



Overhauling Recruitment

Stretch Opportunities Toolkit

About this toolkit



The Overhauling Recruitment programme is seeking to change the way that the NHS attracts, selects and onboards people into the service.

This toolkit looks at stretch opportunities as a means to increase the skills and capabilities of employees, develop careers and ultimately attract people into new posts across your organisation.

This pack is designed to support HR Directors, Deputy HR Directors, Heads of Resourcing and their teams in NHS providers and systems develop an effective approach and policies relating to the use of stretch opportunities that:

- Help recruit, retain and motivate staff within NHS organisations.
- Ensure staff progression is planned in line with the needs of the organisation
- Guard against bias in the use of stretch opportunities and encourage fairness and diversity



This is one of a number of tools as part of the overhauling recruitment series. Model documents, case studies and other helpful resources can be found on [FutureNHS](#).



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Improving the use of stretch opportunities 1 of 2

The way in which talent is managed and staff are selected for stretch opportunities can too often be applied in an unplanned and informal manner. The “tap on the shoulder” persists and this can lead to a lack of transparency around opportunities, lack of fairness in the implementation, and ultimately impact negatively on diversity. However, when operated in a fair, transparent and systematic way, the use of a stretch opportunity programme can increase both effectiveness and diversity in the workplace.

Benefits of stretch opportunities

Stretch opportunities are **tasks or projects that are slightly beyond your current skill or knowledge level and therefore allow you to 'stretch' by improving your capabilities.**

Opportunity	Application
Secondments	An opportunity to work on a different role within a different team or organisation. Time bound with a default setting of an eventual return to the home team/organisation.
Acting Up	Formally undertaking a more senior role for the duration of the absence of the incumbent, usually within the same team and management chain.
Stretch Projects	Discrete pieces of work to be carried out and/or led by a member of staff, outside of, or supplementary to, their usual duties and/or operating level.
Talent Pool	Membership of a group of candidates/staff who have been recognised as having the potential to be called on for specific roles/areas of work.
Succession Planning	Role in which the incumbent is provided with stretch opportunities in the expectation that they are increasingly able to cover for, and their next career step is likely to be, a specific role or level.

Examples of stretch opportunities

Examples of stretch opportunity could include:

- Planned **secondments** within or across organisations including Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) or Arm's Length Bodies.
- Formal “**Acting Up**” opportunities - substituting for a higher grade role in the temporary absence of the substantive role holder.
- A planned **rotational development system** which might include several secondments across a number of departments or organisations.
- **Specific projects** that give staff an opportunity to stretch their skills, raise their profile, gain new confidence, such as a quality improvement project, planning a new way of working, or addressing a specific problem etc.

These could apply to current practices and programmes and extend to new ways of working or innovative development programmes.

Some NHS organisations have developed local systems for giving staff career development “**work samples**”. Examples include the use of a “**temporary transfer**” system that gives staff a short part-time “**taster**” of different and potentially higher graded roles, and the development of a Grade 5.5 for some staff, which is intended as a stepping-stone to a Grade 6 post.



Further guidance and example documentation regarding Job Descriptions and career pathways can be found on the [Overhauling Recruitment FutureNHS](#) site.

Implementing stretch opportunities as a staff recruitment tool *1 of 2*

A clear process for registering/submission of an Expression of Interest (Eoi) appropriate to the potential opportunity should be established and publicised as part of the invitation to register interest.

Planning the use of stretch opportunities – areas to consider

Consideration at management level should include therefore:

- **Workforce planning** and identifying what can be done differently to **support potential staff** into the organisation as well as **current team members**.
- Developing **talent pools** of staff who should be considered for stretch developments.
- An expectation that stretch opportunities will be created and filled in an open and transparent way including a policy on the advertising and filling of all significant stretch opportunities, especially **acting up posts, secondments and substantial projects**.
- Successful deployment and staffing of stretch opportunities with a set of **proactively implemented and monitored measures**.
- What would the **metrics and measures of success** look like or reflect?



The 70-20-10 model (Lombardo, M, Eichinger, R (1996) is a framework suggesting that personal and professional development is primarily the result of a combination of on-the-job learning (70%), interactions with others, such as mentoring, coaching, and networking (20%) and formal education and training (10%). According to this model, most learning and development occurs through on-the-job experiences, including problem-solving, decision-making, and working on projects.

