



## SPF Heat check 2022

### Background

The national Social Partnership Forum (SPF) completes a stocktake every two years to monitor its effectiveness. These alternate between an internal stocktake and one completed by an independent organisation. Involvement and Participation Association (IPA) completed the last external stocktake in 2019 (published in March 2020).

An internal heat check is undertaken in the years in between stocktakes. A heat check was due to be completed in the summer of 2020, but the SPF co-chairs decided that as the forum was concentrating on the NHS response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this would not be carried out and instead there would be an internal stocktake in spring 2021. This focussed on how the SPF adapted and responded to the pandemic; lessons learnt, and progress on the stocktake 2019 action plan. See the SPF website for the [internal National SPF stocktake 2020/21](#).

The national SPF secretariat also produced an SPF [Key achievements April 2020 to March 2022 summary](#). As a result, the plan to have a heat check was put back to late 2022.

This heat check covers the period January 2022 to October 2022 and is informed by a survey of members of the national SPF (Annex A) and a survey of policy leads (Annex B) who engaged with the SPF during this period.

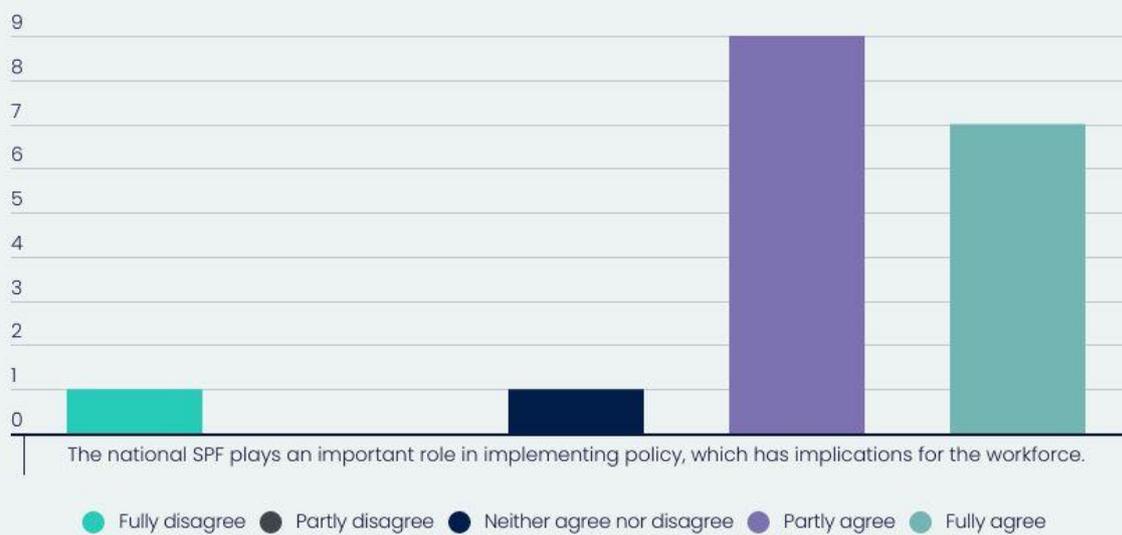
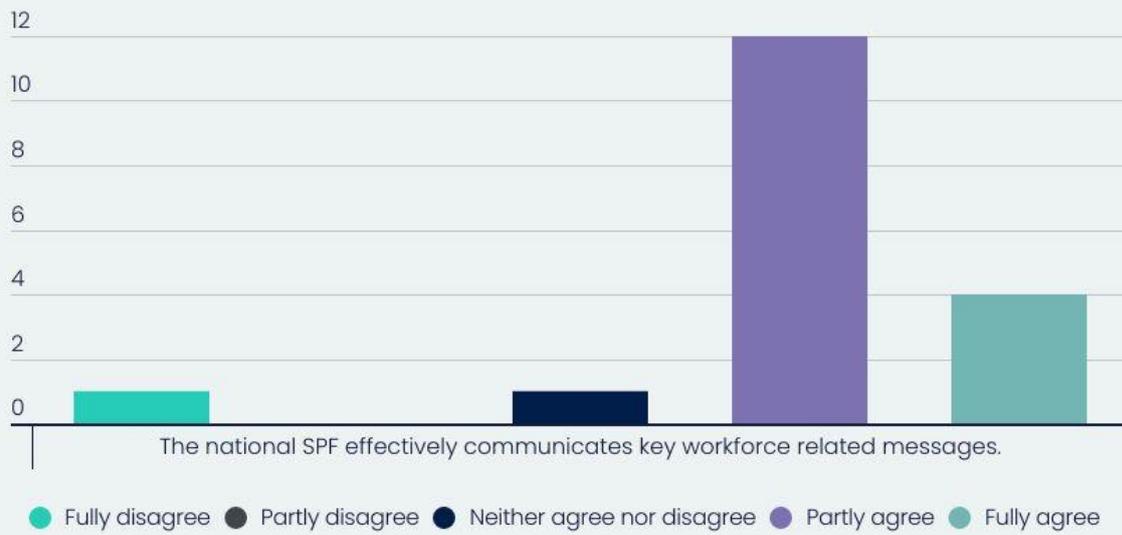
### Findings from the national SPF members survey

