



# National SPF Stocktake 2020/21

September 2021

## BACKGROUND

The SPF represents a key strength of the service in its unique partnership between employers and the trade unions working collaboratively with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the arm's length bodies (ALBs), notably NHS England and NHS Improvement (NHSEI), Health Education England (HEE).

To ensure the SPF continues to support the NHS effectively, partners agreed, following the stocktake 2016, that the SPF should complete a stocktake every two years, alternating between an internal review and one completed by an independent organisation. IPA completed the last external stocktake in 2019.

In 2016, partners also agreed that a heat check would be completed in between stocktakes. A heat check was due to be completed in summer 2020, but because the NHS and SPF focus was on the COVID-19 pandemic, this was not undertaken. Instead, it was agreed that an internal stocktake would take place – to be carried out in spring 2021 - when it was anticipated the pressures of the pandemic would have abated. This also represented a full year of partnership working through the pandemic.

This report is split into six sections.

- Section one - SPF ways of working
- Section two – SPF policy engagement
- Section three – SPF communications
- Section four – The results of a survey of members of the national SPF
- Section five – Actions from the 2019 SPF stocktake and follow up activity
- Section six – 2021 SPF stocktake recommendations.

This report covers the period from 19 March 2020, when the Wider Group met virtually and the first in-depth discussions on the NHS response to the pandemic were held, up until the end of March 2021. The author recognises that the SPF will continue COVID-19 related activity. However, the end of the financial year, appeared an appropriate cut off point to review how the SPF had performed in supporting the NHS response to COVID-19. Also, it was at the end of March 2021 that the NHS response level was reduced from four to three - so management of the pandemic went from being co-ordinated nationally to co-ordination at a regional level.

# SECTION ONE - SPF WAYS OF WORKING

## Introduction

During the pandemic, the SPF rapidly adapted its ways of working to increase access between employers, trade unions and the Minister for Care and SPF chair, Helen Whately, and workforce and system leaders from DHSC and the ALBs, including NHSEI, HEE and Public Health England (PHE).

## Meeting Schedule

The national SPF, in response to the pandemic, started meeting online, instead of face to face, and met far more frequently. This enabled the sharing of key intelligence with employers and trade unions, timely discussions, and prompt escalation and action.

## COVID-19 SPF Engagement Group

A new SPF group was established called the COVID-19 SPF Engagement Group. This had an expanded membership to the Strategic Group, for example, incorporating representatives from Unite and the GMB. The Group's first meeting was 30 March 2020. It met weekly up to 21 July 2020. After which, meetings were fortnightly. There were 30 COVID-19 SPF Engagement Group meetings in the period covered by this stocktake.

The Group focused on pandemic related workforce issues including the NHS pandemic response, infection prevention and control, including personal protective equipment (PPE), NHS Test and Trace, staff deployment, staff risk assessments, racial inequalities, and the COVID-19 vaccination programme. It also linked into the NHS Staff Council Terms and Conditions COVID-19 working group and received updates on pandemic related national directions/communications to the NHS.

## Strategic Group

As the NHS focus was on the pandemic response, national SPF activity was channelled through the new COVID-19 SPF Engagement Group and the existing Wider Group. As a result, the Strategic Group was put on hold in March 2020. As the pandemic evolved and service priorities evolved with it, the SPF co-chairs agreed on 14 September 2020 that this Group should be reinstated with its original membership. The Strategic Group focused on policy that was not exclusively pandemic related. This included the HR Futures programme, the implications of the spending review for the workforce, NHS People Plan implementation, and NHS recovery. Meetings resumed in November 2020, monthly up to January 2021, then every two months. There were five Strategic Group meetings in the period covered by this stocktake.

## Wider Group

The SPF Wider Group is normally chaired by the Minister for Care, Helen Whately, during a typical year it would meet three times. To increase partnership working at a national level and to enable all NHS trade unions to be involved in the NHS response to the pandemic, the Wider Group began to meet fortnightly. These new arrangements commenced in April 2020. Partners then agreed to move to monthly meetings from July 2020 and every two months from 2021. There were 12 Wider Group meetings during the period covered by this report. Because of the increased frequency, the Minister was not always able to chair the meetings but she did chair many of the meetings, particularly during the height of the first wave of the pandemic. In this case a senior member of DHSC workforce directorate covered this role. The Minister's demonstrable commitment to social partnership working nationally has been valued by partners.

