



INSTITUTE *of*
HEALTH EQUITY



NHS EMPLOYERS BUILDING OPPORTUNITY: REDUCING HEALTH INEQUALITIES THROUGH INCLUSIVE LOCAL RECRUITMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Health is determined not only by health and clinical care, but by the social determinants of health, the conditions in which people live, grow, work, and age. Employment is one of the most important social determinants of health. Good quality work improves health and wellbeing, while unemployment, low pay, and insecure work drive poor health and deepens health inequalities. (1) (2) Secure, fairly paid, and good-quality work improves both physical and mental health, supports social mobility, and contributes to community cohesion.

The NHS is under intense and sustained pressure, managing rising demand, tight budgets, and long waiting times. While addressing these immediate operational challenges is essential, it is equally important to continue to recognise the NHS's broader role in shaping the long-term health and wellbeing of the population.

The NHS, as the largest employers in the country, has both the responsibility and the opportunity to lead by example, using its role as an employer to improve health outcomes and reduce inequalities. Its workforce is often drawn from communities facing high levels of deprivation. Analysis of the workforce of a single large NHS organisation showed they proportionately employed more people living in more deprived areas. However, staff from the most deprived areas had higher sickness absence rates (even after accounting for age and sex). Employees in the lowest pay bands had sickness absence rates 2.5 times higher than those in the highest pay bands. The authors suggest this is largely explained by variations in pay and job roles. (3) Lower paid staff had significantly higher absence rates, with those in the lowest wage group taking 2.5 times more sick leave than those in the highest. Similarly, staff in frontline roles such as nursing and midwifery reported nearly double the sickness absence of administrative and clerical staff.

These patterns suggested a strong link between low pay, demanding roles and worse health among NHS employees. Improving working conditions for these groups can enhance NHS efficiency, individual wellbeing and job satisfaction and also support the NHS's broader goal of reducing health inequalities in the communities it serves.

THE NHS AS AN ANCHOR INSTITUTION

The NHS's impact on its workforce and community positions the NHS not just as a healthcare provider, but as an anchor institution: a stable, place-based organisation with the capacity to reduce health inequalities through its employment, procurement, and partnership strategies. This potential is widely recognised across the system.

SHIFTING NHS APPROACHES

Interviews conducted by the Institute of Health Equity in previous research highlight a strong desire for change within the NHS. (4)

"There are loads of vacancies in the NHS, and we could be pulling people out of poverty by hiring them."

"Most people get into the NHS because a family member worked there. If you don't know how to navigate the system, you're locked out."

"We should be offering mentoring, work experience, apprenticeships—this wouldn't even cost us money."

These comments highlight both the **challenges** and **opportunities related to accessing employment in the NHS**. They call on the healthcare system to **reduce reliance on fixed-term or temporary contracts** and to commit employment practices that improve access, retention, and career progression, particularly for those who have historically faced barriers to employment.

These comments from interviewees also suggest that examples of good employment practices within the NHS are not widely known or consistently implemented. This report highlights how some NHS organisations

are using their role as employers more intentionally to address health inequalities. It presents **four case studies from NHS organisations in Marmot Places in England** (Leeds, Merseyside, Morecambe Bay and Blackpool). Each **showcases inclusive approaches to local recruitment and workforce development** and is based on interviews with key stakeholders working within each organisation. All quotes in green are from these interviews held in April and May 2025.

By more fully **embracing their role as employers who provide good quality jobs**, particularly to those who have been excluded from the workforce or who live in areas of deprivation, the **NHS can build a more inclusive and resilient workforce** while also making a meaningful contribution to **improving the social and economic conditions that drive health inequalities** in local communities.

THE NHS AS AN ANCHOR INSTITUTION: REDUCING HEALTH INEQUALITIES AND LEADING BY EXAMPLE

As one of the UK's largest employers and purchasers, the NHS has the power to act as an **anchor institution; a stable, place-based organisation deeply embedded in its community**. This approach challenges the NHS to contribute beyond healthcare delivery, by intentionally leveraging its resources, employment, procurement, estates, and partnerships, to improve the social and economic conditions that shape health. (5)

WHAT ARE ANCHOR INSTITUTIONS?

Anchor institutions are **large organisations**, often in the public sector, that are **unlikely to relocate and have a strong connection to their local area**. Their scale and permanence give them a **unique ability and responsibility to improve local health and wellbeing** by tackling the wider social determinants of health. This includes: how they recruit and support staff, purchase goods and services, use buildings and land, and engage with communities.