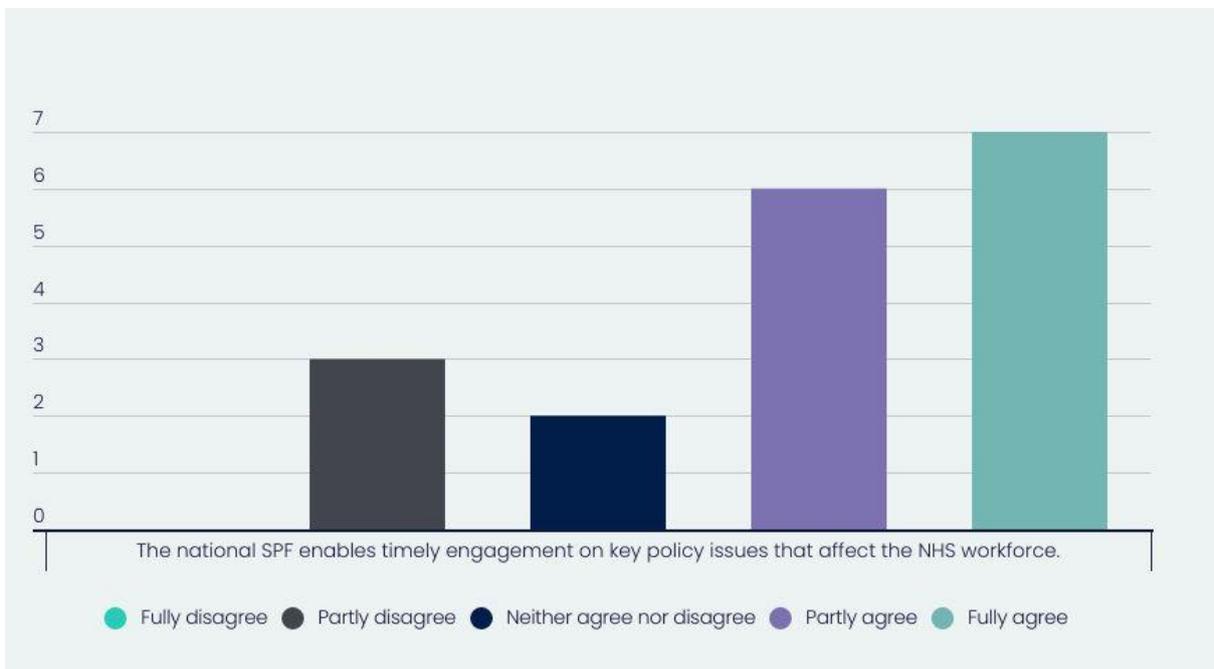
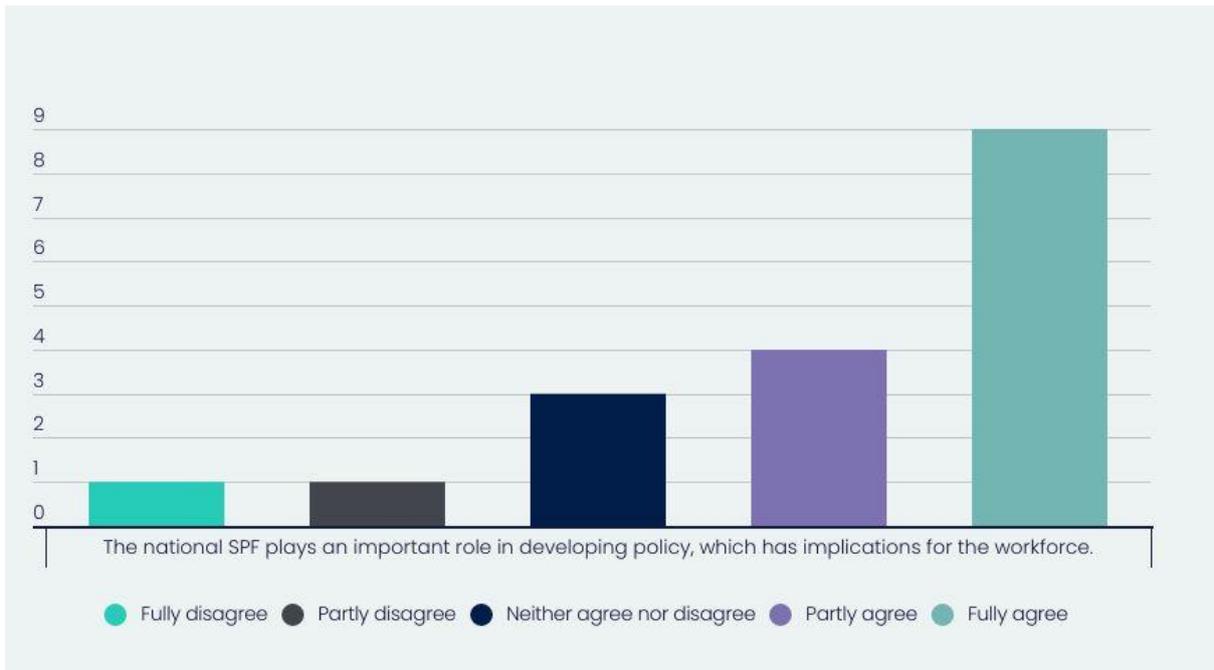
SPF Wider Group and subgroup members were sent the survey on 13 October. They were requested to submit their responses by 4 November. This deadline was extended to 11 November. There were 18 respondents. 12 from NHS trade unions; one from NHS Employers; three from NHS trusts, foundation trusts, or ICBs; one from NHS Resolution and one from local government.