## SPF COVID-19 focussed workshops

Workshops that enabled more detailed partner engagement in specific topics were also held during this period. These included workshops on use of PPE, held on 21 April 2020; COVID-19 testing, held 1 May 2020; the NHS COVID-19 App, held 4 August 2020; the NHS People Plan, held 15 December 2020 and the COVID-19 vaccination programme, held 20 January 2021.

## Workforce Issues Groups (WIG)

The WIG continued to meet monthly, giving partners a regular opportunity to discuss in more detail specific workforce issues that emerged during the NHS response to the pandemic. The key areas of focus for the Group were national resources to support the health and wellbeing of NHS staff, the digital staff passport, and the enabling staff movement toolkit. There were 12 WIG meetings in the period covered by this report.

## Violence Reduction Subgroup

The work of the Subgroup was moved back into the WIG during the early stages of the pandemic. The Subgroup was reinstated in July 2020 for a four-hour workshop to discuss activity such as the Ministry of Justice consultation on doubling the maximum penalty for assaults on emergency workers and to engage colleagues on the new Violence Prevention and Reduction Standard. A second Violence Reduction Subgroup meeting was held in November 2020 and featured updates on the Standard, which was codeveloped by the SPF, and the body worn camera pilots.

## Additional engagement

In addition to the workshops there were bespoke SPF briefings. These include a briefing held on 25 March 2020 on permissions to enable staff to move and work in new clinical areas during the pandemic; briefing on testing laboratories (held 8 July, 23 September, and 4 November 2020), fitness to practice changes, and bureaucracy busting.

## Maintaining positive industrial relations

An industrial relations statement was agreed by the SPF and published on the SPF website in April 2020 and refreshed in July 2020. These stated that partnership working in organisations may need to be streamlined and organisational change, employment processes and industrial disputes put on hold.

As of 31 March 2021, the April statement had been downloaded 1,042 times and the July statement 796 times. This demonstrates the numbers who referred to the statements and that they were being used. The statements sought to help employers and trade unions focus on tackling the pandemic during the first wave.

There was a move from the England-wide arrangements put in place to support the NHS during the first wave of the pandemic to locally led approaches based on local circumstances in the second wave. This reflected the change in situation and the need for greater local flexibility. The SPF published a statement in September 2020 which explained the change in approach. This included guidance for employers on maintaining positive employee relations in progressing HR processes and organisational change.

## SECTION TWO - SPF POLICY ENGAGEMENT

### NHS response to the pandemic and recovery

During the period covered by this stocktake, through the SPF, partners engaged with workforce and system leaders on issues related to the NHS response to the pandemic and recovery.

These included:

- Keith Willett, Medical Director, Acute Care and Preparedness and National Strategic Incident Director for COVID-19 for the NHS
- John Stewart, Director of Specialised Commissioning
- Matthew Winn, Director of Community Health, NHSEI
- Mark Brandreth, Chief Executive, Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital NHS Foundation Trust and National Lead on Restoration of Non-COVID-19 activity
- Ted Baker, Chief Inspector of Hospitals, Care Quality Commission
- Jacquie White, Director - National System Transformation Group, NHS England
- Em Wilkinson-Brice, Deputy Chief People Officer, NHSEI
- Tom Simons, Chief HR & OD Officer, NHSEI.

### Infection prevention and control including PPE

An SPF PPE workshop took place on 21 April 2020. Partners met virtually with Susan Hopkins, Joint Medical Advisor PHE, Emily Lawson, Chief Commercial Officer and Lead for the Mass Vaccination Programme NHSEI and Una Bennett, Chief Executive of the Standards and Testing Agency, to get answers to key questions on the supply of PPE and the level of PPE that should be used in specific clinical procedures.

Key messages from the workshop were published on the SPF website, promoted using SPF communications and shared in regional SPFs. These messages helped reassure trade unions and employers on the action being taken to increase levels of PPE. The messages also requested:

- Trade union statutory health and safety representatives be consulted in good time in relation to PPE, including on policies and risks.
- The sharing of local risk management strategy/plans particularly relating to PPE with trade unions.
- Early notification to local trade unions of deviation from or change to established plans or formal guidance.
- Provision of local risk assessments where requested.
- The establishment of local mechanisms for trade unions to escalate to employers any PPE related concerns raised by their members.

The SPF continued to engage with workforce leaders on PPE, including:

- Lord Paul Deighton, Government PPE lead
- Selvin Brown, Director, PPE Policy and Engagement, DHSC
- Peter Howitt, Director of PPE supply, DHSC.

