



**Survey
Coordination
Centre**

THE NHS STAFF SURVEY: METHODS FOR IMPROVING RESPONSE RATES

NHS STAFF SURVEY COORDINATION CENTRE

1 Introduction

This document provides advice on how you can improve your response rate for the NHS Staff Survey. By taking actions, such as those presented in this document, it is possible to achieve an excellent response rate, adding value to your survey and helping ensure that results are representative of your trust as a whole.

The higher the survey response rate, the more confident we can be that the survey findings are representative of NHS staff as a whole. Non-responding staff may have different characteristics and views from staff who respond, so the lower the proportion of non-responding staff, the lower the probability that the survey findings are not a true reflection of staff views as a whole.

To raise awareness and to promote the NHS Staff Survey, we have produced some text that can be used in internal newsletters, flyers, letters, etc. (see section 5) and a list of Frequently Asked Questions for staff (see section 6). On the Survey Documents page of the NHS Staff Survey website (www.nhsstaffsurveys.com) you will find colour posters, payslip flyers and an email tag for use within your organisation.

So, what can you do to help improve your response rate?

2 Before the survey

Publicise the survey within the organisation

It is important to communicate with staff about the forthcoming survey with emphasis placed on the importance of staff having their say. Methods of communication can include the use of:

- Posters
- Flyers
- E-mails
- Articles in newsletters
- Briefings at staff meetings

The highest response rates in previous years have been achieved when **multiple methods of communication** have been used and when this communication is maintained throughout the survey period, ensuring that the survey has a high profile.

For communications to be successful, the content of the communication should include information on:

- The overall purpose of the survey.
- How and when questionnaires will be sent out.
- Thanking staff for their co-operation.
- Assuring staff that answers will be treated in confidence and that no one in their organisation will be able to identify individual responses.
- How the results of the survey will be used to improve the working lives of staff.
- How the results of previous surveys were used.
- A message of support for the survey from senior management.

We recommend that managers are properly briefed so that they feel comfortable promoting the survey and are ready to answer questions from staff. Demonstrating support for the survey and its aims, at all levels within an organisation, can help make a difference.

Organisations with the best response rates in previous years have demonstrated to staff how the survey data has been used. It is very important you publicise the action you have taken, otherwise staff cannot appreciate how the survey can improve working conditions.

We recommend that you seek local press coverage for the Staff Survey to increase interest and awareness.

Ensure there is a clear questionnaire distribution strategy in place for paper surveys

Problems with the distribution of questionnaires and reminders are often the main reason for achieving low response rates. A good distribution strategy should include:

- Ensuring that the staff list being used for sampling is as up to date as possible and that the internal address details for each staff member are complete and accurate.
- Considering the distribution of the questionnaires with staff pay slips.
- A meeting with the post room staff the week before the survey so that they are fully informed about the large quantity of mail they will need to distribute.
- Giving post room staff a clear idea of the survey timetable and dates for when questionnaires and/or reminders need to be distributed.
- Regular dialogue between the survey lead and a key contact in the post room to ensure that any problems with distribution can be identified and addressed.
- The nomination of individuals at each key site or department to take responsibility for receiving the packs of questionnaires, and alerting the survey lead of any problems.
- The survey contractor assisting in the distribution process by dividing the questionnaires into batches for the different sites.

Ensure that staff understand that responses are confidential

Respondents cannot be individually identified from their survey results because independent contractors are responsible for entering and aggregating the Staff Survey data. Bar codes are used purely to identify if a person has previously responded, this stops additional questionnaires being sent to those who have already responded. Below is some example text which you can use to communicate to staff and reassure them that their responses are confidential

Q: If I fill in the questionnaire, will my response be kept confidential?

A: Yes. You will post your completed 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 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 questionnaire need an identification number and bar code?

A: You have been given a unique identification (ID) number so that your name and work contact details are not on the questionnaire. Three and six weeks after the first survey is distributed, survey contractors use the ID numbers to ensure that reminder letters are only sent to staff who have not returned a questionnaire.