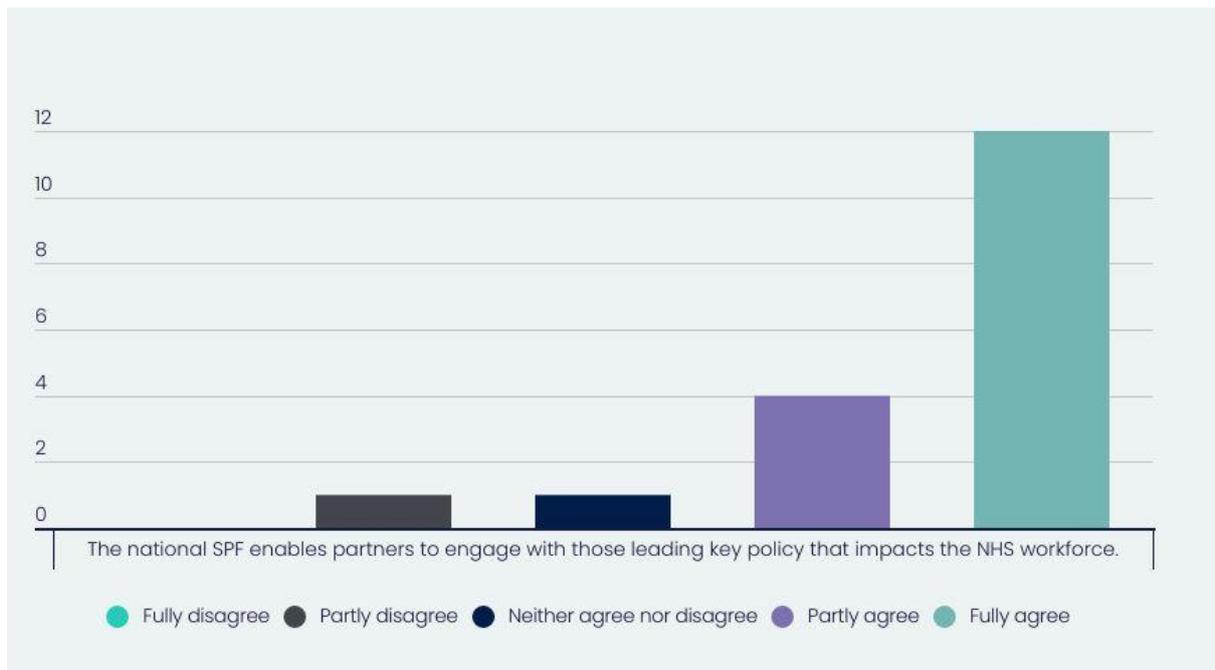
There were five survey questions, which were based on the aims of the SPF. Respondents were also asked to supply comments. See the results below.



