# Understanding how unprofessional behaviour in English NHS Trusts can be prevented and reduced

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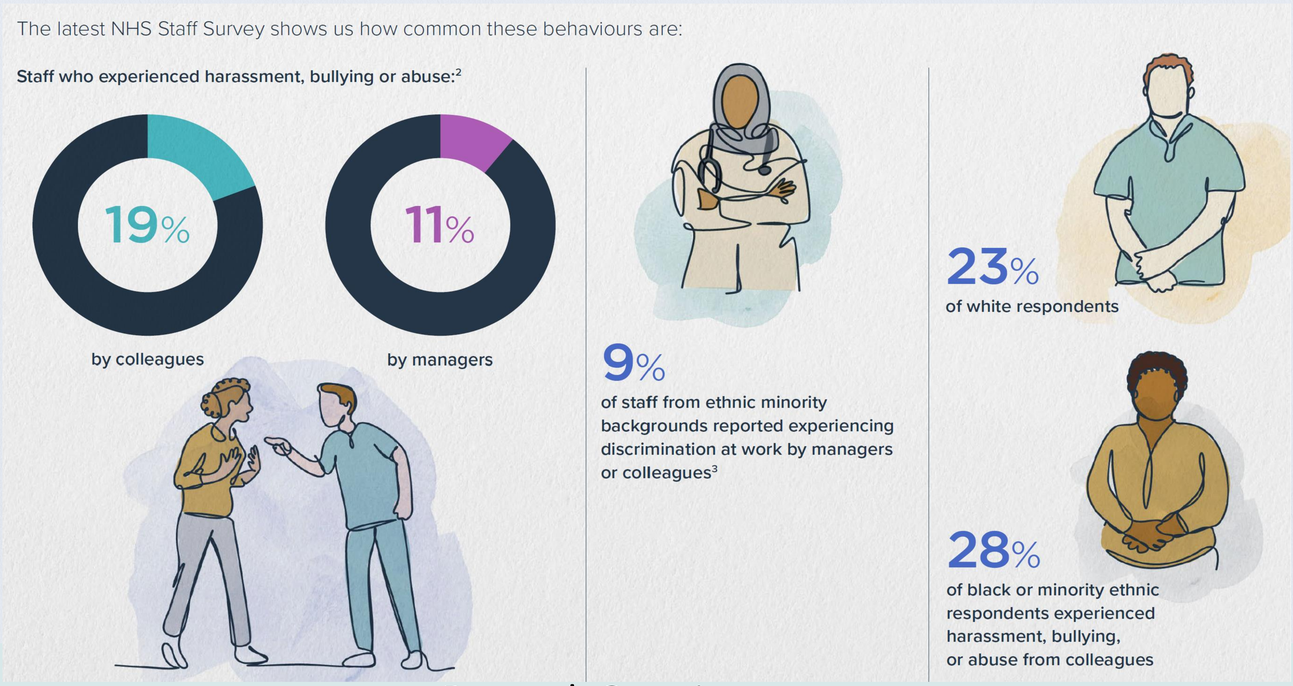
## Background

- Unprofessional behaviour is any interpersonal behaviour by a staff member that acutely or frequently undermines, humiliates, intimidates, or causes distress or harm to other staff, in the healthcare workplace.
- Almost all NHS staff experience incivility and about a quarter report bullying or harassment each year.
- Women, staff with disabilities and staff from ethnic minority backgrounds experience more unprofessional behaviour than others.
- Unprofessional behaviour harms staff well-being and reduces patient safety.
- Bullying alone costs the NHS around £2 billion a year.
- Despite acknowledging the need for improvement, the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan lacks a clear plan for addressing unprofessional behaviour, highlighting the urgent need for evidence-based solutions.




## Research Questions

1. What is the national context around tackling unprofessional behaviour and how do NHS trusts compare on measures of unprofessional behaviour based on routine data, and how does this change over time?
2. What activities, organisational structures, processes, and interventions have been introduced in NHS organisations to reduce unprofessional behaviours?
3. By what mechanisms do different activities, organisational structures, processes, and interventions to reduce unprofessional behaviour work at individual, group, profession and organisational levels?
4. In what ways do activities, organisational structures, processes, and interventions to reduce unprofessional behaviours take account of the varying needs of diverse staff groups (e.g. professional groups, women, staff with disabilities, and staff from ethnic minority backgrounds)?
5. How can existing programme theories for understanding unprofessional behaviour be improved and refined, and how might this support the development of more effective interventions to reduce it?