In January 2021, following a request from trade union members of the COVID-19 SPF Engagement Group, Sara Gorton and Rebecca Smith the co-chairs of the Group wrote to Susan Hopkins, Test and Trace and PHE Joint Medical Advisor, and Ruth May, Chief Nursing Officer, NHS England to ask whether PHE, along with NHS England, DHSC and the public health bodies from the devolved nations, had reviewed or planned to review COVID-19: Guidance on Infection prevention and control, as a result of the alpha variant of the Coronavirus.

The co-chairs received a helpful response, which stated that the guidance 'has been updated to reflect the most up-to-date scientific understanding of how to prevent and control COVID-19 infection.' The letter also stated that 'Following extensive clinical and scientific review, no changes to the recommendations, including PPE, have been made in response to the new variant strains at this stage. However, this position will remain under constant review.'

Information regarding the correspondence was published on the SPF website, along with a message to employers highlighting the importance of working with trade union health and safety leads to address staff concerns re IPC and PPE. This was featured in the SPF bulletin.

## NHS Test & Trace

A COVID-19 testing workshop was held virtually on 1 May 2020 and was led by John Newton, Director of Health Improvement, PHE, Nicola Hunt, COVID-19 Testing Lead, NHSEI, Deputy Chief Scientific Officer at NHSEI Angela Douglas, and DHSC Director for Testing, Kathy Hall. The leads updated on the progress of the testing strategy. This included capacity, turnaround times, access, and effectiveness, as well as reflections on current results of testing on staff. Key points from the testing meeting were published and promoted in the SPF bulletin and shared in regional SPFs. These helped reassure trade unions and employers on the action being taken to increase testing capacity.

During the period covered by this report, partners also engaged with the following workforce leads on testing policy:

- Ben Dyson, Policy Director, Test and Trace, DHSC
- Madeleine Percival, Deputy Director for Contact Tracing Policy DHSC
- Dido Harding, Head of the NHS Test and Trace programme.

At the July 2020, SPF Wider Group meeting Simon Thompson, Managing Director of the COVID-19 App updated on the App and plans to test it before it was launched. Following this meeting

there was an SPF workshop on the App held in August 2020. This workshop enabled partners to contribute to the development of the App and flag issues to consider.

Once the App was launched, the SPF requested additional information from the App team on use of the App in a healthcare setting. Further guidance was produced as a result. This was promoted in the SPF bulletin.

During the period of the stocktake report, the national SPF issued the following communications to publicise key information from the testing programme/NHS Test and Trace including:

- An article to encourage essential workers who have COVID-19 symptoms to book a test for themselves and their household via a new online portal.
- A letter to NHS trusts from the Chief Nursing Officer, Medical Director and Director of Emergency and Elective Care describing the updated approach to asymptomatic testing for staff.
- NHSEI guidance on lateral flow testing for asymptomatic staff.

## Staff deployment

At the 7 April 2020 COVID-19 meeting, the Group discussed a letter to NHS HR directors from Prerana Issar, NHS Chief People Officer on deploying NHS staff safely. The meeting recognised the importance of involving staff and trade unions in redeployment discussions. NHSEI, along with HEE and other partners, had published a guide in April 2020 on deploying staff safely which summarised key considerations for safe redeployment of staff and deployment of those staff temporarily supporting the NHS. This included information on the importance of working with trade unions. The SPF issued a position statement welcoming the guidance. The statement was featured in the SPF bulletin.

There was further SPF engagement on staff deployment with the following policy leads:

- Andrew Foster, Managing Director, the NHS Leadership Academy
- Mark Radford, Chief Nurse, HEE
- Neil Churchill, Director for Experience, Participation and Equalities at NHS England
- Andrew Saffron, Chief of Staff, Nightingale Hospitals Programme, NHSEI
- John Drew, Director for Staff Experience and Engagement, NHSEI.

The SPF also publicised a statement from Mark Radford, Chief Nurse, HEE to student nurses, giving assurance on pay and training arrangements for those who volunteered to support the NHS's fight against COVID-19.

## COVID-19 Vaccination Programme

Through the COVID-19 SPF Engagement Group, partners were able to engage with Jonathan Leach, Programme Medical Director for the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme, Emily Lawson, Chief Commercial Officer and Lead for the Mass Vaccination Programme NHSEI, Tom Simons, Chief HR & OD Officer at NHSEI and Mark Radford, Chief Nurse at HEE, on the COVID-19 vaccination programme. This engagement enabled partners to understand, support and promote the staff-facing parts of the campaign.