There has been a strong policy commitment to this agenda. The NHS's role as an anchor has been embedded in national policy, including the *NHS Long Term Plan*, the *Integrated Care System (ICS) Design Framework*, and the *NHS England Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Improvement Plan*. (6) (7) (8) NHS organisations' strategies often focus on:

- **Equality, diversity and inclusive employment approaches:** Promoting local recruitment, apprenticeships, and workforce development.
- **Socially responsible procurement:** Supporting local suppliers and delivering social value through contracts.
- **Sustainable use of estates:** Using NHS land and buildings to benefit communities.
- **Collaborative partnerships:** Working across sectors to reduce inequalities and build community wealth. (9)



A 2023 survey conducted by UCLPartners found that **employment is considered the most important anchor activity** by organisations working alongside the NHS. More than half (54%) of survey respondents ranked **“building the future workforce and widening participation”**, including expanding access to training, volunteering, and employment opportunities, as the most or second **most important action the NHS can take as an anchor institution**. (10)

Although NHS organisations differ in their commitment to developing and implementing employment-focused anchor strategies, the importance of good employment is critical, both now and in addressing future health inequalities.

BEING A GOOD EMPLOYER

Central to the NHS’s anchor role is its responsibility to be a good employer. This includes:

- **Workforce self-sufficiency:** Reducing overreliance on international recruitment while providing robust support to overseas staff.
- **Local opportunities:** Creating clear pathways into NHS careers, including through apprenticeships and pre-employment programmes.
- **Training and development:** Expanding skills and education opportunities for all staff.
- **Equity and inclusion:** Ensuring fair access to roles, advancement, and support across the workforce. (11)

By improving employment access and conditions and targeting those living on the lowest incomes, the NHS can help to improve incomes, support economic recovery and reduce health inequalities.

The following table, adapted from the UCL Anchors Project, outlines **how local recruitment efforts can generate short-, medium-, and long-term benefits for communities**. (12)

Table 1. NHS Workforce Initiatives: Activities, Outputs, and Long-Term Outcomes (12)

Activities	Outputs	Outcomes
Create pre-employment programmes (e.g. apprenticeships, internships, placements)	Opportunities such as work experience, internships, apprenticeships, and placements	Short Term: • Increased awareness of NHS careers among local young people • Improved skills and qualifications
Develop partnerships with schools, colleges, and community organisations	Increased outreach to local education and training providers	Medium Term: • More young people entering healthcare education and careers
Promote inclusive employment and career development pathways	Expanded access to NHS roles	Long Term: • Reduced unemployment locally, particularly in underserved communities

HOW THE NHS CAN BE A BETTER EMPLOYER

While the NHS's anchor role and responsibilities are well recognised, examples of how this is being put into practice through local recruitment often remain underexplored. Across England, a number of NHS organisations have moved beyond traditional recruitment models, developing place-based and person-centred approaches that help open up health and care careers to people who have historically faced barriers to employment.

This section presents four examples that illustrate **how NHS organisations are using their role as employers to address health inequalities, strengthen local communities, and create more inclusive workforce pathways**. Each example reflects the unique geography, population, and organisational context in which it operates, but together they show the **breadth of approaches the NHS can adopt to improve local recruitment**.



Leeds Apprenticeship event at Leeds arena.

LEEDS HEALTH AND CARE ACADEMY: CREATING PATHWAYS INTO THE WORKFORCE

In 2023 Leeds became a Marmot Place and has subsequently taken a number of system-wide approaches to tackle health inequalities. (13) Before Leeds became a Marmot Place partners in Leeds were taking actions to tackle health and care workforce challenges; central to this approach is the **Leeds Health and Care Academy**, established in 2019, with the support of the **Leeds Academic Health Partnership and hosted by** Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust. It is a unique, jointly funded partnership that brings together five anchor institutions: the **three NHS Trusts, the Leeds Office of the West Yorkshire Integrated Care Board (ICB), and Leeds City Council (LCC) on behalf of all health and social care organisations in the city**. This collaborative model supports the Academy to design and deliver inclusive recruitment, learning, and workforce strategies that reflect the needs and aspirations of the city's diverse communities.

The Academy is funded through the pooled resources of its five founding partners and shaped by the shared strategic priorities of wider partners within **Leeds One Workforce Strategic Board**. *“It’s actually putting joint resource together into a joint venture... Our main purpose is to integrate the health and social care workforce, but within that, we’ve got a really clear remit around health equity.”*

The Academy’s work spans four major areas:

- 1. Innovation Projects** – tackling complex workforce challenges like retention, mobility, and system-wide skills gaps through test-and-learn approaches.
- 2. Learning and Development** – delivering training through a free learning portal for all health and social care staff in Leeds, with equity indicators built into all programmes. These equity indicators are tailored to each programme but are built around three core areas: participation, experience and impact. They place a specific focus on disadvantage, disability and discrimination, considering factors such as ethnicity, sex and age, as well as other protected characteristics where relevant.
- 3. Cultural and Leadership Development** – including initiatives like Springboard, a leadership programme for people typically excluded from such opportunities.
- 4. Strategy and Planning** – long-term, city-wide workforce planning that begins with early years education and continues into adult employment support, to address the root causes of exclusion from health and care careers.

The Academy works across the entire system—from hospitals to community settings, from primary care to the voluntary and independent sectors. All staff, volunteers, and partners in Leeds health and care have access to free training, health and wellbeing support, and career development through the Academy.

“Our remit around health equity is embedded across all projects... not just in evaluation but in how we design and deliver the work. We collect data on deprivation, ethnicity, and disability—and we use it to challenge the system and reshape practice before inequities emerge.”