Implementing stretch opportunities as a staff recruitment tool *2 of 2*

A clear process for registering/submission of an Expression of Interest (Eoi) appropriate to the potential opportunity should be established and publicised as part of the invitation to register interest.

Expressions of Interest (Eois)

Expressions of Interest (Eois) are the method by which staff formally register their interest in an opportunity. In some cases (e.g. secondments using the existing NHS internal recruitment system) this will already be set out and available. For other opportunities that are within the same team/pool, this is less likely to be the case.

The process of selection for stretch opportunities must not only be applied impartially, but also be seen to be so. It is vital that all staff to whom the opportunities may be applicable have sight of the opportunities, and an equal opportunity to register their interest.

- Different methods of highlighting opportunities to staff will be appropriate depending on the nature of the opportunity and make up of the team involved. However, as a general rule, as wide a mix of outlets as possible should be adopted, including (as appropriate):

ATS	Email prompts	Notice boards	Text prompts
Staff groups	Team meetings	Social media	Positive Action



Further assistance, information and good practice regarding the selection of staff arising from the above activity can be found in the [Overhauling Recruitment Selection toolkit on FutureNHS](#).

How to help mitigate potential bias in the application of stretch opportunities.

Approaches to reducing bias: the issue of potential bias in the use of stretch opportunities

Many future leaders experience developmental assignments as they progress in their careers. At times, these opportunities may be driven by crisis situations and changing business environments, rather than being purposefully matched to linear progression or assignments. Covid-19 provided many such examples – a Technicolor version of what has been happening more quietly for many years. Affinity bias can easily play a dominant role in the allocation of such roles.

Despite the evidence of its importance and the evidence of discrimination, and almost five years after access to stretch opportunities was identified as a priority in NHS leadership development strategy (NHS Improvement, 2016), many NHS organisations do not:

- monitor access;
- ensure access and appointment is fair – many opportunities are filled “informally”;
- issue clear guidance on how such stretch opportunities should be advertised, appointed to, supported and consolidated;
- analyse and then apply an “explain or comply” approach to the resultant data.
- treat such stretch opportunities as positive action options.



There are a range of resources to support managers, teams and leaders to have conversations about race and other protected characteristics available on the [NHS England website](#).

Approaches to reducing bias 2 of 2

How to help mitigate potential bias in the application of stretch opportunities.

Steps to be considered should include:

- An organisation-wide expectation that stretch opportunities will be created and filled in an open and transparent way, including a policy on the advertising and filling of all significant stretch opportunities, especially acting up posts, secondments and substantial projects.
- Measuring, monitoring and reporting the creation and filling of potential stretch opportunities with a deliberate set of measures.
- Seeing the creation, filling and support for stretch opportunities as part of the organisation's positive action measures to improve the representation of under-represented groups of staff.
- Above all, stretch opportunities should be subject to the same “**explain or comply**” process on access as other vacancies.



Positive action may allow for additional activity aimed at ensuring that opportunities are highlighted to, and encouraged from, under-represented groups.



There are a range of resources to support managers, teams and leaders to have conversations about race and other protected characteristics available on the [NHS England website](#).

Recruitment and career progression activity must be underpinned by the recognition of the need to be able to track and report recruitment and career progression in ways that help to both maximise and embed successful practice and spot potential discrimination.

Measurement of success (metrics)

Potential measures for benchmarking, monitoring and review include:

- Number and type of stretch opportunities implemented;
- Take up of stretch opportunities by protected characteristic (benchmarked against staff pool);
- Turnover of staff post development opportunities – reasons for any movement;
- Record of improvements made to working practices arising from stretch opportunities;
- Staff appraisals/”meaningful conversations”;
- Staff perception of equality of opportunity via WRES and other surveys.

Sources of data

Sources of data that can be used to benchmark and measure performance include:

- Electronic Staff Records (ESR) (staffing numbers, pay);
- WRES/WDES;
- Recruitment data from TRAC/ATS systems;
- National staff survey;
- Local staff surveys and feedback from the lived experience of staff;
- Redeployment data;
- Appraisal data.

A recent HEE report ([Cox 2020](#)) suggests that staff who have an opportunity to rotate have a better understanding of others’ roles and that rotational opportunities assist succession planning.



Thank you for taking the time to view this pack.

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