



How technology
can support the

NHS People Plan

Introduction

Since 1948, the National Health Service has cared for millions of lives across the UK. They have worked through wars, recessions, disasters and trauma. Yet in 2020, the NHS experienced their most challenging year yet.

Over the course of eight months, over [115,000 COVID-19 patients](#) were admitted to hospital in addition to the hundreds of thousands of people who remained vulnerable and in need of care. Lives were tragically lost, doctors and nurses came out of retirement and each of our 1.3 million NHS staff worked tirelessly to stop the spread of the virus.

“It’s been the most challenging year in the history of the NHS and staff from across the health service have pulled out the stops like never before to deliver extraordinary care. From the domestic workers on the COVID-19 wards who have worked tirelessly to keep hospitals clean, to medical students heading the call for 111 call handlers and IT professionals working around the clock to keep services running, the NHS has mobilised to tackle this once in a lifetime global pandemic.”

- Sir Simon Stevens, Chief Executive, NHS England and NHS Improvement

The public responded with an outpouring of gratitude and while the clapping has now stopped, the NHS remains our nation’s hero. Now we must continue to support our healthcare system, returning the care and compassion we have received for 72 years.



In response to this now - and for the future - the NHS People Plan was published; an outline of what the future holds for the wellbeing of our healthcare workers. The plan acts as a continuation of the drive shown by NHS employees during COVID-19 and endeavours to foster a culture of growth, inclusion, belonging and fundamentally, a well looked after workforce.

While there are many offline strategies that support the implementation of the People Plan, technology will play a fundamental role in delivering lasting change.

Since the outbreak, the NHS has ramped up its use of digital solutions. A [107% increase in remote consultations](#) was reported by digital healthcare provider, Livi, whilst the [NHSX TechForce19 programme](#) awarded almost half a million pounds to 18 digital innovators offering solutions for those in self-isolation. With this in mind, it's considered that the [NHS will experience a 'black swan moment'](#) as health tech swings into the spotlight.

In this report, we look at how technology can support the delivery of the NHS People Plan and the digital solutions that could revolutionise how we care for our healthcare workers.

We are the NHS: actions for us all

In June 2019, the NHS began implementing steps from the Interim People Plan as a part of their 10-year long term vision. This document focused on immediate actions and groundwork solutions for supporting and developing the National Health Service.

Then came a worldwide pandemic which changed everything. The level of support required to look after our healthcare workers was quickly realised and a number of profound changes were made during the COVID-19 response:

Health and wellbeing: increased support for teams and organisations including mental health services, workplace wobble rooms, greater recognition for carers and an influx of offers from nationwide companies

Permission to act: simplified decision-making and empowering autonomy to help employees implement changes

Highlighted inequalities: shining a light on existing inequalities for the BAME community and implementing change through inclusive leadership, honest conversations and increasing the role of BAME staff networks in decision making

Flexible working: a dramatic increase in remote working through virtual meetings, case presentations and teaching which has improved productivity and work-life balance

Remote consultations: nationwide video consultations that now enable flexible working

Returning and new staff: supporting the process of bringing back staff from academia, retirement and other industries, as well as students currently in training, to support patient careworking

Innovative roles: existing employees taking on new roles and upskilling certain specialities such as physiotherapists

Care home support: rolling out a clinical support package in addition to wider NHS support

Volunteering: an effective and safe process for the surge of volunteers during the pandemic

Research: collaboration between the NHS and world-leading science to support the Recovery programme



Following the success of these new approaches, the NHS People Plan was established in July to set out what workers can expect from their leaders, and each other, for the duration of 2020 and 2021.

The actionable plan addresses the increasing pressure on NHS staff and the pressing need for **more people, working differently, in a compassionate and inclusive culture.**

It will be the responsibility of employers, teams and systems, and of NHS England, NHS Improvement and Health Education England to implement four key actions over the next eighteen months acting as the groundwork for lasting change.

