

Strengthening and diversifying the dietetic workforce: Invest. Expand. Improve

Introduction:

The NHS and third sector are in a workforce crisis. For over 70 years it has stood as a pillar of health and social care in the UK, providing essential services and care to millions. However, the shortage of NHS staff inclusive of dietitians, alongside obstacles to career advancement directly impact the delivery of quality care. Tackling these challenges is crucial for nurturing a strong and empowered dietetic workforce. Investing in training, creating opportunities for career development, and acknowledging the pivotal role of dietitians in health and social care are essential steps towards building a resilient workforce. This document outlines a multi-faceted approach to ensure a sustainable, skilled, and proud workforce that can meet current and future health and social care needs. The BDA believes that this campaign is not just about adding anonymous numbers to tables, it's about nurturing a workforce that is inclusive, skilled, and motivated—a workforce that is the heart of the NHS and the nation.

Why, the value and our message:

The NHS workforce is the backbone of health and social care delivery. A strong and resilient NHS workforce is essential to meet the growing health care demands of the UK population. An increasing need for quality care, public advice and prevalence of chronic conditions the requirement for qualified health and social care professionals, including dietitians, is higher than ever. An effectively staffed NHS and third sector can provide timely, high-quality care leading to better outcomes for service users and their families or carers, reduced health and social care costs and improved population health. The recent British Social Attitudes survey (2023) across England, Scotland and Wales shows that public opinion and satisfaction with the NHS is at an all-time low, with only 24% satisfied with the provided service. Multiple publications, surveys and opinion polls indicate that the public believe that the government and devolved administrations should increase the funding and staffing for the NHS and third sector. Demonstrating strong public support for investing in the NHS and third sector workforce, in which dietitians play a vital role.

Value of dietetic staff: dietitians are qualified and regulated health professionals that assess, diagnose and treat dietary and nutritional problems at an individual and wider public-health level. Plus, they provide evidence-based nutrition advice, develop personalised nutrition plans and educate service users and their families or carers and the public on healthy eating-habits. By expanding the dietetic workforce, the NHS and third sector can better address the growing burden of diet-related diseases, promote preventive care and support the overall wellbeing of the population.

Strategy: Invest, Expand and Improve.

INVEST:

By investing in the dietetic and support workforce, the government and devolved administrations can build a resilient NHS and third sector that is better equipped to handle future health and social care challenges. UK wide research by data consultant Carnall Farrar (2022) found that investing in the NHS workforce can lead to significant economic returns; with every £1 invested generating £4 in wider economic benefits. A well-equipped and adequately staffed dietetic workforce can adapt to changing health and social care needs with success and provide consistent, high-quality care to all service users, their families or carers.

EXPAND:

The BDA advocates for a comprehensive and four nation approach to protecting and expanding the dietetic workforce. This includes increasing training capacity, attracting diverse and inclusive talent, and creating supportive and appealing career pathways with an emphasis on continued professional development. The Health Foundation (2022) estimated that the NHS workforce gap could reach up to 250,000 by 2030, emphasising the urgency of long-term workforce planning that meets the need of the public and supports trusts and boards to encourage people into the dietetic workforce.

IMPROVE:

Improving working conditions, providing opportunities and access for continual professional development (CPD) and supporting the wellbeing of dietitians will contribute to a more resilient workforce. The NHS staff survey (2022) stated that 44% of English respondents reported feeling unwell due to work-related stress in the past year. Embracing and extending access to technology and innovation will streamline processes and reduce administrative burden on staff, improving their wellbeing and leaving the focus on service-user care. A resilient workforce is not only able to cope but thrive and adapt with the demands of their roles, maintain morale and provide excellent service user care.

Tactics:

- **Increase funding for dietetics education and training:**

To ensure a sustainable pipeline of qualified dietitians, the government and devolved administrations should invest in expanding and improving dietetics courses in higher education institutions. The BDA pre-registration framework identifies the need for sustainable dietetic courses, including the rising number of apprenticeships to attract enough students to build a pipeline of skilled professionals to meet the workforce demands. The Kings Fund (2024) reported a shortage of over 100,000 full-time staff in the NHS in England, emphasising the need to for increased recruiting efforts and therefore expansion and widening the access of courses and apprenticeship routes into dietetics across all four nations in the UK. By investing in dietetics education and training the government and devolved administrations can ensure a steady supply of

qualified dietitians and support workforce to meet the ever-growing demand for nutrition services and help address the overall NHS workforce shortage.

