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INTRODUCTION

In July 2025, NHS England in the East of England, Cambridge University Hospitals and Royal Papworth Hospital joined up to deliver a week-long Access Accountancy work experience programme. The initiative welcomed eight students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, giving them a unique opportunity to learn about NHS finance and the breadth of career paths available.

This case study will outline the importance of the initiative as well as practical advice as to how to get this started in your organisation or system.

Now in its third year, the programme has gone from strength to strength. The 2025 model delivered collaboratively across three NHS organisations, not only enriched the student experience but also made hosting more manageable and sustainable for staff. It shows that with the right partnerships, delivering widening participation initiatives can be both impactful and achievable.

"If we want to improve diversity in NHS finance and truly represent the populations we serve it is important that we give everyone no matter their background the opportunity to access our finance departments."

WHY THE PROGRAMME MATTERS

Access Accountancy placements are built on the principle that professional opportunities and networks should not be limited by socioeconomic background. These placements give young people from less advantaged communities direct exposure to the accountancy profession — including the working environments, culture, and day-to-day tasks — which many may never have the chance to experience otherwise.

The programme helps to level the playing field by enabling participants to:

- Develop professional skills — such as financial literacy, analytical thinking, communication and presentation,

understanding organisational structures, and teamwork.

- Gain confidence in a corporate environment — by meeting professionals, observing workplace behaviours, and navigating real-world project tasks.
- Build a network of contacts — making connections with mentors, finance professionals, and peers, which can open doors to future guidance, internships, and roles.
- See real-world relevance — relating theoretical subjects they may study in school (maths, economics, business studies) to practical applications in NHS finance and healthcare settings.



COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

In previous years, NHS organisations in the East of England have run the work experience weeks individually. This year, three organisations decided to work in partnership — NHS England, Cambridge University Hospitals NHS FT and Royal Papworth NHS FT.

This approach had several advantages:

- Broader exposure: Students saw finance in action at both a system level and a hospital level.
- Shared responsibility: Teams didn't need to host for a full week on their own, easing logistical pressures.
- Varied learning: Each site offered different perspectives, from financial governance to hands-on operational finance.

The success of this model has inspired plans to repeat and expand it in future years.

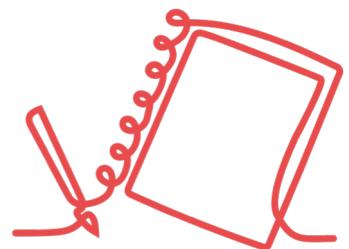
"We wanted to give students a richer, more realistic experience. NHS England is a regulator, which can feel a bit narrow. By involving local trusts, students saw how money flows through the NHS and impacts patient care."

PROMOTING THE PROGRAMME

One of the biggest challenges in the early years was simply getting the word out to schools. In year one, progress was slow because there were no direct contacts with local careers teams. Without those links, it was difficult to reach the right students.

Things improved once the team connected with a colleague at Addenbrooke's whose role included working with schools. She already had strong relationships with careers advisers across the region, which meant the programme could be promoted much more effectively.

By year three, promotion had become much smoother. The programme also began to benefit from links with the NHS Insights placement scheme, which already targets students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. These existing networks provided a ready-made feeder route, helping to attract students who could benefit most.



ATTRACTING AND SUPPORTING STUDENTS

The programme attracted significant interest, with 72 applications received. Out of these 72 applications 60 of them came from outside the region showing demand for the programme across the country.

Out of the 12 students that were in the region 8 ended up on the programme from across the East of England, travelling daily, often long distances to take part.

Because it was run jointly across NHS England, Cambridge University Hospitals, and Royal Papworth, there were several bits of paperwork to complete:

Application forms – Each organisation had its own process, so students filled in joint forms covering details like what they were studying, why they wanted to take part, and confirmation of school permission.

Safeguarding and duty of care – Students and guardians had to sign forms around confidentiality, safeguarding, and commitments on both sides. A key point was ensuring students would never be left alone with a single member of staff.

Parental/guardian consent – Permission was needed for things like photographs, social media posts, and creating LinkedIn profiles. Students were encouraged to connect with the professionals they met online, which many did.

Liability Insurance Certificate – Organisations will need to provide a Liability Insurance Certificate.