- **Looking after our people** particularly the actions we must all take to keep our people safe, healthy and well – both physically and psychologically
- **Belonging in the NHS** highlighting the support and action needed to create an organisational culture where everyone feels they belong.
- **New ways of working and delivering care** emphasising that we need to make effective use of the full range of our people's skills and experience to deliver the best possible patient care.
- **Growing for the future** particularly the need to build on renewed interest in NHS careers, to expand and develop our workforce, as well as taking steps to retain colleagues for longer.

- Excerpt from the [We are the NHS: People Plan 2020/2021](#)

We will now delve into these key areas and look at how the NHS can harness technology and innovation to drive long lasting, effective solutions which support our 1.3 million healthcare staff.

Looking after our people

Quality health and wellbeing support for everyone

Before the pandemic, the NHS was already a stretched sector. Burn out, understaffing and excessive work demands were - and still are - just the beginning, leading to a drop in retention rates and huge impact on wellbeing.

Whilst the NHS is exceptional at looking after the general public, we can often forget to pay attention to our caregivers. In the 2019 State of Medical Education and Practice paper, it was reported that half of GPs and 26% of doctors worked more than their scheduled weekly hours and that they were struggling to cope with the increasing workload. Whilst this has a clear effect on doctor wellbeing, it can also be detrimental to patient care, making medical errors a more common occurrence.

Following the COVID-19 outbreak, it was clear how much we depend on our NHS staff but also that the burden put upon them was too big a strain. The toll on physical, mental and psychological impacts has been significant and many workers are in need of respite.

The NHS People Plan pledges to put the safety and wellbeing of their staff at the forefront of their service. To encourage people to seek help but also to support those around them consistently throughout the organisation.

Increasing accessibility for better mental health support

All employers have a responsibility to care for their employees' mental wellbeing - particularly those whereby the role in question has a direct impact. The NHS has recognised this moral obligation over recent years, now pledging to build on the support given during the pandemic in an ongoing mental and physical health initiative.

Whilst in-person arrangements such as safe spaces, wellbeing guardians and psychological treatment are crucial to better mental health, they are clearly more difficult for a nationwide roll out. Technology has therefore played a huge role in the delivery of the NHS's mental health resources.

Free access to popular advice-packed apps such as Headspace, Sleepio and Cityparents has become accessible to all NHS staff in addition to an online support forum where visitors can communicate issues with experts.

In a world that is becoming more and more virtual, the need for online resources only grows and we can expect to see more advancements in this area.



