

Culture review of ambulance trusts

Siobhan Melia, Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust chief executive, published an [independent culture review of ambulance trusts](#), commissioned by NHS England (NHSE), on 15 February 2024. This briefing outlines the context of the review, summarises the report and its recommendations, and sets out NHS Providers' view. If you have any questions or comments, please contact Amber Jabbal, head of policy and strategic projects (amber.jabbal@nhsproviders.org).

Context of the review

In February 2023 the National Guardian Office's (NGO) published a [report](#) highlighting significant cultural challenges within ambulance trusts across England, which made it difficult for staff to speak up, and called for an independent review of ambulance sector culture.

The review considers the core factors impacting cultural norms within ambulance trusts in England and offers actionable recommendations for improvement. The findings are underpinned by quantitative research, including data from the NHS staff survey and CQC reports, and qualitative findings from interviews with key stakeholders, including other blue-light sector organisations. A dedicated working group, made up of ambulance trusts and regulators, developed and reviewed recommendations.

The report highlights worrying indicators of ambulance sector culture such as [NHS staff survey data](#), in which ambulance trusts consistently have poorer results in key metrics across: experiences of stress, burnout, anxiety; staff members' intention to leave their current role; and all seven People Promise elements. The report acknowledges that while [progress](#) has been made, core factors continue to limit changes to cultural norms, and improving organisational culture remains an area of challenge for the ambulance sector.

The importance of cultural improvement is also reflected in the current national policy context, with clear emphasis in the [NHS People Plan](#), [Long Term Workforce Plan](#) and [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion \(EDI\) Improvement Plan](#). [These workstreams](#) all aim to improve staff and patient experience, and the operational environment, through appropriately staffed, compassionate and inclusive workplaces. This is welcome.

Recommendations

The six key recommendations and corresponding actions directed at NHSE, ICB and trust level are outlined below. Additional detail on the actions recommended for trusts is also included.

Recommendation one: Balance operational performance with people performance at all levels

- **NHSE** to embed culture improvement alongside operational targets in planning and delivery oversight; and to work with the Association of Ambulance Chief Executives (AACE) to review the role they play in embedding culture improvement in the ambulance sector
- **ICBs** to review lead ICB commissioning arrangements
- **Ambulance trusts** to routinely review workforce culture alongside operational performance

The report recommends **ambulance trust boards to routinely review workforce culture alongside operational performance, taking account of the main themes for improvement**. As part of its findings, the report notes that the persistent focus on operational performance often overshadows the equal importance of people and culture, creating a disconnect between the two and hindering progress on improving organisational culture. The report refers to stakeholder feedback on the need to balance the focus on operational performance with people metrics, and place patient outcomes on an equal footing to staff experience.

Recommendation two: Focus on leadership and management culture and develop the ambulance workforce

- **NHSE** to develop a bespoke leadership and management offer and review existing career frameworks to develop the ambulance workforce
- **ICBs** to enable cultural change by facilitating shared learning across ambulance trusts
- **Ambulance trusts** to develop a clear vision and set of values, have a registered paramedic on the Board, and provide protected time for individuals to receive leadership and management training and development

The report contains three recommendations for ambulance trusts focused on leadership and management. The first recommendation calls for trusts to **develop clear vision and values and role model these from board to floor**. The report points to previous research and reviews, such as the

Messenger review, that have consistently highlighted the important link between effective leadership development and management, and shaping a positive organisational culture. The report notes that ambulance trusts continue to fall short in embedding compassionate and inclusive leadership, impacting staff and patient experience. The historic 'command and control' leadership model within the ambulance sector is also noted, and the report views this as unsustainable for day-to-day practice. The report specifically highlights stakeholder asks to embed compassionate leadership into the operational context of the ambulance service.

The second recommendation is that **every trust should have a registered paramedic on the board to represent this staff group**. While acknowledging that this is already the approach taken by some ambulance trusts, the report refers to stakeholder feedback that stressed this approach better represents views of the workforce and ensures that cultural issues are given due attention, so should therefore be made the norm. The report also suggests that paramedic leadership development and management should be strengthened, offering clinical supervision opportunities to encourage aspiring leaders.