The programme is built on five strategic priorities:

- 1. Future Workforce** – engaging people from early years to adulthood to support inclusive entry into health and care.
- 2. Learning Together** – advancing system-wide education and training aligned with the Healthy Leeds Plan. This work is delivered through primary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities, supported by a strong partnership with the Leeds Learning Alliance¹, as well as through third sector partners, community youth groups, and Leeds City Council’s Children and Families services.*
- 3. Team Leeds** – fostering inclusive leadership and collaborative relationships.
- 4. Health Equity** – addressing inequalities in access, experience, and outcomes within the workforce.
- 5. Workforce Insights** – using data and evaluation to shape and refine action.

¹www.leedslearningalliance.org/

THE TALENT HUB: STARTING WITH THE PERSON, NOT THE JOB

The Academy's **Talent Hub** is a flagship approach designed to recruit local people into the health and care workforce by removing barriers and rethinking what recruitment should look like. The Talent Hub provides the infrastructure to deliver the city's **Connecting Communities** programme, which is a geographically targeted initiative engaging residents living in the city's areas of highest deprivation (lowest 10% on the Index of Multiple Deprivation). *"We connect communities with health and care careers... through innovation, we remove not just barriers, but some of the root causes that people experience in accessing opportunities."*



Career Compass Leeds launch event held at Leeds City College

Rather than starting with job vacancies, the **Talent Hub starts with the individual**. *"We start with the person and apply a coaching approach. They think they want to work in the big glossy hospital, but when we really explore what they love doing, their circumstances, their aspirations... we might help them realise that a social care or community role is a better fit."*

This **flip from 'is the person right for the job?' to 'is the job right for the person?'** underpins the Hub's success. *"It's that subtle shift that makes the biggest difference... because we work across the whole system, we've got more opportunities to support people."* This model **departs from conventional recruitment methods** by **providing tailored, wraparound support**—from coaching and application guidance to pre-employment training and wellbeing checks. The Hub enables people to access health and care roles they may have never considered possible.

The Talent Hub plays a **critical role in addressing health and social care workforce shortages**, particularly for entry-level roles. Its model deconstructs traditional recruitment processes which can often be exclusionary due to **digital requirements or complex forms and instead replaces them with supportive, values-based pathways**. *"We are reducing process... deconstructing traditional recruitment processes that are a big barrier."*

By **focusing on individual potential**, not just qualifications, the Talent Hub makes it easier for people of all backgrounds, such as those who have been economically inactive or out of education for a number of years, to enter health and care careers. This includes tailored support for school leavers, as well as people returning to work after long absences. *“If we’re going to have the biggest impact, you can’t just do one piece of work. We run them in parallel... schools, young people, and the community.”*

IMPACT AND OUTCOMES

The impact of the Talent Hub is significant.

- **90% of participants remain in post after 12 months**, far surpassing conventional retention rates.
- The approach has led to **policy and recruitment practice** change across Leeds health and care organisations.
- The Hub has **supported hundreds of people into employment**, with participants reflecting diverse backgrounds including long-term unemployed, career changers, and people with caring responsibilities.
- Employment is only one positive outcome. People supported by the Talent Hub also **access education, training, work experience, volunteering and specialist support** which helps them make positive **changes in their lives**.

The Academy **collects both quantitative and qualitative data** to assess its health equity impact. Metrics include postcode analysis, ethnicity, and disability, alongside participant case studies that demonstrate life-changing outcomes.

“We use it to change the system. Not just to fix problems after they happen, but to stop them before they start.”

Box 1 outlines the importance of metrics to understand and improve efforts to recruit from local populations.



Pharmacy careers engagement event in Leeds, showcasing careers through interactive learning.

PRE-EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMMES AND COMMUNITY CO-DESIGN

The Academy’s pre-employment programmes are co-designed with communities to ensure accessibility and relevance. Each programme aligns with priority workforce needs and offers recognised qualifications such as:

- **Level 2 Infection Prevention** for care roles
- **Level 2 Paediatric First Aid** for children’s residential services

This co-design not only improves employability but contributes to population health by building health literacy and confidence in local communities. *“We don’t just focus on employment as an outcome—we’re upskilling people, improving health awareness, and supporting wider family and community wellbeing.”*

CITY-WIDE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR EQUITY AND LEARNING

Digital and strategic tools developed by the Academy also support the system's wider equity ambitions and include:

- **The Leeds Health and Care Learning Portal** – offering free, accessible online learning for all staff and volunteers.
- **Career Compass Leeds** – a digital tool helping people identify roles and training aligned to their interests and life circumstances.
- **Collaborative, data-driven workforce planning** – using evaluations and longitudinal analysis to inform strategy and track progress. Key priorities include ensuring the health and social care workforce reflects the city's diversity, understanding how the workforce is distributed across sectors (NHS, independent, third sector), and assessing how well the sector delivers good quality employment to address socio-economic disadvantage, aligned with the West Yorkshire Fair Work Charter.