## National SPF members survey results







In response to the request for additional information, a respondent highlighted the importance of policy makers knowing the benefits of coming to the SPF at the earliest opportunity. They also stated the SPF needed to maximise the impact of its communications.

A respondent fed back that the SPF should be fully sighted on the whole scope of the workforce policy landscape and it is important for the SPF to co-produce policy.

“There are many initiatives that are announced with short/no warning and we are not fully sighted on the whole scope of the workforce policy landscape... we have clear influence, but this is largely on policy determined elsewhere rather than co-production...”

A respondent stated the SPF provided an opportunity to hear in practice what is working and what is not.

Another respondent requested an increased employer representation on the national SPF.

“We need more employer representatives on some of the groups - WIG and VRS. Otherwise, it is just TUs and Arm's Length Bodies talking to each other and employers are so important for the implementation part of workforce policy...”

There was also a comment that stated the SPF needs to reflect the growth of ICSs.

Additional comments from members of the national SPF, to inform the heat check, were received. Some of which were outside the remit of the SPF. Those that the SPF could affect are related to the following.



A respondent requested a stronger ministerial presence, whilst another stated that it is useful to be involved at this level in contact between ministers and unions.

A respondent questioned the ability of the national forum to tackle key strategic issues.

“There is a huge accountability gap on key strategic issues which the SPF can't address, as Government don't have any co-ordinated national leadership for such issues. The most obvious is areas around workforce planning but extend to difficulties trying to address issues that emerge... Nor does the SPF have a strong track record of addressing strategic problems identified - e.g. racism or disability discrimination in the workplace.”

A respondent asked for the SPF to be updated on the NHS England (NHSE) workstreams and for better links between the SPF and the NHS Staff Council.

Two respondents fed back on the importance of a consistent approach from policy teams across NHSE and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) so that all engage with the SPF at an early stage in policy development.

“Sometimes we are engaged a bit late on workforce policy once it is being implemented rather than at the design phase. This is not always the case and some parts of NHS England and DHSC engage with us really well. Improving the consistency of engagement within the NHS structures would be helpful.”

A respondent stated how different SPF stakeholders enable better development and implementation of policy.

“The broad range of stakeholders in the group facilitates a range of perspectives and enables barriers, gaps and opportunities in development and implementation of policy is always pragmatic and useful as intended.”

They also suggested the SPF might benefit from further discussions with a regulator.

A respondent highlighted the importance of extending partnership working to the ICSs.

Another respondent complimented the positive partnership working in the Violence Reduction Subgroup.

## Findings from the policy leads survey

The survey request was sent to 12 policy leads who had engaged with the SPF on policy development and implementation which impacts the workforce. Three policy leads completed the survey.

The policies these leads had brought to the SPF were:

- Staff engagement/staff survey/people promise - health and wellbeing (e.g., long covid/sickness absence/improving attendance) and elective recovery.
- Long Term Workforce Plan.

- Health and Care Bill 2022.

In response to a question on the benefits of working with the SPF on developing and/or implementing your policy/policies, respondents fed back the following:

- “Always helpful to engage with SPF and unions to get their perspectives and support, and be reminded of the importance and value of involving them early - at the shaping stage - and not just at sign off. SPF brings everyone together in one place which is important in also hearing each other's perspectives and potentially agreeing compromise solutions given different organisations will have different views. NHS Employers has been very helpful in convening round tables on certain topics to test or develop ideas, or simply to hear an unvarnished view of the current reality on key topics (e.g., HRDs ahead of a large scale event on staff engagement).”
- “Getting a broad range of views on the key issues relating to the [Long Term Workforce] plan.”
- “Really helpful to get direct but thoughtful feedback on the policy intent of the [Health and Care] Bill.”

In response to a question asking for suggestions on ways in which the SPF could do things differently to enable better partnership working with policy leads, the following points were made:

- “It would be helpful to identify practical ways that different organisations - especially unions - can help beyond making sure that they are name-checked in policies. SPF might have good insights into where national policy can be an important lever in enabling change e.g., by setting expectations or changing the incentives, so that we are focusing on the right things - and possibly fewer things. Not so much for SPF but specifically for NHS Employers and NHS people directorate/workforce, training and education is to coordinate better so that our efforts are targeted and not duplicative or confusing for the service e.g., on staff engagement agenda.”
- “My only reflection is whether it might have helped to spend some time with a sub-group or SPF lead ahead of the session [on the Health and Care Bill 2022] so that they could almost co-present with us. But in practice, we may have struggled to make the time work to be honest.”