As staff return their completed questionnaires directly to an external survey contractor, there is no way that anyone in an NHS organisation will be able to link data with a particular ID number or individual. Organisations will only receive reports of the summary survey findings. If a questionnaire is returned with the ID number obscured or removed,

that data cannot be included in the survey findings. Without the ID number, it is not possible to assign data to the correct NHS organisation.

3 During the survey period

Continue to publicise the survey within your organisation

In order to keep the profile of the survey high, it is important to continue your publicity campaign throughout the survey period (late September/early October to December).

Nominate Staff Survey champions at different sites/directorates who can encourage staff to respond and check that questionnaires have been distributed.

Multiple methods of communication with staff (posters, emails, meetings, etc.) are recommended. Another approach that has been used to help boost response rates is to encourage staff to complete their questionnaires during working time.

Keep a close eye on the questionnaire distribution progress

The distribution process should not be left to post room staff alone. Both organisations and survey contractors should monitor the distribution closely. The following checks are recommended:

- Check regularly with post room staff that questionnaires and reminders are being distributed according to the survey timetable.
- Ask your survey contractor whether there are any departments or sites with a particularly low response rate. If so, the distribution of survey materials may need to be checked.
- Re-addressing or resending questionnaire packs may be necessary if you discover that staff have moved internally.

4 After the survey

What you do after the survey has closed can have a direct impact on the subsequent year's response rate. If staff do not see any evidence that participation in the most recent survey has led to any local action, they are less likely to see the value in participating in the survey in future years. For this reason it is important to:

- Communicate survey findings to your staff.
- Get staff involved in helping to develop an action plan on the basis of the survey results.
- Keep staff informed about any improvements made as a result of their views.

5 Text for internal newsletters/information

The text below provides a brief explanation of the Staff Survey and its purpose. This text could be used for the basis of any internal communications, for example in a newsletter. Where local amendments may be needed, we use square brackets. You may wish to link the text to things that you are doing locally, such as staff meetings, or the description of local improvements you are making. You may wish to discuss publicity with your local communications department.

SAMPLE TEXT



2020 NHS Staff Survey – Working through the pandemic

Your chance to have your say

We need to hear your views about working through the pandemic

The NHS has never before experienced a year like this one. The Covid-19 pandemic has demanded the very best from all of us, whatever our role, placing extraordinary challenges and pressures on us to deliver the most compassionate healthcare, at the highest clinical standards, while trying to keep ourselves and our families safe. *Thank you for everything you have done to support NHS patients and colleagues during this time.* **Now we need to know what it was like for YOU.**

In September/October we will be taking part in the NHS Staff Survey organised by the NHS Staff Survey Coordination Centre. [All / A sample of] staff employed by this [trust/organisation] will be asked to fill in [a paper/an online] questionnaire.

The survey asks for your views about your job and about working for [organisation name]. While this year has been very different for the NHS, the survey asks many of the same questions, in the same way, as in previous years, so we can measure the impact of the pandemic on the experiences of our staff by comparing it to previous years. There are also some changes to the survey which are specifically relevant to working through Covid-19, so that we can understand your experience more fully.
[Local uses of Staff Survey results may be inserted here.]

The survey is run in partnership with trade unions and is one of the best ways for you to share your views about your job, your organisation and the NHS. This will aid local and national learning for future public health emergencies, will help to inform further work to support #OurNHSPeople, and will help to improve [organisation name].

Questionnaires will be returned to an external survey contractor who administers the survey, so no one from [organisation name] will be able to see individual responses.

The survey findings will be reported in a summary report, in which individuals cannot be identified. Our local results will be available from December and benchmarked results from all organisations in England will be made public early next year.

For advice and support about the survey, please visit the NHS Staff Survey website at www.nhsstaffsurveys.com

6 Questions and answers for staff

Below is a list of some Frequently Asked Questions about the survey.

Q: When is the survey going to take place?

A: The survey is being launched in September/October and will be obligatory for all NHS trusts and foundation trusts. Other NHS organisations such as CCGs and CSUs are encouraged to take part.

Organisations will be distributing the questionnaire to all (or a sample) of their staff in late September or early October of the given survey year.

Q: Why are we having to do another Staff Survey?

