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# A history of the NHS workforce in England – a timeline 1948-2023

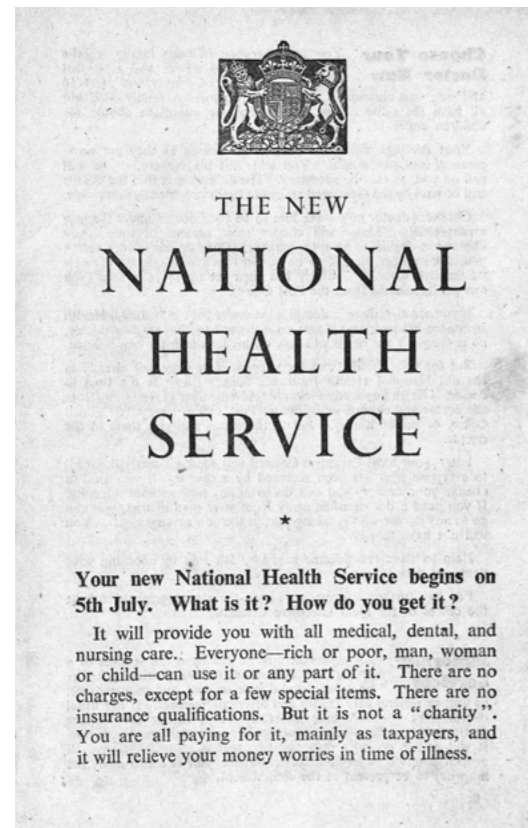
This timeline provides a historical overview of selected events, reports, policies, legislation, implementation, and achievements applicable to the evolution of the NHS workforce in England across the last 75 years since its creation in 1948.

All URL links are current to April 2024.

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## 1940s

— **1948** The [National Health Service \(NHS\)](#) is launched in England and Wales on 5th July, when the [National Health Service Act 1946](#) comes into force. It employs [144,000 members of staff](#) including doctors, nurses, pharmacists, opticians, and dentists, but not GPs who initially remain independent. **Government:** 🇹🇺 **Labour**

**1949** A depleted labour market after WWII prompts the Government to begin a [huge recruitment drive](#) throughout the Commonwealth countries to recruit staff to the NHS resulting in a large influx of nurses from the Caribbean in the 1950s, as part of the ‘Windrush’ generation.

**Government:** 🇹🇺 **Labour**



## 1950s

**1956** The first national administrative training scheme begins – the [NHS Graduate Management Training Scheme](#). It’s offered as a 2-year intensive training programme and will produce many of the NHS’s future senior leaders, including Sir David Nicholson and Simon Stevens.

**Government:** 🇹🇺 **Conservative**

**1957** Commissioned to examine the future supply of doctors in the NHS, the [Willink Report](#) concludes that too many doctors are being trained and proposes a 12% reduction. This report is believed in retrospect to be responsible for the severe shortage of junior medical staff throughout the 1960s. **Government:** 🇬🇧 **Conservative**

## 1960s

**1960** The [Professions Supplementary to Medicine Act 1960](#) names 7 regulatory bodies for chiropodists, dieticians, medical laboratory technicians, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, radiographers and remedial gymnasts working in the NHS. Each would maintain a state register, approve training courses, supervise training institutions, and remove from the register those guilty of misconduct. They will be supervised by the new Council for Professions Supplementary to Medicine (CPSM). **Government:** 🇬🇧 **Conservative**

**1966** Negotiations for the [Family Doctor Charter](#) translates into a new contract for GPs. It introduces major changes to improving pay and working hours and by subsidising premises and staffing, which were to have lasting effects on general practice organisation and structure. **Government:** 🇬🇧 **Labour**

**1966** The [Salmon Report](#) paves the way for a new senior nursing staff grading structure, heralding the end of the 'matron' and the creation of a 'chief nursing officer' in every hospital. **Government:** 🇬🇧 **Labour**




Henry Willink, Chairman of the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Future Numbers of Medical Practitioners and Intakes of Medical Students  
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British Medical Association headquarters, Tavistock Square  
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# 1970s

● **1971** The [British Medical Association](#) applies to be an officially recognised trade union for doctors. Their members would strike for the first time in 1975, to maintain junior doctors' extra pay received for long hours. **Government:**  **Conservative**


**1974** The [NHS Reorganisation Act 1973](#) comes into effect, heralding the first major structural and administrative reform of the NHS since its formation in 1948. It shifts towards a more unified health structure with the Government setting the strategic direction for the NHS.