Flexible working leads to a better work-life balance

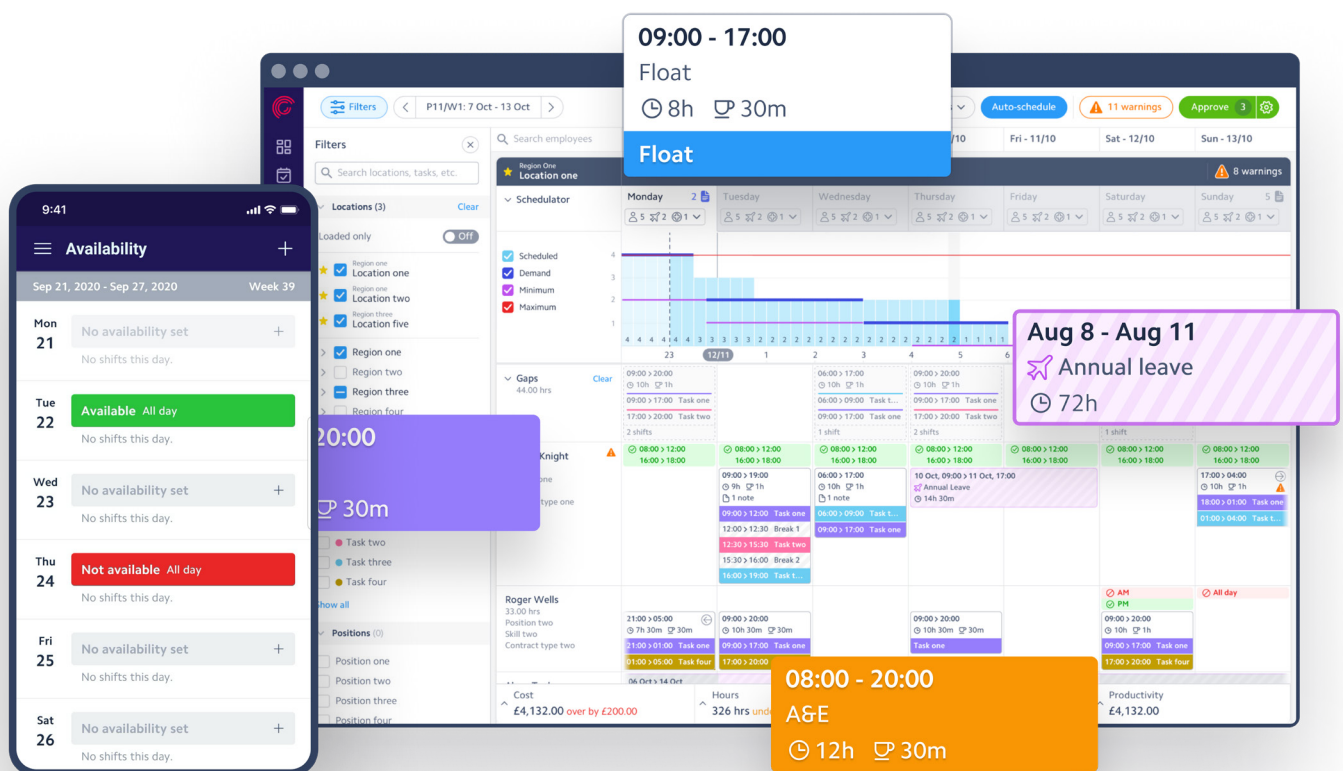
Between 2011 and 2018, over 56,000 people left their role within the NHS due to a poor work-life balance. As the strain on the NHS increases, so does the focus on employee wellbeing and the crucial need to retain healthcare talent.

Like the majority of organisations, flexible and remote working increased significantly for the NHS during the nationwide lockdown with the average number of [virtual meetings rising from 13,521 to 90,250](#). This not only opened doors to a simplified way of handling presentations, handovers and teaching but also reported a better turnout. NHS staff noted that less time travelling saw an increase in their productivity and improvement to their overall work-life balance.

Since the outbreak, the NHS has recognised the importance of a modern approach to flexible working, committing to making it a normalised part of employment from January 2021.

However this doesn't come without complications. The ability to implement flexibility requires a greater understanding of forecasting and accurate scheduling. The different organisations within the NHS each have varying working environments that require specialist skill sets and different responsibilities. But with data-driven software, smart schedules can overcome the time consuming, complicated nature of rostering with automatic, compliant rotas.

One solution that is revolutionising the way the NHS handles rostering is Rotageek. The AI-driven engine predicts accurate labour demand using historical data, event trends and individual requirements to immediately produce optimised schedules.



This not only has an impact on overworked NHS staff but appeals to increased flexibility for employees who can input their own availability and benefit from 'self-rostering'. Doctors are able to easily swap shifts directly on the platform whilst submitting preferences in advance of schedule creation. This provides better control over work-life balance and contributes to the reduction of work-related burnout.

Platforms such as Locum's Nest and Patchwork Health are also making flexible working patterns easier for NHS staff through the use of bank rotas. This particularly suits the high number of people with caring responsibilities - which has increased since COVID-19 - by giving employees greater empowerment when it comes to managing their own working hours.

Relieving the burden with financial stability

Financial strains have been one of the biggest impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the virus, it was reported that [4 in 10 NHS workers struggled with money worries](#), contributing to the higher than average rate of employee stress and depression. Following the devastating effects of the pandemic on the economy, the concerns around financial stability are subsequently booming.

To support those made financially vulnerable - and improve the 60 day wait time for overdue shift payments - various financial solutions have offered their services free of charge to NHS organisations.

Wagestream has fast tracked its software implementation time to just 24 hours for NHS organisations, also allowing trusts to increase the number of times staff can withdraw monthly wages during the pandemic.

