSS/NSSB)
- Ethnic background
- Job title
- Staff group
- Job role
- Occupation code
- Area of Work
- Long term sickness
- Grade information

Please also supply the SCC with the following details for each organisation:

- Confirmation that the list contains all staff eligible for NSS
- Number of eligible workers at the organisation for NSSB
- Organisation name
- Any notes about the sample, including organisation responses to queries raised.

Samples should reach the SCC by **18 September 2026**. Please contact the SCC if you anticipate problems with meeting this date. If the sample is not submitted in this way there is a risk that organisations will not have enough time to correct any problems in the sample and complete the survey with an acceptable response rate. Please note that the SCC may require **up to 3 working days** to review a sample.

Organisations which have not submitted their sample for checking by **18 September 2026** will be contacted by the SCC to discuss any problems they are having and how we can help with the process.

Please note that checked samples must match the information included in the final data. Please also note that the 'staff IDs' / 'staff record numbers' used in the sample checking file should match those used in the final data file submitted to the SCC following fieldwork.

3.1 Sampling errors

If the sampling guidance is not correctly applied by organisations when producing their staff lists, this can lead to eligible staff missing the opportunity to participate, or responses from staff who should not have been invited being included in the results. To prevent this, it is important that the guidance in this document is followed when preparing staff lists.

When errors in the sampling process are discovered please notify your survey contractor and the SCC as soon as possible. If there is sufficient time before the start of fieldwork, it is possible to correct the staff list. If the sampling error is reported after the beginning of fieldwork, this may lead to the results of the affected organisation being excluded from analysis and published reports.

Occasionally, historical sampling errors (mistakes in how staff lists are drawn in previous survey years) are identified. When this occurs, the current year's correctly sampled staff list cannot be compared with the incorrectly drawn list from the affected year. As a result, survey data from those years are not directly comparable. To produce comparable data over time, consistent sampling methodology is essential. Therefore, organisations affected by such errors will not receive comparative data between the current and previous year in the published reports.

Appendix 1 Eligibility criteria: why are certain groups excluded?

The staff list is designed to include all members of staff who are consistently and regularly employed by the organisation they will be responding about. It is very important that staff eligibility criteria are identical across all organisations taking part, as this is necessary to enable comparisons to be made between results of the different organisations.

Staff employed through wholly owned subsidiaries (WOS) are excluded as they are not directly employed by the participating organisation, and therefore do not meet the eligibility criteria. Staff employed through WOS can still be included in a local sample but not in the sample for the national survey. If your organisation would like to include WOS staff in your local survey, please discuss with your contractor if they are able to do so.

Staff who started at the organisation after 1 September 2026 are not included for several reasons. The methodology of the NHS Staff Survey is based on a fixed-point sampling strategy, where all and only eligible staff working in a participating organisation on 1 September can take part in the survey. This includes staff that started at the organisation on 1 September, as well as those who are soon to leave after this date. This means the survey represents the population of the NHS workforce on that date.

If staff who joined the organisation after 1 September were included, this would no longer be the case, and new starters would be proportionally over-represented in the results.

Furthermore, including staff who started after 1 September would cause serious logistical problems for the contractors, and would also mean that the checks carried out prior to fieldwork would need to be repeated by contractors and the SCC multiple times (and with approximately 250 organisations included in the survey, this is not feasible).

Staff who have been seconded out of the organisation or on long-term leave for longer than 12 months are not included as the survey is designed to allow staff to provide feedback on their experience of working at the organisation in the preceding 12 months. However, if staff have been seconded to another participating NHS organisation for at least 12 months they will have the chance to participate in the survey at that organisation.