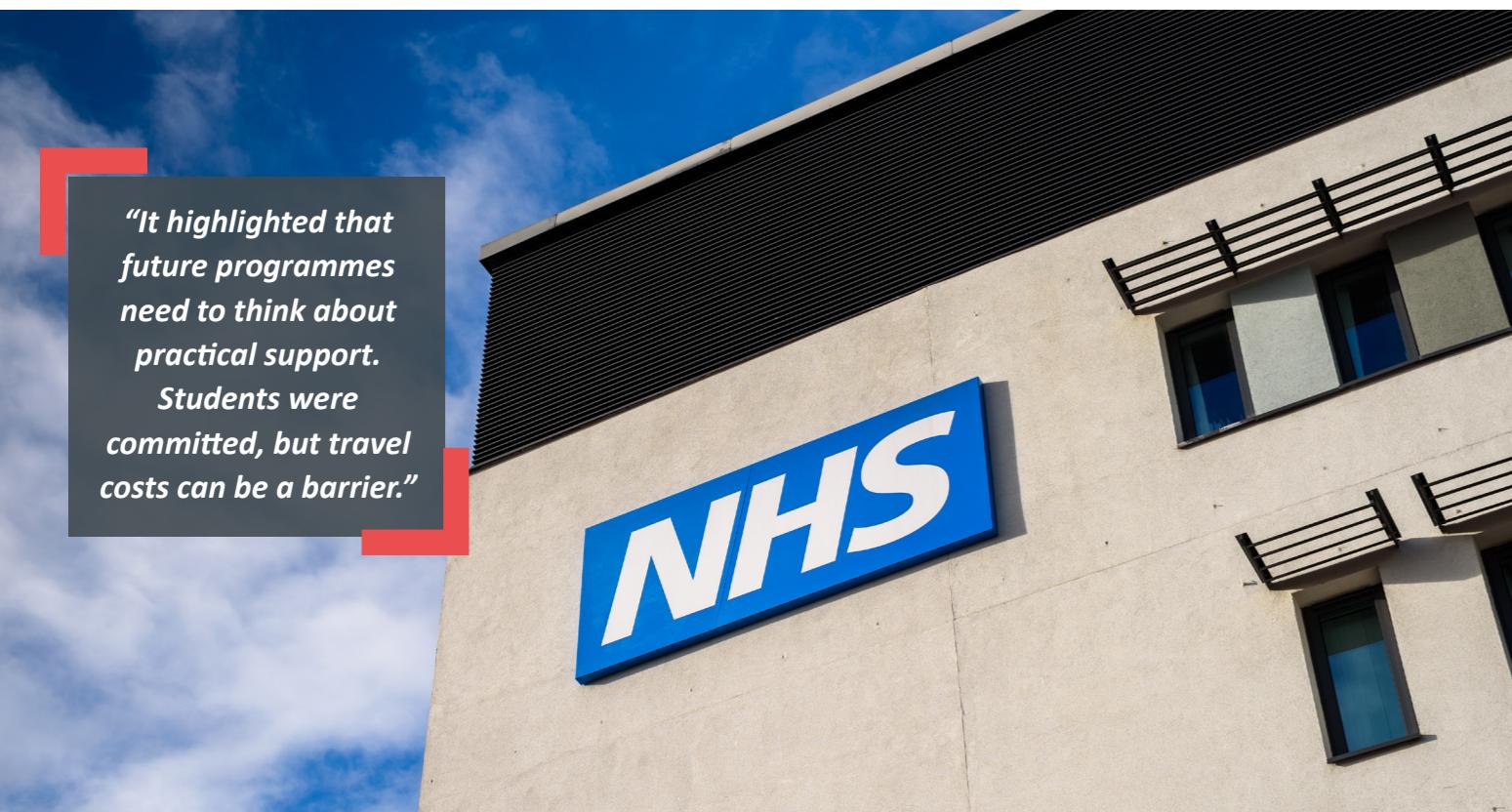
School coordination – A Unifrog form (from schools) set out what the students would be doing and confirmed attendance. It proves agreement and assurances for all parties – students, schools and the NHS hosts.

Practicalities – Travel costs were considered, and while bursaries weren't available this year, there was recognition that this could help widen access further in future.

Commitment was high, but there were some challenges around funding travel and lunches. With no petty cash system available, creative solutions were needed, including supermarket vouchers and charitable contributions.

Despite these hurdles, the students' determination was striking, and their participation was supported through careful safeguarding, consent processes, and school liaison.

"It highlighted that future programmes need to think about practical support. Students were committed, but travel costs can be a barrier."



WHAT THE STUDENTS EXPERIENCED

Over the week, students got a mix of learning, networking, and hands-on activities designed to show the breadth of NHS finance and how it connects to patient care.

NHS England (first two days)

- Introduction to NHS finance and how money flows through the system.
- Career insights from apprentices, placement students, and staff with varied career paths.
- Discussions on salaries, pensions, flexible working, and NHS benefits.
- A group project that would lead to presentations at the end of the week.

Addenbrooke's Hospital (middle of the week)

- Tours of the hospital, including behind-the-scenes areas such as tunnels, laundry services, and logistics.
- Meetings with finance and operational staff.
- Exposure to the sheer scale of NHS operations, including the daily costs of running services.

Royal Papworth Hospital (final day)

- Introduction to innovative technology, such as the AI-driven pharmacy robot.
- Team building exercise testing skills including communication, cooperation, planning, decision making, time management and negotiation.
- Dedicated time for students to rehearse and deliver group presentations.
- Quizzes and exercises on NHS costs and budgeting.