In response to requests from partners, the SPF organised a standalone briefing on the vaccination programme, which took place on 20 January 2021. Jonathan Leach, Wei Shen Lim, member of the Joint Committee on Vaccine and Immunisation, Mark Radford, and Tom Simons, joined the group to update on the programme and address questions and concerns raised by partners. Key comms from the meeting were made available via the SPF website.

Marketing resources from PHE to promote uptake of the vaccine and a letter from NHSEI to healthcare workforce leaders, providing clear operational guidance on vaccinating frontline health and social care workers against COVID-19 were promoted in the SPF bulletin. The SPF bulletin also featured information to clarify that sub-contracted staff yet to receive their vaccine should speak to their host NHS employer about arranging their job.

## NHS staff health and wellbeing

Throughout the period covered by this stocktake, the WIG was involved in discussions on the development and launch of national resources to support the health and wellbeing of NHS staff – engaging with:

- Sonya Wallbank, Head of Culture Transformation, NHSEI
- John Drew, Director for Staff Experience and Engagement, NHSEI
- Steve Lee, Head of Health and Wellbeing, NHSEI
- Adam Turner, Improving Health and Wellbeing, NHSEI
- Laura Tyrell, Programme Manager, NHSEI.

The WIG and its Violence Reduction Subgroup had a pivotal role in the development of NHSEI's national Violence Prevention and Reduction Standard for NHS organisations which was published on 2 January 2021 and jointly branded as an NHSEI/SPF "product". The Standard provides a framework that supports a safe and secure working environment for NHS staff, safeguarding them against abuse, aggression, and violence. The Standard was promoted in the SPF bulletin.

The WIG contributed to a NHSEI toolkit aimed at helping NHS organisations to promote a culture of civility and respect in the workplace. The toolkit was launched in January 2021, housed on the SPF website, and promoted in the SPF bulletin.

Additional engagement on programmes to support the health and wellbeing of NHS staff took place in COVID-19 SPF Engagement Group and Wider Group meetings with:

- John Drew, Director for Staff Experience and Engagement, NHSEI
- Zoe Evans, Head of Staff Engagement, NHSEI
- Henrietta Hughes, National Guardian for the NHS
- Em Wilkinson-Brice, Deputy Chief People Officer, NHSEI.

During the period of the stocktake report, the national SPF promoted the following NHS staff health and wellbeing resources/information:

- A support hotline.
- Free health and wellbeing apps.
- NHSEI wellbeing webinars.
- A dedicated bereavement support line.
- Guidance on carrying out risk assessments.
- Guidance on how key workers may approach difficult conversations about their role in the pandemic with children and other family members.
- The Liberate meditation app which offered culturally sensitive and diverse meditations curated for the BAME community.
- An infographic, which gave simple and concise information on the impact of bullying in the NHS.
- A range of interactive events, open and available for all NHS staff, as part of a national financial health and wellbeing offer being led by NHSEI.
- Resources from HEE to support NHS staff in raising issues such as patient safety.
- Information on the NHS People website to support NHS staff with unpaid caring responsibilities outside of work.
- Free online learning modules on establishing a just and learning culture in an organisation.
- The second module of a new e-learning package for managers to support them to foster a speaking up culture in their teams.
- Guidance for staff who were clinically extremely vulnerable.

## Supporting Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) NHS staff

On behalf of NHSEI, Kamlesh Khunti, Professor of Primary Care Diabetes & Vascular Medicine, University of Leicester and an expert working group at the University of Leicester developed a Risk Reduction Framework for NHS Staff at risk of COVID-19. Partners on the SPF contributed to the development of the framework through providing feedback on draft versions. The purpose of the framework was to support employers protect their workforce and maximise the ability of the NHS to deal with current pressures. The Framework was promoted in the SPF bulletin.

There was further engagement in the SPF throughout the pandemic on this topic with the following policy leads:

- Ines Campos-Matos, Public Health Consultant and Head of Migration Health, PHE
- Kevin Fenton, London Regional Director, PHE
- Prerana Issar, Chief People Officer, NHSEI
- Em Wilkinson-Brice, Deputy Chief People Officer, NHSEI
- Nikita Kanani, Director of Primary Care, NHSEI
- Dr Naeem Ahmed, Consultant Radiologist at Chelsea & Westminster NHS Foundation Trust who led NHSEI's work on risk assessments for vulnerable staff - following publication of the report into the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on BAME staff
- Habib Naqvi, Director of the NHS Race and Health Observatory
- Jenni Douglas-Todd, Director of Inclusion and Equality, NHSEI.