A: The purpose of this survey is to collect staff views about working in the NHS. The data will be used to improve working conditions for staff and practices, and ultimately to improve patient care. And this year in particular, the data will help us uncover the best practices that really made a difference to staff working through the pandemic, and get a clear picture of what could have been better. The survey is administered annually so staff views can be monitored over time. It also allows us to compare the experience of staff in similar organisations as well as nationally.

Q: Who is the survey being sent to? / Who is taking part? / Why have I been selected?

A: Participating organisations are being asked to, as a minimum, select a random sample of employees to take part in the survey. Sample sizes will depend on the number of staff employed by the organisation. We can get a representative picture of views within the organisation by taking a random sample which reduces the burden on staff within an organisation, as not all staff have to take part. Other organisations may choose to survey an extended sample of staff or all of their staff. Provided the fieldwork procedure in the guidance manual is followed, the Coordination Centre will accept all of this data for national reporting purposes.

Q: Do I have to complete it?

A: Participation in the survey is not compulsory, but staff are strongly encouraged to use the opportunity to give their opinion and views about the organisation in which they work by completing the questionnaire.

It is important that as many staff members as possible complete the questionnaire. The higher the survey response rate, the more confident we can be that the survey findings are representative of the views of staff at the organisation as a whole.

Q: Do I have to complete it, even if I took part in the survey last year?

A: Even if you completed the previous questionnaire, it is important that you take part in the current/upcoming survey so that we can see whether the experiences of staff have changed, particularly in this extraordinary year for the NHS. In particular, it enables us to monitor the impact of our policies on staff experiences and attitudes.

Q: If I fill in the questionnaire, will my responses be kept confidential?

A: Yes. You will post/submit your completed questionnaire directly to the independent survey contractor appointed by your organisation. Your organisation does not have access to the questionnaires or to any linked personal data (e.g. names and addresses). The report that is sent back to the organisation presents the survey findings in summary form, and does not reveal the identity of the staff sampled. To help preserve anonymity, the Coordination Centre will not provide feedback on any group from which there are 10 or fewer responses.

Q: Why does the questionnaire need an identification number and bar code?

A: You have been given a unique identification (ID) number so that your name and work contact details are not on the questionnaire. After the first survey is distributed, survey contractors use the ID numbers to ensure that reminder letters/emails are only sent to staff who have not returned a questionnaire.

As staff return their completed questionnaires directly to an external survey contractor, there is no way that anyone in your organisation will be able to link data with a particular ID number or individual. Your organisation will only receive reports of the summary survey findings. If a questionnaire is returned with the ID number obscured or removed, that data cannot be included in the survey findings because, without the ID number, it is not possible to assign data to the correct NHS organisation.

Q: How has the data from the previous surveys been used?

A: The Coordination Centre produces benchmark reports for all organisations who take part in the survey. These reports benchmark organisations against those of a similar type.

The survey findings, and ongoing analyses, are used to inform NHS England and NHS Improvement and Department of Health national NHS workforce policies. The Care Quality Commission will also use the data as part of ongoing monitoring of registration compliance.

Other organisations and trade unions also make use of the data. For example:

- The Pay Review Body uses the results as part of evidence for their recommendations.
- The Social Partnership Forum, where Unions, NHS Employers and the Department of Health, meet regularly to consider the results and influence national workforce policy accordingly.
- Many organisations at all levels use the results of the Staff Survey as a basis for partnership working with unions and staff sides.

Q: How does the survey help patients?

A: Research has shown that staff experiences can have a direct impact on patient care. The survey provides valuable information about staff working conditions and practices, which are linked to the quality of patient care. For example, staff have been shown to provide better care for patients when they are well managed and working in teams, have lower levels of workplace stress and violence or abuse from patients. By collecting information on staff experiences, trust management can improve working conditions.

Q: Where can I find further information?

A: The NHS Staff Survey website is www.nhsstaffsurveys.com. Here, you can find all the survey documentation, as well as a page of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about the survey.

If you would like any further information about the NHS Staff Survey, this is available from the Coordination Centre:

- 01865 208 141 (9.30am – 4.30pm, Monday to Friday).
- nhsstaffsurvey@surveycoordination.com