



Wellbeing champions

Co-ordinating a route to retention



A practical approach toolkit

Based on Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent ICB's approach



Introduction	03
The context	04
About the organisation	05
The approach	06
Building blocks	08
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Planning and preparing■ Digital and technology■ Financing and investment■ Involving key stakeholders■ Governance and implementation■ Workforce■ Pilot, refinement and embedding■ Outcomes, impact and learning	
Recommendations	11

Introduction



Wellbeing is more than a morale booster – it's a strategic lever for workforce stability. When support structures are absent, stress and sickness escalate, driving turnover and disrupting care continuity.

To address this, Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Integrated Care Board (ICB) introduced a co-ordinated, system-wide approach that placed wellbeing at the heart of everyday practice through a network of wellbeing champions.

Key highlights?

- Practical, low-cost model built on peer support, central co-ordination and inclusive engagement.
- Scalable approach that normalised wellbeing conversations, improved morale and strengthened workforce resilience.
- Cultural change without major investment, driven by thoughtful design, peer-led support and continuous learning.

ICBs plan and fund local health services, bringing partners together to improve outcomes and shape system-wide priorities. As their remit around workforce continues to evolve, cross-sector initiatives like this may, over time, be led or sustained by local authorities, provider networks or care associations.

This toolkit provides a practical framework for introducing a network of wellbeing champions. The approach can be adapted to work in different local contexts, and you can use the building blocks and recommendations to guide you in adopting the approach in a way that works for your area.

The context



Recruitment and retention challenges in adult social care often stem not just from pay or training, but from staff wellbeing. When wellbeing is overlooked, continuity suffers, costs rise and services become unstable.

These pressures rarely reflect a lack of care – providers face workforce shortages, tight budgets and constant operational demands. Leaders have limited capacity to co-ordinate wellbeing initiatives, even when they understand their value.

Wellbeing directly affects how long staff stay, how effectively they work and the safety of care. In an already stretched sector, neglecting it amplifies every challenge and undermines long term sustainability.

Why wellbeing matters for retention

Care work is demanding – both emotionally and physically. Staff manage complex needs, unpredictable shifts, and the responsibility of safeguarding vulnerable individuals. Without consistent wellbeing support, stress builds, leading to burnout, disengagement, and ultimately, high turnover that destabilises services and impacts care quality.

- **Without wellbeing support, retention suffers** – Staff who feel unsupported are far more likely to leave within the first year, often after costly recruitment and induction processes, creating a cycle of churn and instability.
- **Turnover rates remain high** – The independent sector faces a 24.7% turnover rate, with care workers reaching 35.6% – figures that dwarf the national average and highlight the urgent need for proactive wellbeing strategies.
[\(Skills for Care: The size and structure of adult social care, data from 2024/25\)](#)
- **Continuity of care is compromised** – Frequent staff changes fracture relationships, disrupt routines and reduce care quality. For people with dementia or complex needs, this instability can lead to confusion, anxiety and deterioration in health outcomes.
- **Managers face mounting pressure** – High turnover forces leaders to juggle recruitment, induction and crisis management. Induction processes often become rushed or fragmented, leaving new recruits unprepared and increasing the likelihood of early exits.
- **Financial costs escalate quickly** – Replacing a single care worker can cost up to £6,000, and sector-wide turnover drives annual costs into billions – often exceeding what structured wellbeing investment would require.
[\(Care England: Solving the annual £3bn recruitment and retention cost to adult social care providers, 2024\)](#)
- **Operational risks intensify** – When staffing levels can't be maintained, reliance on agency staff grows, team cohesion suffers, and service closures become more likely. This makes wellbeing a critical factor for sustainability.

About the organisation

The Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent ICB was established in July 2022 as part of a national transformation. This was more than a structural change – it marked a cultural shift toward collaboration, pro-active health equity and ill health prevention. The ICB leads a system designed to bring health and social care closer together, rather than in isolation.

This system spans two very different geographical areas. Staffordshire is largely rural and has an older population, with 22% of residents aged 65 or over. In contrast, Stoke-on-Trent is urban and younger but faces significant deprivation.