The SPF also publicised relevant information on this topic, including:

- A PHE report on understanding the impact of COVID-19 on BAME communities, which Kevin Fenton led on.
- An SPF statement, featured in the SPF bulletin, which encouraged a partnership approach to tackling racial inequalities in the NHS and the sharing of best practice.

## NHS People Plan

The 14 July 2020 meeting of the COVID-19 SPF Engagement Group enabled employers and trade unions to engage further in the development of the NHS People Plan. At the meeting, partners highlighted the importance of connecting the plan with phase three of the NHS COVID-19 response and welcomed the ambition for increased opportunities for flexible working. They acknowledged that workforce shortages would need to be addressed for flexible working to become a reality. Partners also stressed the need for clarity in the plan on organisational, system and national responsibilities and that the plan should highlight the importance of employers and systems engaging staff and trade unions when developing and implementing system change.

Following publication of the NHS People Plan on 30 July 2020, the SPF issued a response and promoted useful resources to help with action planning. The SPF continued to engage with policy leads on the implementation of the People Plan through COVID-19 SPF Engagement Group meetings and an SPF workshop on People Plan metrics held in December 2020.

## SECTION THREE - SPF COMMUNICATIONS

In April 2020, the national SPF published a new web page on COVID-19 to share important information on related NHS workforce issues and provide updates on SPF activity in response to the pandemic. During the period of the stocktake review, the COVID-19 web page had been viewed 2,776 times.

During the period of this stocktake, 14 SPF bulletins were published. This compares with six bulletins published in a similar period in 2019. The bulletins contained updates from meetings and briefings, resources, and guidance to help workforce leaders, and updates on how regional SPFs were working to help tackle the challenges of the pandemic.

Key communications from each of the 12 Wider Group meetings held during this period were produced and published on the SPF website and featured in the SPF bulletin.

SPF communications (website, bulletin, updates, and social media) were used to promote key information on the NHS response to the pandemic. The SPF facilitated the sharing of messages to help reassure trade unions and employers that they were being represented at a national level and action was being taken to address workforce priority issues.

Key messages from the SPF not covered elsewhere in this report featured:

- Keith Willett, Medical Director, Acute Care and Preparedness and National Strategic Incident Director for COVID-19 video on how the coronavirus worked, spread and its symptoms and why specific actions were being taken.
- A reference and link to a letter from Simon Stevens and Amanda Pritchard sent to the chief executives of NHS organisations in April 2020 which set out plans for the second phase of the NHS response to COVID-19.
- Guidance, produced by NHSEI working with the NHS Muslim Network and British Islamic Medical Association, for employers on how to support NHS workers Muslim staff during Ramadan.
- Information on the government's decision to extend the deadline for reporting on trade union facility time.
- A letter to key clinicians and system leaders on domestic abuse during COVID-19.
- A blog written by Prerena Issar, Chief People Officer, NHSEI on the right of NHS staff to speak up.
- Life assurance scheme detail and eligibility criteria in the event of a staff member dying in the course of work related to COVID-19.
- Information on a national proposal on overtime for NHS staff relating to COVID-19.
- Information on indemnity for NHS staff providing social care services.
- A letter from DHSC, PHE and NHSEI to all NHS services, outlining plans for the 2020/21 flu vaccine programme.

- A survey from NHS Employers to identify challenges experienced by disabled NHS staff during the first wave of the pandemic.
- A press release from NHSEI, in which senior health and social care figures stressed the importance of that year's seasonal flu vaccination programme and urged frontline workers to get immunized.
- A letter from the national director for emergency and elective care and the national medical director to NHS chief executives, chief people officers and chief nursing officers to ask for further concerted effort to maximise flu vaccination uptake for frontline healthcare workers before the start of December 2020.
- A range of resources available on the Public Health England website, which workforce leaders could use to promote the flu vaccine amongst staff.

## National SPF visits to regional SPFs

During the period covered by this stocktake report, national SPF representatives joined eight regional SPF meetings to give a national update and receive feedback on the key issues for the region. This feedback was shared with the SPF Programme Manager and any further actions progressed as and when required. The national visits undertaken, were:

- 19 May 2020 – South East
- 4 June 2020 – Yorkshire and Humber
- 22 June 2020 – North East and North Cumbria
- 3 July 2020 – Yorkshire and Humber
- 8 July 2020 – North West
- 22 January 2021 – East Midlands
- 9 March 2021 – East of England
- 18 March 2021 – London.