This work is guided by the Leeds One Workforce Strategy, supported by partner workforce strategies, and aligned with the Leeds Health and Wellbeing Strategy. It also contributes to national NHS and Social Care Workforce Strategies.

Through these frameworks, the Leeds Health and Care Academy promotes inclusive access to development opportunities and evidence-based decision making. This includes apprenticeships, leadership programmes, skills training, cultural development and continuing professional development, all of which enable the City's diverse workforce to actively contribute to improving health and wellbeing and reducing inequalities across the city.

WORKFORCE STRATEGY AS A HEALTH EQUITY INTERVENTION

Leeds has reimagined health and care **workforce development as an important contribution to its efforts to reduce health inequalities**. The Academy and Talent Hub has built a person-centred, place-based infrastructure that enables local people to thrive and ensures that the health and care workforce reflects, understands, and serves the communities it supports.

“We’re genuinely working for the whole system. That means we don’t try to fit people into pre-set vacancies—we find the right fit for them, and that’s why it works.”

Box 1. Measuring What Matters: The Role of Metrics in Local NHS Recruitment

Without data, it's difficult to evaluate what's working, where improvements are needed, or whether initiatives are truly making a difference in reducing workforce inequalities.

Many anchor metrics, those related to social value, local recruitment, and inclusive employment, are easier to collect if data systems are designed to capture them routinely and from the start of strategies and interventions, rather than relying on retrospective analysis. If HR systems are able to track the staff who participated in pre-employment programmes such as volunteering, internships, or placements, organisations can more easily compare outcomes like retention rates or sick leave among this group. Similarly, procurement systems can be designed to collect information on suppliers, such as whether they are locally based or pay the Real Living Wage, during the tender process, allowing for consistent and prospective data collection.

Key examples of metrics that support effective recruitment from local and target populations include:

- **Number of participants in** pre-employment programmes (e.g. volunteering, internships, work placements)
- **Percentage of participants** from local and/or target populations
- **Conversion rate:** proportion of participants who go on to gain employment in the trust
- **Local recruitment rate:** proportion of new hires from local and/or target populations
- **Proportion of apprenticeship investment:** overall and specifically for local/target groups
- **Community outreach:** whether the trust has a strategy or programme to engage schools, colleges, or community groups
- **New hires or trainees** from local and/or target populations, broken down by staff band or role

By embedding these metrics into routine data collection and reporting, NHS organisations can more effectively monitor progress, demonstrate accountability, and refine recruitment strategies to build a workforce that reflects and serves its local community.

UNIVERSITY HOSPITALS OF MORECAMBE BAY NHS FOUNDATION TRUST: BUILDING A LOCAL HEALTH WORKFORCE

As part of its commitment to addressing health inequalities and supporting economic inclusion, the **University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust (UHMBT)** has taken a **strategic, place-based approach to recruiting and developing its local workforce**. In 2021, Morecambe Bay became a Marmot Place as part of the wider Lancashire and Cumbria partnership with the Institute of Health Equity, committing to tackle the social determinants of health and reduce health inequalities across the region. (14) They work closely with the University of Cumbria, further education (FE) colleges, and community partners and the UHMBT and have created **clear and inclusive pathways** into careers in health and care. These reflect the UHMBT's role as an anchor institution and demonstrate a **strong commitment to local employment, workforce innovation, and equity**.

INVESTING IN LOCAL PEOPLE

The UHMBT's views growing and retaining its workforce from within local communities as both a **moral imperative and a practical solution to workforce shortages**. *"We've made huge progress. We've got some really good systems in place where we take that responsibility very seriously... We are pervasive in terms of schools around here, showcasing a career in health for people in the school system."*

The commitment extends beyond traditional recruitment routes. UHMBT have taken **actions to reach those who might previously have been excluded or deterred by the costs** and academic barriers of conventional university education. *"We've been very, very specific, recognising our local communities and deprivation within our patch. Conventional degree application is not a possibility [for many]. So how do we engage with our people who want to be carers in our community?"*

UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE PARTNERSHIPS: ALIGNING EDUCATION WITH LOCAL NEEDS

The **University of Cumbria is a key strategic partner, with a formal Memorandum of Understanding that supports shared educational goals, resource use**, and research priorities. Crucially, UHMBT influences curriculum design, ensuring alignment with local service demands: *"We've increased the expectation on data fluency and the use of evidence... and we've influenced the knowledge and awareness of safeguarding as a primary function of each professional."*

Local Further Education colleges, including Lancaster and Morecambe College and Furness College, are also central to **delivering inclusive employment routes**. This includes delivering a Level 3 clinical support worker apprenticeship: *"We've worked again on the content, so that we know that they're fit for the services that we deliver."* Colleges have also recruited experienced NHS staff to teach on T-level programmes,² reinforcing the practical relevance of training: *"A midwifery support care worker... ready for a change, and she's moved over to work for the college."*

INNOVATIVE APPRENTICESHIP PATHWAYS

The **apprenticeship model** has been critical in making NHS careers more accessible. It offers **flexible, progressive pathways** from support worker to registered nurse, using **"step on, step off" models that allow learners to pause and rejoin their education as needed**. *"Some people were excellent clinical nurses but really were struggling with the academics ... They can step out as a nurse associate and then... progress in the future."*