“Allowing nurses and vital NHS workers to access their pay when they have earned it at no cost to them will hopefully ease one source of stress and allow them to focus on the vital work they are doing. We are very proud to provide Earnd for free as a service to help the NHS at a time it needs it most. Allowing nurses and vital NHS workers to access their pay when they have earned it at no cost to them will hopefully ease one source of stress and allow them to focus on the vital work they are doing. We are very proud to provide Earnd for free as a service to help the NHS at a time it needs it most.”

- Lex Greensill, CEO Greensill & Earnd

Similarly, the financial app Earnd grants staff increased flexibility for accessing their pay, even withdrawing a portion immediately after their shift. This feature is predicted to bolster staff morale by helping those who are experiencing lows in accessible cash, whilst also benefiting recruitment by being a seemingly more flexible organisation.

Both platforms are currently in use across at least ten NHS trusts, alleviating a major financial worry for thousands of healthcare workers.

New ways of working and delivering care

Capturing innovation through technology

With over 400,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 to date, the NHS was well and truly pushed to their limits during the initial outbreak. Doctors returned from retirement, volunteers took their place on the frontline and healthcare workers were challenged to deliver the best possible patient care despite a lack of time, energy and resource.

Never before had our health service needed to - or been so successful - at adapting to such extreme change. Teams were created based on experience rather than traditional roles whilst greater collaboration and authority led to optimised communication and better decision making.

The People Plan recognises this great achievement and builds upon it as the foundation for which the NHS must continue to operate going forward.

Reducing manual administration for a more efficient workforce

Manual administration has slowed down the healthcare system for decades. Repetitive tasks such as testing, symptom checking and ongoing paperwork take up hours of already precious time that is needed to keep up with the increasing demands on the NHS.

Interoperable systems are still not widespread across healthcare organisations yet have incomparable benefits. Real time data sharing results in quicker, simpler access to patient medical information that can not only be processed and understood more clearly but ultimately leads to an improved quality of care.

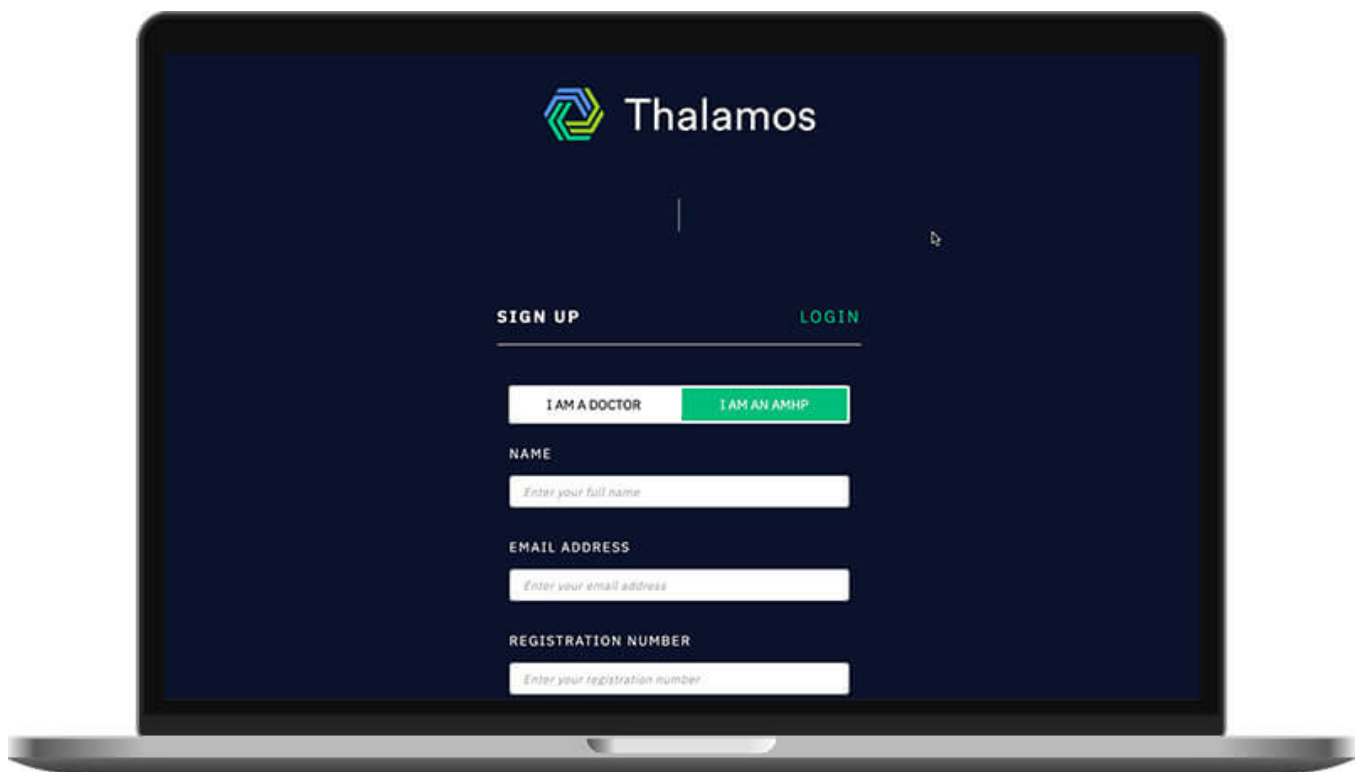
Thankfully there are already dozens of innovative solutions saving doctors valuable time and brain drain:

Empela: giving doctors superpowers

One example currently in use by the NHS is [Empela](#), a hands-free technology platform which allows clinicians to spend 'more time talking and less time typing'. Physicians can communicate with patients more effectively, giving them a few more hours in the day to meet the demands of their role.

Thalamos: digitising the Mental Health Act

Another platform digitising laborious manual processes is [Thalamos](#). This innovative technology software reduces the need for continuous paperwork by digitally storing statutory forms such as the Mental Health Act. Documents can be securely edited and shared with colleagues, helping to reduce both time and errors.



Rotageek: saving hours spent on rota management

Rostering solution, Rotageek, guarantees efficiency and caters for flexible working with automatic staff scheduling. Compliant rosters can be created in a few clicks whilst remaining adaptable to match labour with patient needs. The workforce management system is used within NHS organisations, meeting the requirements of the NHS Good Rostering Guide which encourages the use of technological scheduling solutions.

Innovative solutions in the face of a global pandemic

The pandemic led to many unprecedented changes in the way that the NHS is able deliver care, resulting in an uprise of digital solutions. As we adapt to a 'new normal' where in person interaction is limited, extra measures were required to protect both our healthcare workers and the public from COVID-19.

Over the course of 2020, the NHS has been faced with the challenge of adapting for remote healthcare services. The implementation of digital consultation technology was a clear initial course of action. Many practices rapidly increased their use of such tools while those without were able to use platforms such as Skype, WhatsApp and Facetime as a short-term measure. This successfully catered for public demand. Primary care saw a huge increase in remote appointments whilst online patient services including the NHS website and app surged with [registrations growing by 111%](#) and e-prescription services subsequently booming.

“In December 2019, 15% of the 23 million primary care appointments took place digitally. In April 2020, this number tripled, with GP practices reporting delivering 90% of appointments virtually”

- [NHS Digital, 2020](#)

These changes happened at an astonishing pace with fast tracked procurement frameworks enabling the implementation of innovative solutions. The conversation now turns to what services will stay as the threat of COVID-19 reduces.

The chief executive of [NHS Digital](#), Sarah Wilkinson, comments “I think we will see a broader use of tools such as e-triage along with citizens use of technology and remote care. These things are here to stay.”

Whilst other systems will need to be reviewed against a new legal basis set (particularly data sharing), Wilkinson is certain that the NHS will not go back to archaic paper-based processes.

Growing for the future

How technology can help recruit, train and keep people

In 2019 it was announced that [5,000 trainee medics are needed each year](#) to account for the shortfall within the NHS. That GPs are in desperate short supply. And that the number of junior doctors leaving medicine after just two years of service is more than those who stay.

Yet despite the NHS's struggle to attract and retain talent, there has been a sudden spike of interest. Following the notable, high-profile public support for our National Health Service, an increase in health profession applications occurred, matched with a dramatic change to the labour market which opens new doors for potential candidates. Former staff and the recently retired have also shown interest in returning after a call to the frontline during the pandemic.