**Government:**  **Conservative**



Royal College of Nursing headquarters, Cavendish Square  
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● **1976** The [Royal College of Nursing](#) registers as a trade union. They will go on to change their rules in 1995 to allow industrial action without harming patients. **Government:**  **Labour**


**1979** The [Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors Act 1979](#) establishes the Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting (UKCC) responsible for education, training, regulation and disciplinary action. It also requires the establishment and maintenance of a single professional register – by which time, [10-12% of the nursing workforce are male](#). UKCC will become the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) in 2002. **Government:**  **Labour**

# 1980s

**1982** [3-year vocational training of GPs](#) becomes mandatory. By the mid-1980s, general practice would become one of most popular medical career choices with one-third of GPs being women, reflecting the proportion of women in medical school at the time.

**Government:**  **Conservative**

**1983** UKCC publishes the first code of conduct for nurses – the '[Code of Professional Practice](#)'. Although updated since, these standards still hold [today](#). **Government:**  **Conservative**

**1983** The [Medical Act 1983](#) provides the current statutory basis for the General Medical Council's (GMC) registration and postgraduate training functions for doctors. **Government:**  **Conservative**


**1983** An independent [NHS Pay Review Body](#) is set-up to advise Government on national pay awards for NHS nursing staff and allied health professionals, [still in existence today](#).