## Recommendations

Based on the feedback received the national SPF could do the following to improve how it operates:

1. NHSE, HEE and DHSC SPF representatives to work with colleagues in their organisations to ensure timely and purposeful engagement with the SPF around the whole scope of the workforce policy landscape.
2. All members of the national SPF have a collective responsibility to ensure the forum is effective. They should therefore continue to observe the behaviours and carry out their responsibilities as agreed and set out in the [SPF partnership agreement](#) and in the [SPF members' handbook](#) (see Annex C for the relevant extract from the handbook).
3. SPF co-chairs to consider if there is a benefit in a more coordinated approach between the SPF, NHSE workforce policy and the work being undertaken in the NHS Staff Council.
4. The national SPF, with regional SPF colleagues, to continue to work to embed the principles of partnership working in the new system structures.
5. The SPF programme manager to keep under review SPF communications to maximise their impact.
6. Subject to agreement with the other SPF partners, NHS Employers to increase employer representation, including ICS representatives, in the national SPF, in particular the subgroups.

**SPF Secretariat**  
**December 2022**



## Annex A - National SPF members survey

Organisation or organisation type you work for (select one):

- *NHS Trade Union*
- *DHSC*
- *NHS England*
- *HEE*
- *NHS Employers*
- *NHS Trust, Foundation Trust or ICB*
- *Devolved Administration*
- *Other – please specify – Open text box*

On a scale of 1 to 5...

1=fully disagree

2=partly disagree

3=neither agree nor disagree

4=partly agree

5=fully agree.

...please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

- *The national SPF enables partners to engage with those leading key policy that impacts the NHS workforce.*  
Give a score from 1 to 5.
- *The national SPF enables timely engagement on key policy issues that affect the NHS workforce.*  
Give a score from 1 to 5.
- *The national SPF plays an important role in developing policy, which has implications for the workforce.*  
Give a score from 1 to 5.
- *The national SPF plays an important role in implementing policy, which has implications for the workforce*  
Give a score from 1 to 5.
- *The national SPF effectively communicates key workforce related messages.*  
Give a score from 1 to 5.

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

Please leave any other comments you think would be helpful to inform the 2022 SPF heat check.



## Annex B – Policy leads survey questions

- Name
- Policy/policies you've taken to the national SPF
- What have been the benefits of working with the SPF on developing/implementing your policy/policies?
- Can you suggest any ways in which we could do things differently to enable better partnership working between policy leads and the SPF?



## Annex C – [SPF members' handbook](#)

### Members' behaviour

The SPF and its subgroup meetings are conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect even when the partners disagree over a specific issue. The following guidelines provide some agreed ground rules to support a positive and constructive working environment:

- Wherever possible keep the language simple and avoid jargon. If you do not fully understand an issue, ensure that you seek clarification before agreeing or disagreeing.
- Respect other members of the forum as individuals with equal rights.
- Recognise and respect the responsibilities that individuals have as representatives of their respective partner organisations.
- Where appropriate, maintain confidentiality on issues of a sensitive nature and where agreed, do not share confidential papers outside of the meeting. If an issue is potentially sensitive, agree how and when it will be communicated externally. During the meetings individuals have the right to express opinions without having their views quoted outside of the meeting.
- Strive for consensus as far as possible. Sharing of information should be encouraged and enough time allowed for meaningful discussion.
- Where a consensus is not reached but a recommendation still must be made, the divergence of views needs to be clearly noted.

As a member of the national SPF or one of its subgroups, you represent one of the partners i.e. NHS Employers, NHS Trade Unions, HEE, NHSE, DHSC (not the SPF as a whole). As an SPF member you should use your judgement, guided by the principles of partnership working, to engage with your own constituents outside the group as and when necessary. Each partner organisation has its own processes in place for gathering wider views to input into discussions.

Representatives should:

- use their judgement to engage with their colleagues and constituents for views/feedback to inform social partnership discussions
- report back agreed messages from the national SPF to their colleagues and constituents
- promote the benefits of social partnership working at a national, regional, system and organisational level
- be involved in the annual programme of regional visits.