## Reflecting on and sharing learning from the pandemic

On 31 March 2021, the national SPF ran an online conference called Positive Partnership Working During COVID-19 and Beyond. This was the first virtual partnership conference of its type bringing together representatives from the national and regional SPFs with workforce and system leaders and management/HR and trade union representatives from NHS organisations.

The conference featured:

- An opening address by Minister of State for Care and SPF chair, Helen Whately.
- A keynote presentation from the NHS Chief People Officer, Prerana Issar.
- A presentation from Richard Saundry, Professor of HRM and Employment Relations at the University of Sheffield on partnership working and employee relations during the pandemic. This was followed by a panel session involving Professor Saundry, Rebecca Smith, NHS Employers, Sara Gorton, UNISON, Shajeda Ahmed, Director of People, OD &

Inclusion, North Staffordshire Combined Healthcare NHS Trust and Jenny Harvey, Staff Side Chair at North Staffordshire Combined Healthcare NHS Trust to discuss the research findings and to respond to questions from delegates.

- A session on learning from the pandemic in relation to the more negative experience of BAME NHS staff. This session featured Dr Habib Naqvi, Director at the NHS Race and Health Observatory, Jenni Douglas-Todd EDI Director, NHSEI and Jon Restell, Chief Executive at MIP and included a Q&A session with delegates.
- Interactive breakout sessions showcasing good practice social partnership. These included Red Card to Racism at North Bristol NHS Trust; addressing racial inequality in partnership across public services – Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership; the work of the London SPF Health and Wellbeing subgroup; and One Voice, caring for staff at West Midlands Ambulance Service.
- A keynote speech from Nita Clarke, Director of the IPA on the important role of social partnership in the NHS and the success of the national SPF as an exemplar model for the public sector.

In total 364 people joined the conference. All sessions were recorded and available for delegates who booked to attend so they could watch them up to 30 days post event. In addition, a conference highlights video was produced and made available via the SPF website.

During the conference, main stage sessions were evaluated using a 1-to-5-star rating. The average rating for these was 4.7. Of those who completed the conference evaluation survey:

- 94.5 per cent of respondents agreed the overall quality of this conference had been very good.
- 88 per cent agreed the conference had helped them understand how partnership working contributed to responding to workforce issues during the pandemic.
- 91.5 per cent of respondents agreed the conference helped them to understand how current workforce issues can be tackled in partnership.

## SECTION FOUR – THE RESULTS OF A SURVEY OF MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL SPF

During the period 5 May 2021 to 3 June 2021, members of the national SPF were requested to complete an online survey (see annex) which sought to identify learning from the pandemic. The request was sent to 66 people. In total 17 responses were received, which is 26 per cent.

The survey results show that:

- 11 fully agreed and six partly agreed that the national SPF adapted quickly so that it was able to effectively support the NHS response to the pandemic.
- 13 fully agreed and four partly agreed that the national SPF enabled partners to engage with key workforce policy leads involved in the NHS response to COVID-19.
- Ten fully agreed and seven partly agreed that the national SPF enabled timely engagement on key workforce policy issues during the pandemic.
- Eight fully agreed and nine partly agreed that the national SPF effectively communicated key workforce related messages during the pandemic.
- 13 fully agreed, three partly agreed and one neither agreed nor disagreed that the national SPF played an important role in supporting the NHS workforce response to COVID-19.

Feedback on why respondents gave the answers they did to the above questions reveals that engagement through the SPF during the pandemic worked well. There was praise for NHSEI's health and wellbeing team for exceptional engagement and partnership working. Setting up the COVID-19 SPF Engagement Group was seen as a positive as was more regular Wider Group meetings. The workshops on PPE and testing at the start of the pandemic were considered very useful.

A respondent noted that using the structures available and through creating the new COVID-19 SPF Engagement Group the national SPF was able to bring key strategic people and partners together in a timely manner.

A respondent stated:

'Personally I am more committed and energised to partnership working than ever, and I see this reflected in my own team and across staff side. It remains the answer.'

Another respondent stated:

'all involved in the SPF, especially those involved in the setting up of all the meetings etc, should be very proud of how they adapted at such short notice.'

