Staff retention: guidance for employers

By Erin Dean

Essential facts
As nurse numbers decline, the retention of staff takes on greater importance for the NHS.

Last year the RCN said there were 40,000 nursing vacancies in England alone, and the nursing register is shrinking. NHS organisations focus on recruitment, but it is also important new and existing staff are supported and encouraged to stay with their employers.

What’s new
Practical guidance on staff retention from NHS Improvement encourages employers to listen to nurses.

The guidance, based on best practice from 75 trusts in England, urges organisations to engage and empower staff and look closely at staff development and career planning.

It calls on employers to standardise work environments and consider making it easier for staff to transfer to different jobs within the organisation.

Employers should know how many of their staff are over 50 and offer them a tailored option such as reducing their number of working days or letting them step down to a less demanding role.

Staff engagement can be improved by looking at staff survey data, considering the forums available to nurses for raising issues and suggesting ideas, and ensuring success is recognised and celebrated.

Issues that prompt staff to leave include staffing levels, work pressure, feeling unsupported and not having enough time to do the job well. Good line manager relationships, role rotation, feeling valued and a consistent approach to flexible working encourage people to stay, the document says.

The NHS Improvement guidance includes case studies showing changes employers have made to improve retention. These include showing career plans on a single page at Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust, and ‘councils’ at Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust where staff can raise issues and ideas.

Erin Dean is a freelance health journalist

Implications for nurses

The report urges employers to:
» Improve standardisation of practice to improve quality, efficiency, and patient and carer experience
» Implement a staff induction process that is relevant across an organisation and considering ways to share staff across typical working boundaries can help standardise practice
» Offer tailored packages for nurses over 50 and those in mid-career, including greater flexibility and new opportunities
» Consider a two-year preceptorship for new starters, a buddy system and career clinics to support newly qualified nurses
» Map out career pathways in the trust so staff can see how they can develop in the organisation

Josie Irwin
RCN head of employment relations

‘We are in the middle of what is probably the most acute nursing shortage there has been.

‘While recruitment is important, so is holding on to our most experienced and expert nurses.

‘Part of the problem with retention is that it has become a vicious circle, as vacancies can’t be filled, staffing reduces and work pressures increase, prompting more nurses to leave.

‘This document from NHS Improvement is very helpful. It outlines a series of practical steps and acknowledges there isn’t a simple or single step to solve retention.

‘It is based on listening to nurses’ own experiences and acting on that.

‘It also doesn’t shy away from recognising that pay is one of the issues.’