The NHS recognises the need to build on this momentum and expand their workforce, particularly for matters of urgency including the NHS Test and Trace and winter flu vaccination campaign. The People Plan therefore looks to address the gaps in the healthcare system and focus on both short term and long term recruitment strategies to build a strong, diverse NHS for the future.

Attracting and attaining new recruits

Since COVID-19 there has also been a higher number of applications for education and training opportunities. The chance to recruit these potential candidates into entry-level roles and apprenticeships is profound and will refresh the NHS talent pipelines with a new breed of healthcare professional.

In order to continue attracting - and retaining - these new workers, the NHS must keep up with technological advancements. Millennials and Generation Z have grown up using digital platforms such as Slack, Snapchat and cloud sharing apps to optimise both their personal and working lives. They will therefore have expectations when it comes to the presence of technology in their day to day job.

The NHS will need to consider how to ingrain such innovations into their healthcare practices in order to appeal to these digital natives. The good news is that even minimal changes can have an effect on job efficiency and overall morale - key areas that keep an employee happy in their role.

According to research by Indexa, [96% of junior doctors would feel more comfortable treating patients if they could access medical resources](#) and information via an app. This is particularly useful on busy wards where computer access is limited and time is of the essence. App-based clinical communication is the first step to better interoperability which speeds up the delivery of care and saves doctors crucial time.

These developments will not only be vital for attracting new candidates but to demonstrate advancements to those who have left the profession. The People Plan's focus on encouraging former staff back to the NHS will be bolstered by the uptake of innovation. Adopting game changing platforms will eradicate major stresses - the concerns that caused them to leave in the first place.



Developments in training

Junior doctors especially suffer when it comes to feeling overworked and missing out on vital learning opportunities. Recent research shows that [60% of junior doctors do not feel they have enough time to spend in CPD training](#). Whilst a further 84% believe there needs to be a better integration of digital tools to support improved diagnosis, treatment and patient management.

Thankfully, digital innovations are clearly an important part of the NHS's plan to invest in training. Already in place are plans for technology-enhanced learning that will train medical staff on new ways of working including remote consultations and remote triage. This is increasingly important as we cater for socially distanced restrictions and virtual patient care.

Long term plans are also set out in the NHS Technology Enhanced Learning guidelines which advises for better health technology in education. Computer-based simulations, e-learning apps and simulated patient environments are all proven to improve clinical and practical skills, enabling junior doctors to develop essential knowledge in a method best suited to their learning style.

New state of the art training centres are also testing VR technology on junior doctors undertaking medical specialities such as general surgery or psychiatry. Learning new procedures in a safe, simulation-based environment is boosting doctors' confidence in decision making and diagnosis whilst improving their ability to handle critically ill patients.

The right kind of rostering also plays a valuable part in training top talent. With flexible rotas, junior doctors are able to spend time in different departments and gain visibility of varying specialities. The simple process of automatic scheduling ensures that this is a part of their daily routine, aiding their development of both functional and soft skills.

Conclusion

Digitising the NHS has historically been a drawn out, complicated issue. Yet when the biggest crisis to date hit our health service this year, health tech finally stepped up. The arrival of COVID-19 acted as a force of transformation. New innovations streamlined remote patient care, digital platforms made mental health support accessible and interoperable solutions eased pressures on our doctors. Technology has already begun to rectify pressures that our NHS has suffered for decades.

This is only the beginning for the NHS's new momentum for change. As the People Plan sets out ambitions for a better, modern future, the importance of sustaining such technological advancements is imperative. Further action, focus and innovation will be required to keep up with the pace of the pandemic, through the winter period and into the new normal.

Coming out the other side, the future of health tech is a promising one. Smart pills that monitor patients' response to medication are not far off. Wearable biosensors and advanced analytics that can predict a fall or heightened risk of heart attack are in a not too distant future. The innovations we see today are the first step in an exciting new chapter of healthcare history that benefits both the public and our NHS heroes.



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