**Government:**  **Conservative**

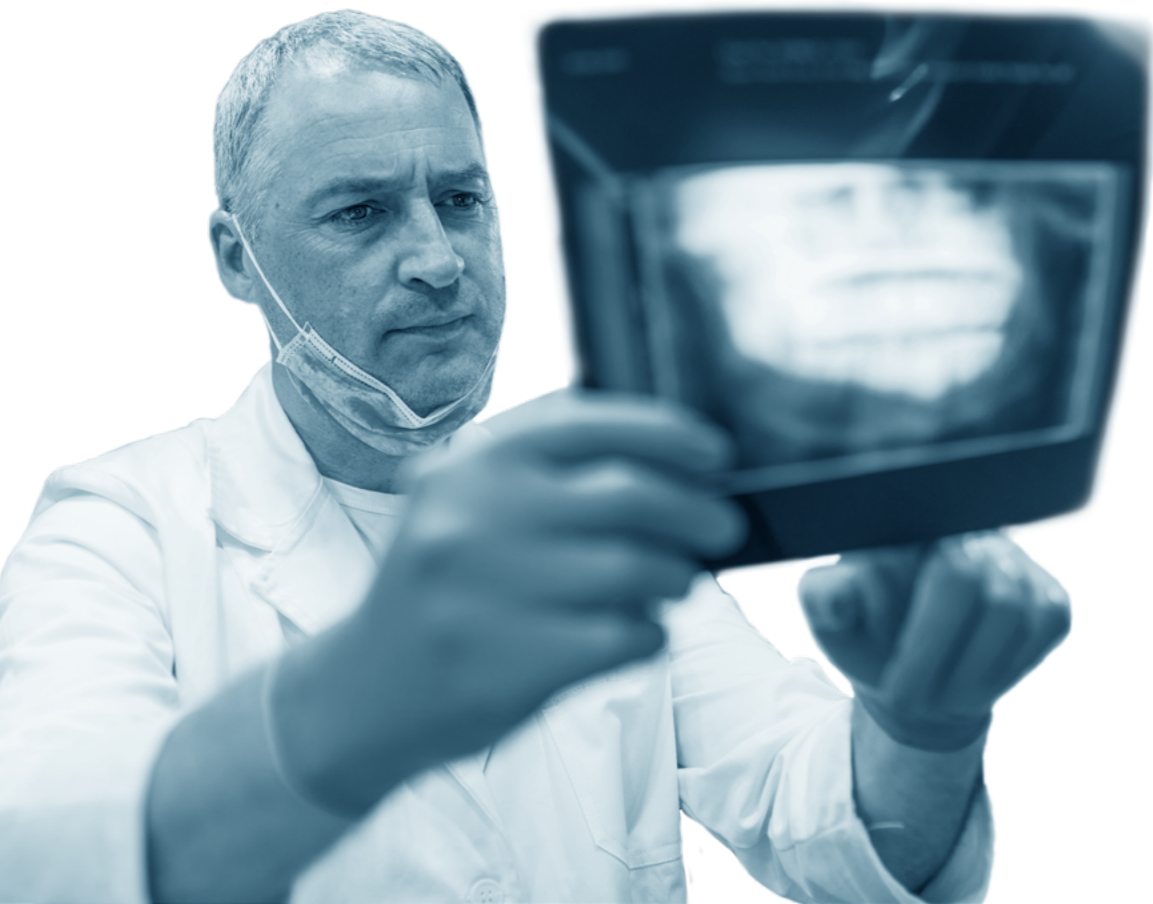




**1983** The [Griffiths Report](#) introduces general management to the NHS, with governing boards and chief executives becoming commonplace. **Government:**  **Conservative**

**1986** UKCC publishes its proposals for the reform of nursing education and training – [Project 2000](#). Widely rolled out across the UK from the early 1990s, nurse training largely moves from hospitals to a university-based system of education. State registered nurses and state enrolled nurses will become registered general nurses and (unregistered) healthcare assistants respectively. **Government:**  **Conservative**

**1988** The [first major overhaul of nurses' grading structure](#) since 1948 is introduced, based on paying nurses for the work they do rather than a rigid job title. A controversial system that led to claims by 1,000s of nurses that they were placed on the wrong grade. **Government:**  **Conservative**




# 1990s

**1990** Following proposals in the [‘Promoting better health’ 1987 White paper](#), the Government instigates performance-related payments on GPs to encourage efficiency and boost preventive medicine, leading to changes in the [GP contract](#) and major increases in the skills and size of primary healthcare teams.

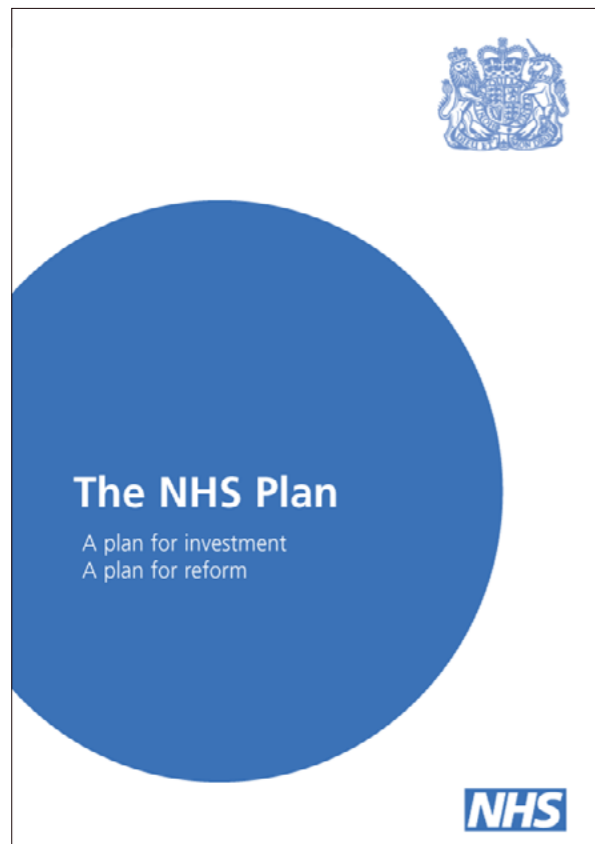
**Government:**  **Conservative**

**1991** The [first nurse practitioner programme](#) is introduced by Dr Barbara Stilwell. This role would develop dramatically during the 1990s, in response to a shortage of junior doctors.

