# One-third of NHS-licensed GPs in England have never worked or left NHS practice, raising workforce concerns



An analysis published in the British Medical Journal has revealed a concerning trend in NHS general practice in England: one in three GPs who hold a licence to practise have either never worked in the NHS or have left the service. This disparity raises questions about the workforce’s ability to meet growing patient demand. Over the last decade, the number of NHS patients per full-time equivalent (FTE) GP has risen by 15%, while the number of patients per NHS consultant has fallen by 18%, highlighting a significant imbalance in primary care workload.

The study, covering the years 2015 to 2024, found that for every five additional GPs licensed by the General Medical Council (GMC), the NHS lost one FTE GP from general practice annually. Consequently, the proportion of GMC-licensed GPs not working in NHS general practice increased from 27% in 2015 to 34% by headcount in 2024, and from 41% to 52% when measured by FTE. This shortage is especially marked among female GPs, those aged 30–39 years, and in London and the South East. The research also noted a reliance on female GPs and those aged 40–49, while male GPs aged 50–59 showed the fastest decline in NHS general practice numbers.

Experts suggest multiple factors contribute to this workforce challenge. Funding constraints limit the ability of some practices to offer jobs to newly qualified GPs, while many existing practitioners face burnout and poor working conditions. Professor Kamila Hawthorne, chairwoman of the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP), stated that cash-strapped practices struggle to fund sufficient GP roles, affecting patients who experience difficulties accessing care. She also highlighted visa challenges for overseas-trained GPs who have completed UK training, urging for policy changes to allow them indefinite leave to remain, thereby easing their path to NHS employment.

The workforce shortfall coincides with structural shifts in general practice. Research by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine shows a 15% decrease in qualified FTE GPs per 1,000 patients over the past decade, amid a 20% fall in the total number of NHS general practices across England. Simultaneously, average patient lists per practice have increased by 40%, pointing to fewer, larger multidisciplinary practices managing more patients with fewer GPs. This consolidation intensifies the workload burden on individual GPs.

The decrease in GP surgeries is backed by data from University College London, which reports an 11% growth in the number of people registered with NHS general practices since 2013. The number of practices has fallen by one-fifth in the same period, pressuring remaining surgeries to cope with larger patient populations. The Royal College of GPs has stressed the urgent need for government support to keep local practices open and adequately staffed.

The government, for its part, has announced recruitment of over 2,000 additional GPs as part of its Plan for Change. This initiative aims to shift care out of hospitals and into community settings, increasing appointment availability and reducing pressure on emergency services. NHS figures for 2025 indicate record high numbers of fully qualified GPs (38,960) and a substantial rise in patient satisfaction. Over 7 million more GP appointments were delivered in the past year compared to the previous year, with 72.4% of patients reporting ease in contacting their GP practice, up from 60% and 72.9% rating their overall GP experience as good.

Despite this progress, the growing gap between licensed GPs and those active in NHS general practice, along with increasing patient list sizes and practice closures, suggest that the system remains fragile. British Medical Association GP Committee chairwoman Katie Bramall pointed to the "significant loss of talent and capacity" as the profession struggles to retain practitioners amid rising demand. She warned that without urgent government funding and workforce strategy reforms, the "brain drain" of GPs will worsen, threatening patient care at its most fundamental level.