A respondent noted the speed in which the weekly COVID-19 Engagement meetings were set up to ensure key workforce related issues could be discussed with the most senior people responsible for those policy areas. Another respondent who was not part of the NHS stated that the SPF was one of their primary sources of information during the pandemic.

An area for improvement included a request for more timely and concise communications. Another respondent stated that the national SPF can be cumbersome.

In response to the question 'Are there any lessons we should take from how the SPF operated during the pandemic, which could influence future ways of working?' answers included:

- The SPF should look at how it can continue to use virtual meetings, whilst recognising that face to face meetings are sometimes helpful.
- Use of video conferencing should continue to be an option to join meetings, even if they return to being face to face.
- Engagement has benefitted from online meetings as it enabled senior policy leads to join meetings where there were free slots in their busy diaries. Online meetings enabled meetings to be arranged promptly – helping keep partners in the loop on current activities. The chat function on Teams has enabled the sharing of information.
- That there is sometimes a greater demand for national direction than people want to admit and there was a very strong and positive reaction, to the industrial relations statements.
- A request for further one-off meetings on hot and pertinent issues and for membership of the Strategic Group to be expanded.
- Decision makers need to be available to speak to partners who are having challenging local conversations to enable shared decision making.
- It was more possible to get the right people round the table and this made for greater and more rapid progress on issues... The time committed to SPF work and engagement was very well spent and productive.

The survey gave the opportunity for respondents to leave any other comments. Feedback included:

- The need to ensure engagement on policy that impacts on the NHS workforce is happening at the right level – provider, place, system, region and national.
- Praise to the SPF secretariat for their attention and professionalism.
- The SPF working is very constructive and that those involved have patients and people foremost in their minds.
- Through providing access to and engagement with those leading the pandemic response, the national SPF helped ensure effective working relationships with workforce representatives and employers in the NHS.
- Meetings should continue to be online as it reduces the carbon footprint of the members as well as the cost and time taken travelling between meetings.

- Although still not perfect in terms of process or outcomes, the response to Covid showed NHS partnership working at its best and brought us together with a common purpose and agenda.

## SECTION FIVE - ACTIONS FROM THE 2019 SPF STOCKTAKE AND FOLLOW UP ACTIVITY

The 2019 stocktake was led by the IPA. The numbered list below, includes all the actions arising from the 2019 stocktake. These were developed and agreed by the national SPF secretariat in September 2020. Under each action is a short update on progress made. Most of the actions have been addressed, some as part of the SPF response to the pandemic.

**1. The ambulance sector to be engaged in the SPF Violence Reduction Subgroup.**

There is ambulance sector representation on the Violence Reduction Subgroup and ambulance trust HRDs are part of the pool of employer reps who are invited to join national meetings.

**2. NHS Trade Unions to consider how best to cascade national SPF meeting messages/minutes to smaller unions.**

More frequent online meetings of the joint NHS Trade Unions has meant SPF messages are shared across all unions more quickly, in addition to the focused briefings which enabled smaller unions to directly engage with policy makers.

**3. Ensure unions of all sizes are involved and included in specific focused briefings and meetings.**

There are clear examples of this happening during the pandemic when all NHS trade unions were invited to join additional workshops including – testing, PPE, People Plan metrics and the COVID-19 vaccination programme.

**4. NHS Employers to ensure employer representatives cover the breadth of NHS organisations and ICSs.**

The pool of employers who are invited to national meetings covers the breadth of NHS organisations and now includes ICS reps.

**5. Update the 'How we do partnership' web page.**

This is ongoing – linked to the development of the new SPF website.

**6. Refresh the 'what partnership working means to partners' quotes.**

These quotes have been refreshed and are featured on the SPF website.

**7. Update the SPF Members' Handbook – how it works, what group work on what and the benefits of partnership working to support new policy engagement.**

The SPF Members' Handbook was updated and published on the SPF website in February 2021.

- 8. Once the pandemic has abated and the SPF has returned to business as usual, update the Partnership Agreement and publish on the SPF website.**

This action has been paused until later in 2021.

- 9. NHS Employers National Engagement Service (NES) which provides the secretariat for regional SPF meetings to work with RSPF co-chairs and members to review the regional meetings and the use of technology to reduce required travel commitments.**

Due to the pandemic all regional meetings moved to being held online. NES will keep meeting arrangements under review – working with the regional SPF co-chairs. The intention is to retain virtual meetings potentially supplemented with face-to-face meetings – where appropriate.