More than half of Stoke-on-Trent's neighbourhoods are ranked among the most disadvantaged in England according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation, which measures factors such as income, employment, health, education and housing. In practical terms, this means many communities experience high levels of poverty and poor health outcomes.

These contrasting landscapes create complex challenges: meeting the health needs of an ageing population while tackling the social and economic pressures linked to deprivation. Against this backdrop, workforce wellbeing becomes critical – not simply for morale, but for sustaining care quality and stability across the system.

Why this matters

Health inequalities here are stark. Stoke-on-Trent faces high cardiovascular mortality and infant deaths. It also faces significant mental health challenges. Staffordshire struggles with limited access to support in rural communities. These realities shape the ICB's priorities:

- Reducing inequalities through targeted interventions.
- Improving access to primary care and urgent services.
- Embedding ill health prevention strategies via population health management and data-driven planning.

Culture and wellbeing leadership

Within this local context, the ICB made workforce wellbeing a priority, recognising that a healthy, supported workforce is essential to meeting population needs. Beyond its clinical responsibilities, the ICB also champions equality, diversity and inclusion.

It fulfils statutory duties under the Public Sector Equality Duty and applies frameworks such as the Workforce Race Equality Standard. Wellbeing leadership is woven into this commitment – creating environments where staff feel valued, supported and able to thrive.

The approach



The approach is practical, inclusive and centrally coordinated, using peer led wellbeing champions and simple, low cost tools to strengthen staff voice, embed everyday wellbeing support and drive culture change across adult social care.

“Retention and wellbeing are inseparable. High sickness, stress and anxiety rates make wellbeing critical. Supporting staff isn’t just nice to have – it’s essential. If staff feel safe and supported, they stay. That insight drove our planning from day one.”

Zara Parrish, ICS People Programme Manager,
Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent ICB

What was the challenge?

The Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent ICB faced significant workforce wellbeing challenges in adult social care, shaped by local context and operational realities.

With over 50,000 health and social care staff across the system, their wellbeing and engagement are critical to delivering safe, high-quality care. Yet providers often lacked the time, resources and infrastructure to co-ordinate meaningful support.

Unlike NHS staff with structured wellbeing frameworks, smaller and independent social care services often operate without similar infrastructure. This gap created a clear disparity in staff experience and outcomes, prompting a system-led response through the Integrated Care System (ICS).

Recognising this gap, the ICB committed to creating an inclusive environment where staff feel valued and supported – because retention and wellbeing are inseparable. Without proactive action, high stress, sickness absence and burnout would continue to undermine morale, increase turnover and destabilise services.

The goal was to design a scalable, inclusive model that could work across diverse care settings, ensuring every provider, regardless of size, could offer meaningful wellbeing support. This initiative was not optional; it was essential for sustaining care quality and workforce resilience.

- **High stress and sickness absence** – Anxiety, depression and burnout significantly impacts morale and retention across adult social care providers.
- **Limited capacity to co-ordinate wellbeing** – Time pressures, financial constraints, and lack of dedicated HR or wellbeing roles left managers overstretched and reactive.

“Feeling underdeveloped impacts wellbeing. Training and CPD requests from surveys revealed how professional growth links directly to mental health and job satisfaction.”

Karina Bennion, Former ICS People Partner for Social Care, Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent ICS/ICB

What was introduced to address these challenges?

Recognising that retention and wellbeing are inseparable, the ICB launched a system-led initiative to embed wellbeing into everyday practice across diverse care settings. As part of this, the ICB:

- **Conducted baseline surveys** – Identified gaps in wellbeing resources, training and development opportunities, shaping priorities based on real workforce needs.
- **Identified and then refined who would become wellbeing champions** – Original ambitions to utilise nursing associate apprentices as champions changed when it was clear they would not have the capacity to commit the time needed. This pivot led to the ICB focusing on front line carers and other staff in providers.
- **Recruited wellbeing champions** – Front line managers from providers promoted the opportunity to their staff, inviting volunteers or nominating colleagues. Staff stepped forward via provider networks, forums and word of mouth, creating a motivated group of champions.
- **Established a wellbeing champion network** – Created peer-based points of contact within services, ensuring staff had approachable, trusted colleagues for wellbeing support.
- **Delivered free training and resources** – Provided psychological first aid, signposting tools, and access to specialist support through the ICS-supported Staff Psychological Wellbeing Hub, a pre-existing initiative. Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training was also available via a local college.
- **Maintained central co-ordination** – Hosted quarterly virtual meetings, distributed resources and sustained engagement across geographically dispersed providers.
- **Leveraged digital tools and partnerships** – Used virtual meetings, morale-boosting activities, and resource sharing to ensure accessibility and scalability without additional cost.
- **Maintained momentum and focus** – Built 6- and 12-month evaluations into the original plan to measure impact, guide improvements, and keep wellbeing firmly on the workforce agenda.

“Champions became the go-to people staff trusted. They were already informal listeners, so formalising that role amplified their impact.”

Rich Bagnall, Service Manager, Staff Psychological Wellbeing Hub,
Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent ICS/ICB

Outcomes and impact

Despite operating on minimal funding, the initiative achieved strong engagement and cultural change, laying the foundation for long-term improvement:

- **Rapid network growth** – Expanded from 15 champions to 109 across 46 services within a year, supporting an estimated 2,376 staff and reaching around 10% of the adult social care workforce.
- **Improved workplace culture** – Champions helped normalise conversations around mental health, menopause and financial wellbeing – turning sensitive topics into everyday dialogue. By embedding wellbeing into daily practice and acting as visible, approachable figures, they created trust and made support accessible across teams.
- **Laid the foundation for cultural change** – Demonstrated that prioritising staff wellbeing can deliver measurable improvements in morale, engagement and service quality, proving that wellbeing is integral to workforce sustainability rather than an optional extra.
- **Enhanced engagement and capability** – Wellbeing hub usage rose by 76%, with increased uptake of psychological services and CPD opportunities for wellbeing champions boosting confidence and positioning them as wellbeing leaders.

“The success comes from listening first, acting second. Foundations built on real needs created trust, engagement and sustainability.”

Rich Bagnall, Service Manager, Staff Psychological Wellbeing Hub,
Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent ICS/ICB

Key decisions that secured success

- **Maintained central co-ordination** – Reduced administrative burden on providers and ensured consistency across the network.
- **Adopted a low-cost, high-impact model** – Used free resources, partnerships and staff feedback to overcome financial barriers and maximise reach.

Key learning

“If this moved entirely into providers without central co-ordination, it would fail. They simply don’t have time to source resources or manage networks.”

Karina Bennion, Former ICS People Partner for Social Care, Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent ICS/ICB

The programme highlighted essential lessons for sustainability and replication, especially in a sector where wellbeing initiatives often struggle to gain traction:

- **Central co-ordination is essential** – Without a dedicated co-ordination point, initiatives risk fragmentation and reduced effectiveness. Providers alone may lack the time and capacity to manage networks and source resources, so a co-ordinating lead organisation is needed.
- **Peer-to-peer support works** – Champions acted as trusted colleagues rather than managers, making wellbeing conversations informal and approachable. This model increased engagement and ensured support reached those who needed it most.
- **Lean delivery drives success** – Initial setup required staff time, but streamlined processes proved that strategic co-ordination, creativity and commitment – not large budgets – are the real enablers of impact and sustainability.

Recommendations

The recommendations provide practical, evidence-based steps for planning, implementing and sustaining a wellbeing champion initiative. It covers everything from securing leadership buy-in and engaging front line staff to leveraging digital tools, embedding governance and measuring cultural impact.

Each recommendation is supported by actionable ideas drawn from real-world experience. Access the checklist to explore how you can adopt and tailor this approach to strengthen workforce wellbeing, improve morale and build a culture of care that supports retention and resilience.



Timeline

Year	Key activity
2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Baseline survey revealed major wellbeing and training gaps■ Initial focus on nursing associates proved unworkable■ Pivoted to recruit wellbeing champions from all front line roles■ First network meeting held in May with 15 wellbeing champions■ Evaluated first six months
2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Network grew to 100+ wellbeing champions across 46 providers■ 12-month evaluation confirmed strong engagement
2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Ongoing engagement support to network