UHMBT also target groups traditionally underrepresented in the workforce in Morecambe Bay, including those leaving school at 16 and older adults returning to the workforce. *"They're more practically based... they want to progress and have a career."* The apprenticeships are aimed at young people and older adults returning to work: *"It's capturing those young learners and older people we wouldn't otherwise attract."*

²T-Levels are a two-year technical qualification for 16-19 year olds in England, offering an alternative to A-levels and apprenticeships. They are designed in collaboration with employers and provide a combination of classroom learning and on-the-job experience through a 45-day industry placement. T-Levels are equivalent to three A-levels and can lead to higher education or direct employment.

CAREERS EVENTS AND ENTRY-LEVEL RECRUITMENT

UHMBT's **Careers and Apprenticeships Team** plays a vital role in **widening access and building awareness from an early age**. They deliver multiple initiatives, including engagement with local schools, T-level placements across hospital sites, and high-profile events such as the **350 Careers in Healthcare showcase for secondary school pupils**. *"You have to win hearts and minds very young now. People want to know at 15 or 16 – what will I earn? How will it work? Will I get paid?"*

UHMBT's local **recruitment events**, particularly for clinical support roles, **address common barriers** such as digital exclusion and offer on-the-spot support, assessment, and interviews. *"We provide these forums... where people come and we talk about the job, assess personality and values, and then guide them through the system of application. It's provided a lot of recruitment."* Their recruitment model combines approaches that target specific job roles with tailored support that meets individuals where they are, recognising both the needs of the health system and the varied backgrounds, aspirations, and barriers faced by local people. The **demand for these events is high**, expressions of interest often close within 12 hours, and each event typically **results in 20-30 new hires**.

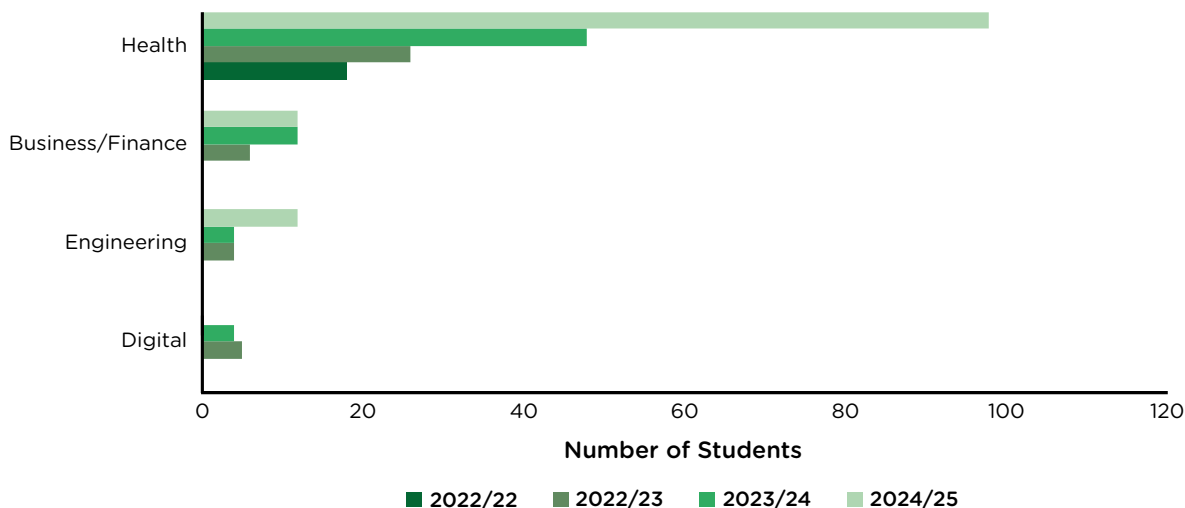
To support those hired, particularly individuals who have been economically inactive, UHMBT offers **personalised onboarding and follow-up assistance**. *"They can book appointments with the careers team to sit.... We've ensured a personal, very local process."*

THE CENTRAL ROLE OF THE CAREERS AND APPRENTICESHIPS TEAM

The Careers and Apprenticeships Team has been central to Morecambe Bay success in local recruitment. This small team works across schools, colleges, and community settings to inspire, inform, and guide people into careers in health and care. They are the driving force behind the integration of T-level students into hospital placements, collaborating with FE colleges in Lancaster, Kendal and Barrow to place young learners across a wide range of clinical and non-clinical areas.

UHMBT welcomed 105 T-level students to work placements during 2024/25 and plans to welcome up to 140 in 2025/26 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Breakdown of T-level placements by speciality and year, University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust, 2021/22 to 2024/25



Source: University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust

The reach of the Careers and Apprenticeships Team is extensive: from organising the high-profile "350 Careers in Healthcare" event for secondary school pupils to providing one-on-one support with NHS job applications for both internal and external applicants. *"I can't tell you the amount of innovation and integration they have with local schools and colleges. They really push and drive that success."* The team also **provide crucial follow-up support**, helping applicants navigate online systems and ensuring no one is excluded due to IT skills or confidence. Their approach reflects the broader ethos of UHMBT: not only recruiting staff, but nurturing future professionals who are connected to Morecambe Bay.