**Government:**  **Conservative**

**1997** The [NHS \(Primary Care Act\) 1997](#) enables new possibilities for delivering primary care including establishing mechanisms for the direct employment of GPs (‘salaried GPs’) rather than self-employment. **Government:**  **Conservative**





# 2000s

— **2000** The [NHS Plan](#) sets out the Labour government's 10-year modernisation programme to transform the NHS, by improving services through performance targets, and developing patient choice. In addition to expanding the current workforce, for the first time, all NHS employers will be assessed against a new [Improving Working Lives \(IWL\) Standard](#) to provide flexible and supportive working practices.

**Government:** 🌹 Labour

**2001** With the continued influxes of overseas medical staff across the decades particularly nurses, the UK becomes the first country to implement an ethical '[Code of Practice for the international recruitment of healthcare professionals](#)' (revised 2004). **Government:** 🌹 Labour

**2001** [Skills for Health](#) is set-up to support local and national workforce development, recruitment, and retention initiatives across the UK, helping to improve staff skills, jobs, and roles. **Government:** 🌹 Labour

**2002** The [Health Professions Council \(HPC\)](#) is established by the [Health Professions Order 2001](#) to replace the CPSM. It's the UK's first multi-professional regulator and now regulates 15 allied health professions as the renamed [Health and Care Professions Council \(HCPC\)](#).

**Government:** 🌹 Labour





**2002** The [Wanless Review](#) on the long-term funding needs of the NHS concludes that the UK must expect to devote a significantly larger share of its national income to healthcare over the next 20 years and that this investment must be carefully targeted. It leads to unprecedented increases in NHS funding over the next 5 years with subsequent NHS staff pay rises, changes in junior doctors' hours, and rising drug costs immediately swallowing much of the extra money available.

**Government:**  **Labour**

**2003** One of the largest workforce surveys in the world, the [NHS Staff Survey in England](#) begins to collect data annually on the experience and wellbeing of healthcare staff (excluding primary care).

**Government:**  **Labour**

**2003** The first [physician associates](#) are formally introduced in the NHS to address medical workforce shortages, particularly doctors.

**Government:**  **Labour**

**2004** '[Modernising Medical Careers](#)' is published, extensively reforming postgraduate medical education and training for doctors. It replaces the Senior House Officer and Registrar training grades with a redesigned training programme involving 2-years general Foundation training followed by 3-7 years of Specialty or GP training.

**Government:**  **Labour**





**2004** [NHS Employers](#) is created to negotiate with unions on behalf of employers in the NHS and to support them with workforce issues.

**Government:** 🌹 **Labour**

**2004** The [Agenda for Change \(AfC\) agreement](#) is implemented as a new single system of pay, grading and conditions of service for NHS staff (except doctors, dentists, and senior managers), to support the Government's aims in increasing recruitment and retention of staff. It's accompanied by the new [NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework \(KSF\)](#) to support the production of a personal development plan for each staff member. **Government:** 🌹 **Labour**

**2009** Patients' and staff's rights and responsibilities are set out in a new [NHS Constitution for England](#) (updated in [2023](#)), replacing the [1991 Patient's Charter](#) which had been criticised for being unrealistic and for raising patient expectations. **Government:** 🌹 **Labour**



**2009** The Royal College of Physicians publishes '[Women and medicine: the future](#)'. Their report found that women provide 60% of a full-time equivalent medical role, compared with 80% for men, but that men still hold most of the senior posts. **Government:** 🌹 **Labour**

**2009** The [European Working Time Directive](#) is extended to trainee doctors, limiting them to working 48 hours per week. There are concerns that their training programme will be hindered due to limited clinical exposure and experience, as well as impacting workforce capacity of nursing staff. **Government:** 🌹 **Labour**

# 2010s

**2013** The recommendations of the [Francis public inquiry](#) into failures in care at Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust leads to widespread changes to guidance and regulation of services, patient safety, and culture in the NHS.