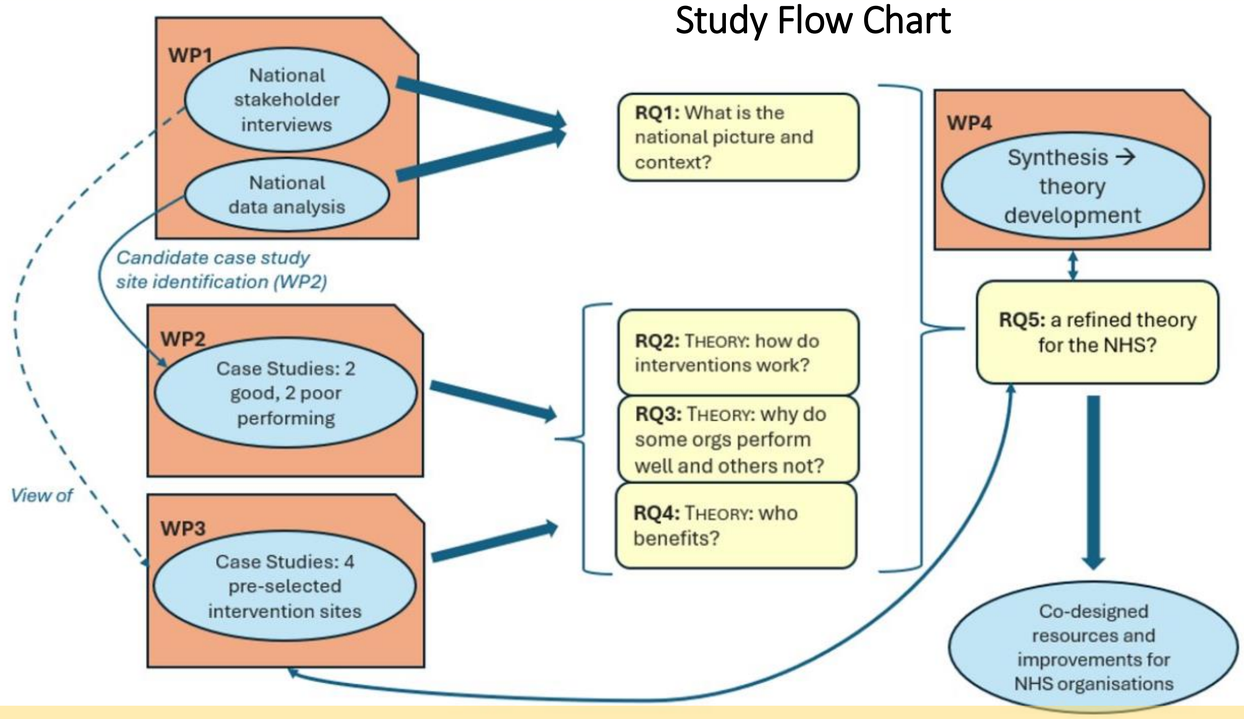
## Objectives

The study aims to identify organisational structures, cultures, leadership styles and interventions that reduce unprofessional behaviour and to generate practical, evidence-based recommendations for NHS Trusts to foster more positive and respectful working environments.

## Methodology

- **Realist Evaluation Approach** will enable exploration of how organisational strategies work (or fail), for whom, and in what circumstances.
- We will conduct **qualitative in-depth case studies in NHS Trusts**, including document reviews, observations of interventions and realist interviews with staff across grades and professions.
- Using **realist evaluation methodology** we will synthesise the empirical data from all WPs to refine our prior realist review-based programme theory.

## Study Flow Chart




## Outputs and Impact

- Outputs will be co-produced with NHS staff , our experts by experience and PPIE colleagues and disseminated through national networks, workshops and NHS leadership programmes.
- We will produce high-impact actionable and accessible findings which will support trusts to prevent and reduce unprofessional behaviour in the NHS, improve staff wellbeing, reduce turnover, enhance patient safety and reduce associated costs.
- The outputs will contribute to national guidance, supporting healthier workplaces and safer patient care.

To collaborate, please get in touch: j.ferguson.1@bham.ac.uk

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