IMPACT AND OUTCOMES

UHMBT's community-first approach is **showing results**. While apprentice retention data is still emerging, they report a **significant improvement in overall workforce stability**. *"We have seen a massive improvement in our turnover rates...people feel happier, they stop leaving."* Turnover rates for nursing and midwifery roles is reported at 5.5%³, and new apprenticeship routes are helping to address higher churn in entry-level roles.

Morecambe Bay's success is **built on a deep understanding of community needs, cross-sector collaboration and sustained investment in its workforce**. *"We've been very definite, very strategic around moving towards an apprenticeship model...The more we can do to get that story out, the better."*



Image: 350 Careers Event showcasing some of many great career opportunities in the NHS

³In August 2023, the overall staff turnover rate in NHS England was 8.1%.(15)

MERSEY CARE: TACKLING HEALTH INEQUALITIES THROUGH LOCAL RECRUITMENT

Since 2021, Cheshire and Merseyside have been working in partnership with the Institute of Health Equity, a collaboration that led to the development of the **All Together Fairer** report, an approach for reducing health inequalities in the region. (16) This partnership shaped Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust's commitment to increasing access to meaningful, quality work as a key part of its approach to addressing inequalities.

ROOTED IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Mersey Care has made local recruitment central to its long-term strategy, aiming to create a workforce that reflects the communities it serves. Through its **Anchor commitments**, the Trust focuses on targeting positions for local people, understanding community demographics, and creating pathways into employment, including pre-employment programmes, work placements, and volunteering opportunities.

A particular focus has been placed on young people, recognising their critical role in building a future workforce that is diverse and representative. Initiatives include:

- **Healthcare Academies**, delivered in partnership with schools and colleges across the Liverpool City Region, giving young people hands-on experience in clinical and non-clinical roles. The week-long programmes have been well received, helping participants gain insights into healthcare careers and make informed decisions about their futures.
- As a signatory to the **Care Leaver Covenant**, Mersey Care provides bespoke employment support to care leavers aged 16–25, offering targeted Healthcare Academy programmes and coaching to ease the transition into work.
- Through the **Sefton Caring Business Charter**, the Trust supports care-experienced young people into employment and learning opportunities, helping them overcome barriers to work.



Employment Specialist and client in the Life Rooms, Mersey Care.

SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH RECOVERY THROUGH EMPLOYMENT

Mersey Care also recognises that employment is a critical health intervention, particularly for those living with mental illness. Its **Individual Placement and Support (IPS) service**, delivered through the Life Rooms, provides personalised employment support for people with severe mental illness (SMI) across Liverpool, Sefton, St Helens, Knowsley, Warrington, and Halton. Embedded within clinical teams, the the IPS service offers rapid access to competitive employment, person-centred support, and sustained in-work assistance, helping individuals overcome practical and emotional barriers.

This service plays a vital role in a region with some of the highest rates of economic inactivity and deprivation in England. By **bridging health and employment services, the IPS service supports recovery, reduces reliance on health and care services, and tackles key drivers of inequality.**

In addition, **Employment Advisors** work in close partnership with NHS Talking Therapies services as part of efforts to improve employment outcomes for individuals experiencing common mental health conditions. These advisors provide **tailored support** to individuals facing employment-related challenges, helping them **return to work following periods of absence or transition** into new roles after long periods of unemployment. The intervention offers a combination of **skills-based support, information, advice, and practical guidance** to assist individuals in remaining in, returning to, or gaining employment.

In addition, Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust's **Life Rooms** service plays a key role in supporting employment through its integrated model. The service enables digital interoperability between clinical mental health teams and the Life Rooms' social prescribing and learning services. This **connectivity allows service users to be referred to a broad network of community-based resources, including employment agencies.** Life Rooms Learning further enhances employability by offering a **diverse range of programmes focused on confidence-building, skill development, and personal activation**, supporting individuals to progress in both life and learning.

In addition, **Care Navigators** support individuals to engage in community activities, set personal goals, and build confidence. Volunteering, facilitated by Care Navigators, has helped many participants **develop skills, routines, and social connections** that act as stepping stones to employment.

Mersey Care has also created **Project Support Worker roles** for **people with lived experience of secure mental health services**, bringing valuable patient insights into service delivery while creating employment opportunities for individuals who often face significant barriers to work.

IMPACT AND OUTCOMES

Mersey Care's approach also delivers wider benefits. The IPS service is **internationally recognised for its effectiveness**, doubling or tripling employment rates for people with serious mental illness compared to traditional methods. Locally, around 40% of participants with serious mental illness secure paid work, often sustaining employment beyond 13 weeks.