- **Develop clear career progression pathways for dietitians and dietetic support workforce**

Recruitment efforts in the education space should be bolstered by clear career progression to retain the current skilled workforce. The government and devolved administrations should work with us, the NHS, education, industry and third sectors to create distinct and sustainable career pathways for both dietitians and the dietetic support workforce. A survey by the BDA (2023) found that 78% of respondents reported working additional hours to meet demand, 95% of those respondents did so unpaid, highlighting a wide spread need for better working conditions and protected time for continued professional development. Expansion and widening access in all four nations of not only clinical roles but roles within research, education and leadership will aid retention and encourage diversity within the workforce. Offering and promoting clear career progression pathways, like those promised in NHS workforce plans will help retain experienced dietitians and support workforce within the NHS and third sector and in the long-term reduce burnout, and ensure a safe, satisfied and increasingly skilled workforce.

- **Improve recruitment and retention strategies**

Over the past few years there have been plans in the four nations to implement one of the largest recruitment drives in NHS history. The long-term NHS workforce plan in England intends to address the need for significant growth in the health and social care workforce by increasing the dietetic workforce by a projected 14%, while other AHP professions have up to a projected 25% increase. Given the vital service that dietitians provide throughout the clinical and public health settings this 14% increase may not be sufficient to meet the demand for clinical dietetic and nutrition services. To improve this long-term workforce plan in all four nations the government and devolved administrations needs to develop targeted recruitment campaigns to attract diverse and inclusive talent from all walks of life in the dietetics profession. The Kings Fund analysis of NHS staff survey (2024) showed that a mere 26% of staff felt there were enough staff in their trust or board to enable them to carry out their roles suitably. By implementing policies to improve working conditions, job satisfaction and work-life balance such as improved resources and embedding of the NHS preceptorship programme for entry level dietitians, the government and devolved administrations can retain experienced dietitians and support workforce in the NHS and third sector.

- **Recognise the value of dietitians in health and social care and collaborate with the BDA:**

The government, devolved administrations and policy makers should recognise the crucial and valuable role that dietitians and dietetic support workforce play in areas such as preventative and critical care, chronic illness management, public and mental

health and research to name only a few. Studies have shown that interventions by registered dietitians can lead to improved health outcomes, reduced hospital admissions and lower health and social care costs. Many of these dietitians and their support worker colleagues are members here at the BDA. Evidently the government should actively engage with the BDA, seeking our and our member's input on workforce planning, education and continued professional development, and ultimately aligning AHP workforce strategies with NHS goals and service user care objectives. A safe staffing survey by the BDA in 2015 found that 57% of the dietetic workforce felt that their caseload was not safe, a figure that did not change when it was re-surveyed in 2023. Improving engagement between the workforce and government and devolved administrations will ensure that the needs of the dietetic workforce are adequately addressed in policy making and decisions.

WHEN:

The [BDA 2024-2034 strategic plan](#) focuses heavily on the development of a sustainable workforce. With varying timed deadlines of 2027 and 2034 the BDA has a short and long-term plan to develop the workforce we need to serve the public with the greatest of care. This campaign aims to take a similar approach in the short-term it is necessary for the government and devolved administrations to plug the vacancies, especially in the areas where there is little or no service. In the longer term the BDA believes that it is a necessity to double the workforce in acute services and look to take a similar approach in other areas of service such as community. Funding all Allied Health Professions (AHP) specialisms is investing in long-term prevention, increase in care provided to the community and improved public health, it is a moveable feast of possibilities.

Conclusion:

The NHS workforce is at a pivotal point. By implementing these strategies and tactics, we aim to create a resilient, adaptable and supported workforce across all four nations that can continue to provide high-quality care to all. The evidence presented supports the urgent need for government and devolved administrations action in the UK to bolster the dietetic workforce within the NHS and third sector. The protection, investment and expansion of dietetic education, CPD, recruitment and recognition of dietetic value is not only supported by the public and it is an economic benefit. It can enable the government to build a more resilient and world-leading health and social care system, fully equipped to meet the growing needs of the UK population. This campaign is not just about adding anonymous numbers to tables, it's about nurturing a workforce that is inclusive, skilled, and motivated—a workforce that is the heart of the NHS and the nation.

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