The third recommendation calls for **protected time for appropriate leadership and management training to be provided and investment in specialist management skills and training programmes**. The report recognises the need for consistency and coordination in the way leaders and managers are trained, developed, and valued. Feedback from stakeholders included the need for further clarity on career development and the need to create further opportunities for the unregistered workforce. The report references the existing **AHP Career framework** as a useful tool to upskill clinical staff.

Recommendation three: Improve the operational environment, line management and undergraduate training

- **NHSE** to review health and wellbeing frameworks taking account of operational context
- **ICBs** to offer portfolio working opportunities to ensure paramedics are supported to work across organisational boundaries
- **Ambulance trusts** to review the paramedic operating environment and management models, and ensure all staff have access to line managers and health and wellbeing schemes

The report contains four recommendations for ambulance trusts centred around workforce pressures and wellbeing. The first and second recommendations call for trusts to **review the operating environment of paramedics, ensuring the operational rota is people-centred and collaborative; and to review management models and bring teams together in a more collaborative way**. Operational and

workforce pressures within the ambulance sector, which are impacting staff morale and motivation, are widely known. The report acknowledges the support and initiatives that have already been implemented to enhance ambulance staff wellbeing, and the potential of the same in operational working environments such as new team working interventions and multidisciplinary collaboration.

The third recommendation calls for **all staff to have clear and direct access to a line manager**. Findings from the report highlight the impact of competing pressures on capacity for professional development and management support, which negatively impacts on staff motivation and morale.

The fourth recommendation outlines the need to **continue to develop and deliver health and wellbeing schemes for all staff**. The report recognises various tools and interventions that have been embedded in ambulance services, such as Wellbeing Guardians, but states that further progress must be made to enhance staff wellbeing and tackle burnout and stress.

Recommendation four: Translate NHS Equality Diversity and Improvement (EDI) Improvement Plan into a bespoke Plan for ambulance trusts

- **NHSE** to collaborate with AACE on a bespoke ambulance sector EDI improvement plan
- **ICBs** to monitor the implementation of ambulance trust EDI improvement plans
- **Ambulance trusts** to deliver EDI priorities, including tackling barriers to recruitment

The report calls for ambulance trusts to **deliver EDI priorities and tackle barriers to recruitment, working on adverts and job profiles to improve diversity**. The report points to recent data (2022 Workforce Race Equality Standard [report](#) and 2022 Workforce Disability Equality Standard [report](#)) which shows the structural inequities and unacceptable behaviours staff continue to face in ambulance workplaces. The report welcomes the [NHSE's EDI Improvement Plan](#), and recognises that ambulance trusts are making progress in positive EDI initiatives to enhance recruitment and retention, but notes inconsistencies between organisations.

Our [race equality board support offer](#) is designed to help trust leaders tackle structural race inequities and embed accountability. A wide range of [resources](#) are available on our website, including recordings of peer learning events and webinars. Future events are also listed [here](#).

Recommendation five: Target bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment and enable freedom to speak up

- **NHSE** to monitor delivery of national sexual safety charter, paying particular attention to the ambulance sector
- **ICBs** to monitor bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment, and take action where needed
- **Ambulance trusts** to uphold policies and provide training to all staff including managers, and ensure effectiveness of Freedom To Speak Up (FTSU) functions

The report contains three recommendations for ambulance trusts related to bullying and harassment. The first recommendation calls for trusts to **uphold all ambulance policies and take appropriate action and ensure all ambulance staff act with integrity to their colleagues, students, volunteers, and contractors**. The report notes that the issue of bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment within ambulance trusts, is deeply rooted. Despite progress to tackle inappropriate behaviour, the report states that tackling complex operational pressures is often prioritised over strengthening staff safety and embracing a 'just culture'. Stakeholder feedback states the importance of all staff to be held to clear expectations of appropriate behaviour.

The second recommendation states trusts should ensure **all staff receive sexual safety and bystander training, and equip managers to have difficult conversations, building moral self-efficacy and self-regulation within the workforce**. The report points to NHSE's [Sexual safety charter](#) and the AACE's [Reducing misogyny and improving sexual safety](#) resource, noting the feedback from stakeholders on the need to further embed these principles into practice.

The third recommendation calls for **boards to ensure the effectiveness of FTSU functions to allow staff to report discrimination and harassment without fear of reprisal**. The report acknowledges efforts that have been made to ensure staff feel psychologically safe, but notes staff are often still met with scepticism and delayed action when concerns are raised. The report refers to stakeholder feedback on the need to improve anonymous reporting mechanisms and ensure that when concerns are raised, they are addressed promptly and effectively.