Employers also benefit from recruitment support, while the NHS and wider care system see reduced pressures linked to unemployment-related ill health. This **whole-system, wraparound approach** is a practical example of how NHS organisations can use their influence to reduce inequalities in health and the social determinants of health and strengthen local economic resilience.(See Table 2)

Table 2. Mersey Care's Individual Placement and Support service functions

Who is supported?	How IPS supports them
Individuals	• Personalised, strengths-based support to explore goals and work preferences. • Rapid job search and placement without unnecessary delays. • Help to overcome barriers (CVs, interviews, benefits, adjustments). • Ongoing, in-work support to promote sustainable employment and reduce relapse risk.
Employers	• Matching suitable candidates to vacancies. • Advice on reasonable adjustments, inclusive recruitment, and mental health awareness. • Ongoing support for both employer and employee to ensure success. • Opportunities to support local communities and meet social responsibility aims.
Health and Care Systems	• Integration with mental health services so employment is part of care planning. • Reduced pressure on primary and secondary care by addressing health impacts of unemployment. • Contribution to health locally and to local health inequality strategies and anchor institution commitments.

LESSONS FOR OTHER AREAS

Mersey Care's experience offers valuable learning:

- **Embed employment support within clinical pathways**, making work part of recovery planning.
- **Invest in employer engagement**, supporting businesses to offer inclusive, flexible employment.
- **Leverage NHS anchor status** to champion local recruitment and tackle inequalities at source.
- **Foster collaboration across health, employment, and community services**, aligning efforts to improve health equity, employment, and wellbeing.

LOOKING AHEAD

Mersey Care's commitment to local recruitment and employment support is helping to build a diverse, skilled workforce and improve health outcomes across its communities. By viewing employment as a health issue, the Trust is contributing to wider efforts to reduce inequalities, improve population wellbeing, and strengthen the local economy.

FCMS: LEVERAGING LOCAL RECRUITMENT TO TACKLE HEALTH INEQUALITIES

FCMS is a large social enterprise delivering a wide range of NHS services across the North West of England. Established in 1994 as a GP cooperative, FCMS has expanded its reach to provide urgent care, diagnostics, dental services, and more, serving communities in Lancashire, South Cumbria, South Yorkshire, Greater Manchester, and the Midlands. As a major provider of urgent care services in the region, FCMS operates several Urgent Treatment Centres (UTCs) and Out of Hours services, including those in Blackpool, Morecambe, and Fleetwood. These services are integral to the local healthcare infrastructure, offering accessible care to thousands of patients annually.

The Institute of Health Equity has highlighted FCMS's work as a compelling example of how NHS providers can actively address health inequalities. Our 2023 report showed FCMS's commitment to tackling the wider social determinants of health by embedding social value into healthcare delivery, especially in areas of high deprivation such as Blackpool and Fleetwood. FCMS's holistic approach not only ensures equitable access to urgent care but also strengthens local capacity to address the root causes of health disparities. (17)

This commitment to improving the social determinants of health locally is further demonstrated through a range of local initiatives aimed at local recruitment and community development:

- **Health and Social Care Academy Partnership:**

In collaboration with Blackpool & Fylde College and local hospitals, FCMS is a member of the Blackpool Health and Social Care Academy. This partnership aligns training with workforce needs, while apprenticeships are funded via levy contributions. Apprentices are paid full market rates throughout their training.

- **Family and Friends Referral Incentives:**

To promote long-term commitment and community continuity, FCMS runs a referral scheme offering staff £50 for successfully recommending candidates. This initiative has led to multiple generations of families working together within the organisation.

- **Inclusive Recruitment Outreach:**

Acknowledging barriers to digital access, FCMS is launching a billboard campaign to promote job opportunities to wider audiences. Roles are regularly shared on social media, through community networks, and at local careers fairs. In some cases, vacancies are geographically targeted—such as within 10km of key sites—to better reach local applicants. A prominent “We Are Hiring” banner is also planned for the Blackpool Head Office to encourage walk-in interest.

These efforts reflect FCMS's commitment to building a sustainable, locally invested workforce, and demonstrate how a large social enterprise employer can play a pivotal role in supporting local recruitment and community development.