In summary, while recent recruitment and government investment have bolstered GP numbers and appointment availability, the overall picture remains challenging. Increased patient loads, declining numbers of practices, and retention difficulties driven by funding, visa issues, and burnout continue to strain the NHS general practice workforce. Future workforce planning must prioritise both recruiting new GPs and retaining experienced practitioners to sustain patient care standards across England.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/one-in-three-gps-have-never-worked-in-nhs-or-have-left-data-suggests-TSLZYPOUZFJR5NEHHUBTYRJNJM/), [[2]](https://www.the-independent.com/news/uk/home-news/gps-nhs-england-experts-london-b2828701.html)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/one-in-three-gps-have-never-worked-in-nhs-or-have-left-data-suggests-TSLZYPOUZFJR5NEHHUBTYRJNJM/), [[2]](https://www.the-independent.com/news/uk/home-news/gps-nhs-england-experts-london-b2828701.html)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/one-in-three-gps-have-never-worked-in-nhs-or-have-left-data-suggests-TSLZYPOUZFJR5NEHHUBTYRJNJM/), [[3]](https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/newsevents/news/2024/new-analysis-finds-15-fall-qualified-fte-gps-across-england), [[4]](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2024/sep/20-fall-gp-surgeries-while-patient-lists-grow)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/one-in-three-gps-have-never-worked-in-nhs-or-have-left-data-suggests-TSLZYPOUZFJR5NEHHUBTYRJNJM/), [[3]](https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/newsevents/news/2024/new-analysis-finds-15-fall-qualified-fte-gps-across-england), [[4]](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2024/sep/20-fall-gp-surgeries-while-patient-lists-grow), [[7]](https://www.rcgp.org.uk/News/Number-of-GP-practices)
* Paragraph 5 – [[5]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/millions-more-appointments-as-more-than-2000-extra-gps-recruited), [[6]](https://www.england.nhs.uk/2025/07/millions-more-gp-appointments-delivered-in-record-year/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/one-in-three-gps-have-never-worked-in-nhs-or-have-left-data-suggests-TSLZYPOUZFJR5NEHHUBTYRJNJM/), [[2]](https://www.the-independent.com/news/uk/home-news/gps-nhs-england-experts-london-b2828701.html), [[6]](https://www.england.nhs.uk/2025/07/millions-more-gp-appointments-delivered-in-record-year/), [[7]](https://www.rcgp.org.uk/News/Number-of-GP-practices)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/one-in-three-gps-have-never-worked-in-nhs-or-have-left-data-suggests-TSLZYPOUZFJR5NEHHUBTYRJNJM/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.the-independent.com/news/uk/home-news/gps-nhs-england-experts-london-b2828701.html> - An article from The Independent reports that one in three GPs licensed to practise in England have never worked in the NHS or have left the service. The piece highlights a 15% increase in the number of NHS patients per GP over the past decade. Experts attribute this trend to funding issues, burnout, and poor working conditions. The analysis, published in the British Medical Journal, reveals that for every five additional GPs licensed by the General Medical Council, NHS general practice lost one full-time equivalent GP each year between 2015 and 2024. Consequently, the proportion of licensed GPs not working in NHS general practice rose from 27% in 2015 to 34% in 2024 by headcount, and from 41% to 52% by full-time equivalent GPs. The article also notes that the number of NHS patients per full-time equivalent GP increased by 15%, while the number of patients per NHS consultant decreased by 18%. The study found that by the end of 2024, there were twice as many NHS patients per full-time equivalent GP (2,260) compared to NHS consultants (1,092).
3. <https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/newsevents/news/2024/new-analysis-finds-15-fall-qualified-fte-gps-across-england> - A study by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) found a 15% decrease in the number of qualified full-time equivalent (FTE) GPs per 1,000 patients in England over the past decade. The research, published in BMJ Open, indicates that between 2013 and 2023, the number of NHS general practices in England decreased by 20%, while the average practice patient list size increased by 40%. The study suggests a shift towards larger multidisciplinary practices with fewer FTE GPs, amid growing patient lists. The findings highlight significant structural changes in English NHS general practice during this period.
4. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2024/sep/20-fall-gp-surgeries-while-patient-lists-grow> - An analysis involving a UCL researcher revealed that over the past decade, the number of NHS general practices in England decreased by 20%, while the average practice patient list size increased by 40%. The study, published in BMJ Open, combined data from NHS England, the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, and the Care Quality Commission between 2013 and 2023. The findings show that over the course of 10 years, the number of people registered with an NHS general practice in England grew by 11%, with a temporary slowdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the same period, the number of NHS general practices fell by 20%, while the average practice patient list increased by 40%.
5. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/millions-more-appointments-as-more-than-2000-extra-gps-recruited> - The UK government announced the recruitment of over 2,000 additional GPs as part of the Plan for Change to rebuild the NHS by shifting healthcare from hospitals into the community. The initiative aims to end the 8am scramble for appointments and increase GP capacity. The new GPs are expected to deliver over 4 million additional appointments per year, with the average GP now responsible for 2,300 patients. The recruitment boost follows the government's removal of red tape that previously made it difficult for surgeries to hire doctors.
6. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2025/07/millions-more-gp-appointments-delivered-in-record-year/> - NHS England reported that general practice delivered over 7 million more appointments in the past year compared to the previous year, reaching a total of 380 million. The data shows that in June 2025, practices delivered 31.4 million appointments, a record for June and nearly a third more than the same period pre-pandemic. The increase in appointments comes amid rising patient satisfaction, with 72.4% of people finding it easy to contact their GP practice, up from 60% less than a year ago. The data also indicates that 72.9% of people rated their overall GP experience as good, compared with 67.4% last year.
7. <https://www.rcgp.org.uk/News/Number-of-GP-practices> - The Royal College of GPs reported that the number of open and active GP practices in England has fallen by over a thousand in eight years, from 7,254 in January 2018 to 6,229 in July 2025. During the same period, the number of registered patients in England has risen by over 4.8 million. The RCGP emphasizes the need for government action to ensure struggling GP practices have the funding, workforce, and support they need to stay open and remain at the heart of their local communities.