- 10. Consider learning from COVID-19 in terms of how utilising technology for national meetings and to carry out national SPF activity.**

Due to the pandemic all national meetings continue to be held online. There is a clear desire to retain a level of virtual and hybrid working and this will be factored into future plans.

- 11. Once the Action Plan is agreed, promote the activity to be progressed in response to the 2019 stocktake recommendations.**

A record of progress on the action plan, arising from the 2019 Stocktake, is included in this 2021 Stocktake report. This report will be promoted via the SPF website and using SPF communications.

- 12. Due to COVID-19 the Heat Check will now be completed in 2022, a report to be produced comparing results with 2018 heat check will be published.**

It is proposed to undertake the heat check in 2021/22 quarter four. In line with the recommendation from the 2019 SPF stocktake, it will replicate the heat check undertaken in 2018 so the results can be compared.

- 13. Undertake an internal review in 2020 of the SPF during COVID-19 to assess effectiveness, highlight strong partnership working and engagement of policy leads and identify any learning, report to be published by autumn 2020.**

This SPF 2021 Stocktake reviews the activity SPF completed through the COVID-19 pandemic.

- 14. Complete a SPF communications review once the 2019 Action Plan is signed off in October.**

A communication review was undertaken in November 2020. A set of recommendations was shared with SPF secretariat and signed off in January 2021.

**15. Following the communications review undertake a communications campaign in Spring 2021 working with communication leads within partner organisations.**

This activity has been delayed due to the pandemic, however a SPF comms working group will be established involving SPF comms leads and the national SPF secretariat to plan activity to be undertaken in relation to a new SPF website due to be launched October 2021.

## SECTION SIX – 2021 SPF STOCKTAKE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In line with the 2021 Stocktake findings, National SPF meetings should continue to be held online as the default position as this format makes it easier for senior policy leads to join. The benefits of online meetings mean members do not incur the cost and time taken travelling and it is also a more environmentally friendly option. However, there may be some benefit to having some meetings face to face where it suits the meeting format. This should be determined by the national SPF co-chairs and a mixed model may suit more business-as-usual SPF activity.
2. SPF co-chairs and secretariat to continue to ensure policy that impacts on the workforce is directed to the appropriate group meeting so that all members with an interest in the topic under discussion can get involved. Consideration should also be given to cascading priority areas to regional SPFs.
3. SPF co-chairs and secretariat to agree when one off policy specific workshops should be arranged, this supports unions of all sizes being engaged on subject specific matters when needed. Partners are also able to field subject experts to attend these workshops, for example, health and safety officers.
4. The SPF co-chairs should consider the impact of the Health and Care Bill on future ways of working for the national and regional SPFs, ensuring active involvement from partners on workforce decisions at a system level.
5. Aligned with the launch of the new SPF website, planned for October 2021, the SPF secretariat should work with partner organisations to take forward a communications campaign to promote the national SPF, regional SPFs, and the benefits of social partnership working in the NHS.

# ANNEX

## SPF stocktake 2021 survey

### Background

The SPF Programme Manager is leading a stocktake of the SPF, which has the following areas of focus:

- How the SPF adapted and responded to the pandemic.
- Lessons learnt through the pandemic and benefits for the future.
- Progress on the Stocktake 2019 Action Plan.

Partners agreed a survey should be conducted of members of the Strategic Group, Wider Group, Workforce Issues Group, and national SPF secretariat to review how the SPF operated during the pandemic and to identify whether any lessons can be learnt. The findings from the survey will be compiled into a stocktake report and be used to inform a set of recommendations on future ways of working.

National SPF colleagues are encouraged to complete the following survey.

On a scale of 1 to 5.

1=completely disagree

2=partly disagree

3=neither agree or disagree

4=partly agree

5=fully agree.

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

- The national SPF adapted quickly so that it was able to effectively support the NHS response to the pandemic.
- The national SPF enabled partners to engage with key workforce policy leads involved in the NHS response to COVID-19.
- The national SPF enabled timely engagement on key workforce policy issues during the pandemic.
- The national SPF effectively communicated key workforce related messages during the pandemic.

- The national SPF played an important role in supporting the NHS workforce response to COVID-19.

Please give any additional information on why you gave the answers above.

Are there any lessons we should take from how the SPF operated during the pandemic, which could influence future ways of working?

Please leave any other comments which you think would be helpful to inform the 2021 SPF Stocktake.