Recommendation six: Prioritise, support and develop Human Resources and Organisational Development (HR&OD) functions:

- **NHSE** to partner with trade unions on a collaborative statement to support cultural change and empower HR&OD functions
- **NHSE/ICBs** to develop a bespoke HR&OD offer accounting for the cultural challenges within ambulance services

- **Ambulance trusts** to implement appropriate infrastructure for effective speak up culture

The report calls for ambulance trusts to **implement appropriate infrastructure for an effective speak up culture which includes trained investigators for the most complex of cases**. The report acknowledges that different methods of conflict resolution are being explored in the sector. Feedback from stakeholders on the need trained investigators and consistent practice with regards to misconduct is highlighted.

Next steps

NHSE has welcomed the report and its recommendations. NHS Providers will work with NHSE, AACE and trusts to consider how these recommendations can be delivered effectively and identify where we can offer support to trusts, and influence NHSE's ongoing work.

NHS Providers view

NHS Providers welcomes this important and constructive report and its focus on tangible actions to support improvement. It is clear that ambulance services face serious cultural issues that are impacting the wellbeing of staff and their experience at work, as highlighted in last year's NGO's [report](#) which led to this review. We know that trust leaders are committed to improving the experience of their staff and to ensuring a positive working culture.

We welcome the review's acknowledgement and focus on staff wellbeing, EDI and embedding a culture of improvement alongside meeting operational targets. Patient demand has been rising relentlessly, placing pressure on those in both clinical and non-clinical roles in ambulance trusts. As recognised in the report, trust leaders know that in order recover services and ensure performance meets the expectations of patients and the public, staff wellbeing and workplace experience must improve.

We welcome the recommendation to enhance leadership and management capabilities within ambulance trusts. We will push for a particular focus on this as part of NHSE's ongoing work in management and leadership development and on EDI Improvement Plan implementation to ensure these important recommendations make progress.

The report contains important recommendations to tackle bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment and enabling psychological safety and freedom to speak up. Nobody working for the NHS should be subject to bullying, harassment, discrimination or violence, yet this report highlights

that these behaviours persist far too frequently. As the report acknowledges, it is important to build an open culture where staff feel confident in raising issues and concerns. It is also important for boards to reflect on their governance and how they listen to staff and pick up the signals indicating concerns and where action and support may be required.

We particularly welcome the recommendation to develop a bespoke HR&OD offer accounting for the cultural challenges within ambulance services. The ambulance sector faces a unique set of challenges due to its working environment compared to other healthcare settings. Interventions to improve workplace experiences and staff wellbeing are commonly acute focused, and not always easily transferable to the ambulance workforce. At a time when staff vacancies remain worryingly high, trust leaders will welcome tailored support in this area.

We note the omission of specific recommendations regarding call handling staff, which ambulance trust leaders have repeatedly told us are a staff group of concern in terms of the nature and volume of their work, and consequently high turnover. We will continue to raise these concerns with the national bodies, including our engagement on the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan refresh.

Trust leaders are committed to improving the experience of their staff, ensuring a positive working culture, and implementing the recommendations from this report. It is important that this is done in partnership and with the buy-in and support at all levels of the sector, including ICBs and system partners. The ambulance sector is facing extremely high operational demands, and it will be a challenge for them to make headroom to address everything in this report immediately. Ambulance trust boards recognise their responsibility and the agency they have to make improvements, and sustained support from national bodies and system colleagues will be essential to addressing the issues raised. The wider NHS will also want to reflect on the findings of this review and its relevance in improving culture across the sector.

NHS Providers press statement

Welcoming the findings of an independent review of the culture across ambulance trusts in England, Sir Julian Hartley, chief executive, NHS Providers, said:

“It is essential that staff feel confident to speak up and this review sets out welcome practical actions to address serious cultural problems within ambulance services.

“Trust leaders agree there’s no room for bullying and harassment in the NHS and no room for complacency. Staff and patients must be and feel safe.

“Trusts are working hard to safeguard staff wellbeing and to improve leadership as well as equality, diversity and inclusion while striving to hit operational targets in services under huge pressure, but more can and will be done.

“Trust leaders are committed to implementing the review’s recommendations, working closely with partners throughout the health and care system.”