**Government:**  **Conservative** /  **Liberal Democrat**

**2013** The [Health and Social Care Act 2012](#) comes into force, resulting in the largest and most complex legislative reorganisation of the NHS. Commissioning is passed to the newly established NHS England at a national level and GP-led clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) at a local level. [Health Education England \(HEE\)](#) (established in 2012) takes on responsibility for planning, recruiting, educating, and training the health workforce. **Government:**  **Conservative** /  **Liberal Democrat**

**2013** The [Cavendish Review](#) proposes that healthcare assistants and social care support workers undergo the same basic training and gain a standard 'certificate of fundamental care' before they can care for people unsupervised.

**Government:**  **Conservative** /  **Liberal Democrat**



Cannock Chase Hospital, Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust, in Cannock, Staffordshire, England

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**2015** The [‘Freedom to speak up’ review](#) establishes processes for staff to raise clinical safety concerns or make complaints, including the creation of a ‘Freedom To Speak Up Guardian’ (FTSUG) in every NHS trust, supported by a national independent officer (the ‘National Guardian’).

**Government:**  **Conservative** /  **Liberal Democrat**

**2015** The [Workforce Race Equality Standard \(WRES\)](#) is mandated through the NHS standard contract. Similarly, the [Workforce Disability Equality Standard \(WDES\)](#) would come into force in 2019.

**Government:**  **Conservative** /  **Liberal Democrat**

**2015** [Lord Rose’s review of NHS leadership](#) recommends reducing the regulatory burden on frontline leaders and instead, focus on the development and recognition of leadership qualities across the whole NHS workforce.


**Government:**  **Conservative** /  **Liberal Democrat**


**2015** The Government temporarily eases [restrictions for recruiting nurses from outside of the European Economic Area \(EEA\)](#), adding them to the shortage occupation list. This measure would become permanent in 2016 following evidence of a UK-wide shortage of nurses. After the UK EU membership referendum in June 2016, [nurse applicants from countries in Europe would crash by 96%](#) due to uncertainty around Brexit further exasperating the problem.


**Government:**  **Conservative** /  **Liberal Democrat**


**2015** In their [2015 spending review](#), the Government changes the system of funding for student nurses, midwives and allied health professionals from NHS bursaries to student loans. It would lead to a [23% reduction](#) in the number of nursing degree applicants in 2017, the first cohort not to receive the bursary.

**Government:**  **Conservative** /  **Liberal Democrat**

**2016** A [new junior doctors' contract](#) is agreed providing additional safeguards for safe working hours and time out of training, following a bitter dispute including the first ever withdrawal of routine and emergency care during strike action. **Government:**  **Conservative**

**2017** The first 1,000 trainee [nursing associates](#) begin their 2-year programmes, marking HEE's creation of a new role bridging the gap between healthcare assistants and registered nurses as recommended by the [2015 'Shape of caring' review](#). **Government:**  **Conservative**

**2017** [HelpForce](#) is set-up aiming to double volunteering to support NHS staff and patients by 2021. It will work with 12 acute NHS hospital trusts to develop new volunteer roles and create a best practice model for volunteering. **Government:**  **Conservative**


**2019** The [Topol Review](#) explores how to prepare the NHS workforce for a 'digital future' and provides recommendations on embracing innovative technologies such as genomics, digital medicine, artificial intelligence, and robotics to improve services. **Government:**  **Conservative**







# 2020s

**2020** [The NHS Volunteer Responders recruitment initiative](#) is launched in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to help 1.5 million people shielding due to underlying health conditions. It [recruits 750,000 people](#) in just 2 days exceeding its initial 250,000 target. The scheme will be [expanded 2 weeks later](#) to offer support to frontline health and social care staff. **Government:**  **Conservative**

**2020** NHS England and the NHS Confederation launch the [NHS Race and Health Observatory](#), an independent body to investigate and provide practical support to the NHS in eradicating ethnic health inequalities including in the healthcare workforce. **Government:**  **Conservative**


**2020** Following on from an [2019 interim report](#), the final [NHS People Plan](#) is published but falls short of the comprehensive workforce strategy promised in the [NHS Long Term Plan](#). Instead, it discusses building on the new ways of working introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the new [NHS People Promise](#). **Government:**  **Conservative**


**2020** A new system of support for nursing, midwifery and allied health profession degree students – [the NHS Learning Support Fund \(LSF\)](#) – is introduced alongside student loans. **Government:**  **Conservative**





**2020** NHS England prioritises £15 million of national funding (expanded to £19 million in 2022) to NHS trusts to recruit [medical support workers](#), a new role aimed at medically qualified UK residents who are not registered with the GMC, such as international medical graduates and refugee doctors.