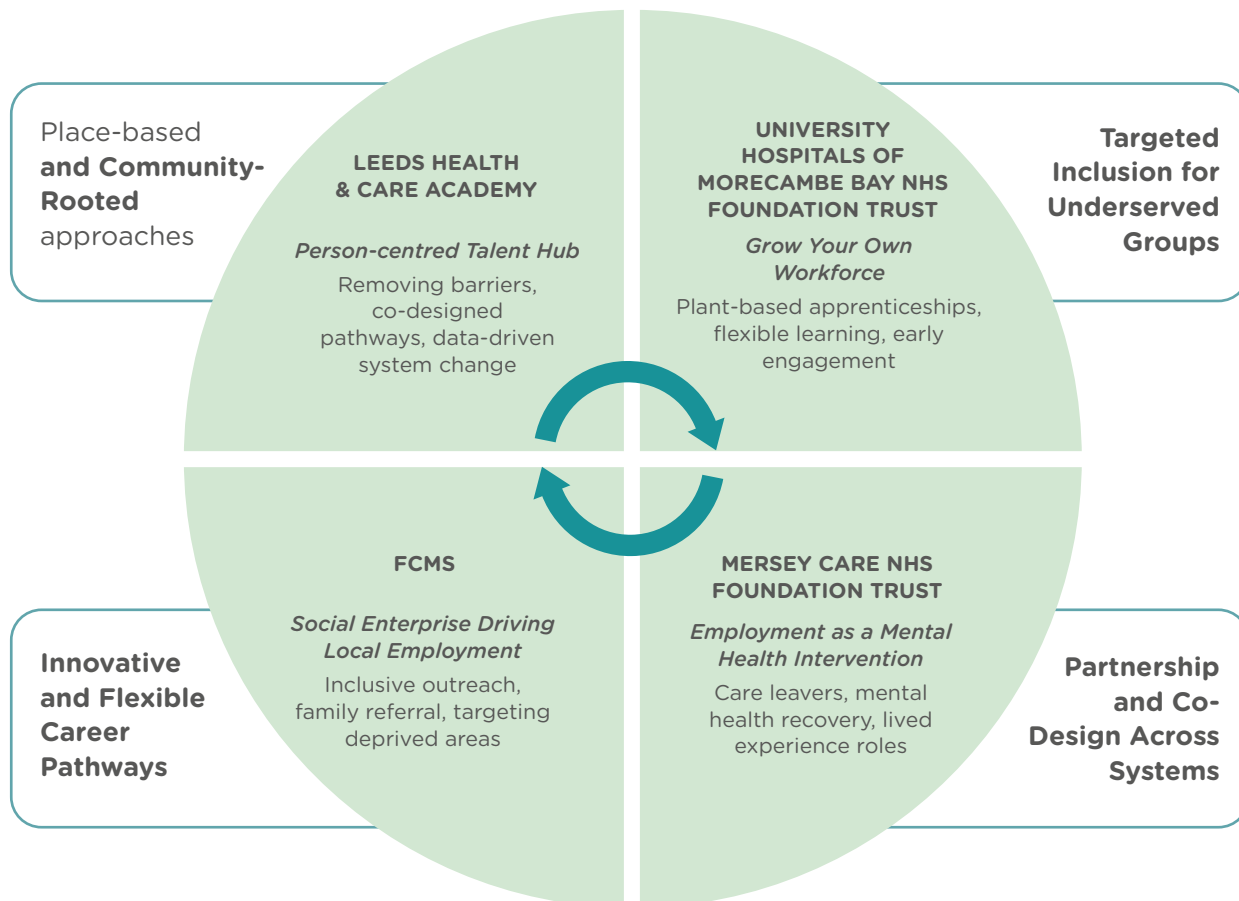
FCMS recruitment in action.

NHS RECRUITMENT AS A LEVER FOR HEALTH EQUITY

These four case studies demonstrate how NHS organisations can reimagine recruitment as a strategic tool to address health inequalities and build more inclusive, resilient workforces.

- In **Leeds, the Health and Care Academy** and its **Talent Hub** are **reshaping recruitment by placing the individual at the centre**, providing wraparound support, and co-designing programmes with communities. Their approach challenges traditional, transactional models of recruitment and instead **embeds workforce development as a system-wide health equity intervention**.
- **University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay Foundation Trust** have taken a deep-rooted, place-based approach, focusing on **‘growing their own’ workforce from within local communities**. Through strong partnerships with the University of Cumbria and FE colleges, flexible apprenticeship models, and tailored local events, they are removing structural barriers and **ensuring that people living in areas of high deprivation have accessible, supported pathways into NHS careers**.
- **Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust** illustrates how **employment can be a mental health intervention**. By widening participation through healthcare academies, supporting care leavers, and embedding employment advisors into clinical teams, they are **not only filling workforce gaps but also promoting recovery, self-worth, and social inclusion among those with complex mental health needs**.
- **FCMS**, as a large NHS social enterprise, shows how **providers can leverage their local recruitment practices to tackle wider social inequalities**. By using creative outreach methods, localised recruitment campaigns, and family referral incentives, they are building a sustainable workforce that is rooted in the communities they serve, including some of the most deprived parts of the North West.

Figure 1. Local recruitment approaches as drivers of health equity



Across these case studies, several common lessons emerge:

- **Local recruitment** must be intentional and targeted, with strategies that address specific barriers faced by underserved groups.
- **Partnership working and co-design are essential**, ensuring that recruitment and workforce pathways reflect local needs and realities.
- Employment can be **both a health and economic intervention**, supporting not only individuals into work but also contributing to community wellbeing and stability.
- Models like the Talent Hub, apprenticeship pathways, and embedded support roles show that the NHS can **move beyond traditional recruitment methods**, creating systems that work for people who have historically been excluded from health and care careers.

Together, these case studies show that the **NHS has the capacity to use its recruitment power as a lever for reducing inequalities, building healthier communities, and creating a workforce** that truly represents and understands the populations it serves.



Leeds Apprenticeship event - Leeds Arena.

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