**Government:**  **Conservative**

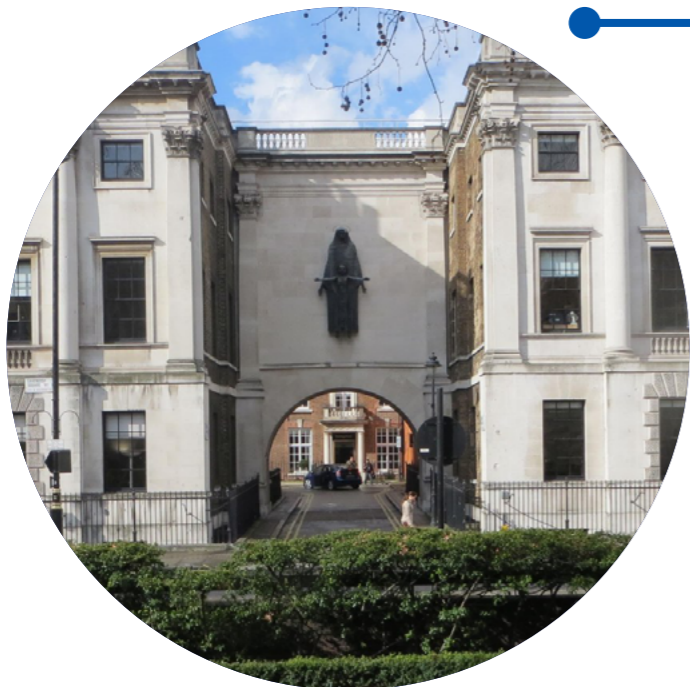
**2021** The Health and Social Care Committee's inquiry into [‘Workforce burnout and resilience in the NHS and social care’](#) learns of the scale and impact of working during the COVID-19 pandemic on NHS staff. **Government:**  **Conservative**

**2022** The [Professional Qualifications Act 2022](#) includes provisions for a new framework for the recognition of overseas qualifications in the UK to be implemented to replace EU-derived law post-Brexit. A year later, the [Dentists, Dental Care Professionals, Nurses, Nursing Associates and Midwives \(International Registrations\) Order 2023](#) will come into force. **Government:**  **Conservative**

**2022** The [Messenger Review](#) reports on the best ways to strengthen leadership and management across health and adult social care, after criticising the normalisation of bullying and discrimination in the sectors. **Government:**  **Conservative**


**2023** The Health and Social Care Committee's report on [‘Digital transformation in the NHS’](#) also outlines the issues around preparing the NHS workforce such as staff involvement, changing roles and training. **Government:**  **Conservative**






The King's Fund's home at 11 Cavendish Square, London  
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**2023** A [King's Fund report](#) comparing the NHS with the healthcare systems of other countries notes that the UK has “strikingly low numbers” of doctors and nurses per person compared to its peer countries. **Government:**  **Conservative**

**2023** The first-ever comprehensive [NHS Long Term Workforce Plan](#) is published. Backed by an additional £2.4 billion in Government funding up to 2028/29, it sets out how the NHS will address existing and future workforce challenges over the next 15 years. **Government:**  **Conservative**

**2023** Following a wave of industrial action in 2022-23 including strikes by nurses and doctors, the [Strikes \(Minimum Service Levels\) Act 2023](#) is passed, which will enable the Government to make regulations setting out the minimum service required during strikes in certain sectors, including the health services.

**Government:**  **Conservative**

**2023** NHS England launches its first [sexual safety organisational charter](#) listing 10 core principles and actions to help NHS organisations achieve a zero-tolerance approach in their workplace.

**Government:**  **Conservative**

**2023** The [Nuffield Trust](#) proposes a 10-point plan to improve workforce retention, after it reports a significant dropout rate during training or soon after joining the NHS.

**Government:**  **Conservative**