The week ended with group presentations and quizzes hosted at Royal Papworth Hospital, in a dedicated presentation space. Staff, including senior leaders, attended to hear what the students had learned and to celebrate their achievements.

[Click here to see the timetable for the week.](#)



IMPACT ON STUDENTS

By the end of the week, students' confidence had clearly grown. Some had never presented before but successfully spoke in front of senior NHS staff.

Other key impacts included:

- Improved confidence: Students who were quiet on day one spoke fluently by the end.
- Enhanced employability: Experience to add to CVs and LinkedIn profiles, plus new professional contacts.
- Raised aspirations: Greater awareness of NHS careers and alternative routes into finance.
- Networking: Many students connected with staff on LinkedIn, extending their professional networks.

The programme also helped students recognise the NHS as not only the UK's largest employer, but also a sector offering varied, meaningful, and secure career opportunities.

While some students noted they would have liked to do more "real work," the mix of talks, activities, and site visits gave them a rounded view of NHS finance and showed how money flows through the system to support patient care.

"They thought it would all be about numbers – but they realised finance is about people too."



BENEFITS FOR NHS STAFF AND ORGANISATIONS

Running an Access Accountancy-style programme isn't just good for the students, it has real benefits for NHS organisations too:

As one of the biggest employers in the world, the NHS has a duty to be inclusive and representative. The initiative directly supports efforts to widen participation and address inequalities. By reaching out to young people who might not otherwise see themselves here, we can break down barriers and show that public service careers are genuinely open to all.

"It's a win-win. Students gain insights into NHS careers, and staff get a fresh reminder of the impact of their work."

Opening doors - As one of the biggest employers in the world, the NHS has a duty to be inclusive and representative. The initiative directly supports efforts to widen participation and address inequalities. By reaching out to young people who might not otherwise see themselves here, we can break down barriers and show that public service careers are genuinely open to all.

Growing future talent - Work experience is a great way to spark interest early. Instead of waiting until people graduate, NHS finance teams can introduce students to the variety of roles on offer and start building relationships with potential recruits. Access Accountancy is a great way to give those who might be interested in applying for the Insights Placement Scheme a taster of what it is like to work for an NHS finance team.

Staff engagement - Staff found it rewarding to explain their work and see its relevance through the eyes of students.

Changing perceptions - Lots of students (and parents) assume NHS finance is all about "hospital accounting" – spreadsheets in a back office. But when they get inside, they see how dynamic it really is: from advising clinical teams to planning capital projects, managing

budgets, and linking finance directly to patient care. Placements like these help bust the myths and show the many routes in, including apprenticeships and second careers.

Sharing the load - One of the big lessons from 2025 was that collaboration works. By splitting the programme across three organisations, no single team had to carry the whole thing. Each partner played to its strengths, and the students got a much richer experience of how the system works.

Seeing the bigger picture - Because the students spent time in different organisations, they got to see how different parts of the NHS fit together, from the regulator through to the frontline.

Reputation and community impact - Hosting a programme like this sends a powerful message: the NHS is committed to social mobility and giving back to local communities. It builds trust, creates goodwill, and shows that finance is an integral part of delivering NHS values.

Learning as you go - Finally, the programme gave us useful feedback from both students and staff, which means we can keep improving year on year. That evidence also helps when making the case for future funding or expanding the

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Collaboration is powerful – Sharing responsibility across sites made the programme richer and more sustainable.
2. Practical support matters – Budgeting for travel and meals is essential to remove barriers.
3. Start with existing contacts – School outreach teams and careers advisors are invaluable for recruitment.
4. Don't reinvent the wheel – Use existing templates for safeguarding, consent, and timetables.
5. Role models resonate – Apprentices, placement students, and non-traditional career paths inspired participants most.



WHY OTHERS SHOULD RUN THIS PROGRAMME

For NHS organisations considering running an Access Accountancy week, the benefits are clear:

- It inspires and informs young people who might never have considered NHS finance.
- It supports diversity, equity, and inclusion goals.
- It strengthens organisational collaboration.
- It provides a rewarding development opportunity for staff.
- It contributes to tackling health inequalities by widening access to NHS careers.

A common concern is that running a programme like this will be too resource-intensive. The reality is, it's more achievable than people think. Much of the groundwork safeguarding forms, school permissions, work experience processes already exists in most organisations. It's often just a case of bringing those elements together under the Access Accountancy banner.

As one programme lead put it:

"It's not as hard as you think. I can give you the forms. Your organisation is probably already doing some of this — careers fairs, shadowing, placements — it's just not packaged as Access Accountancy."

As another programme lead reflected:

"We're never going to improve diversity at the top if we don't start by opening up opportunities at the beginning. University isn't for everyone — and it shouldn't be the only route into the NHS."



TOP TIPS FOR OTHERS THINKING OF GETTING STARTED

Start with what's already happening – Many trusts already host work experience, shadowing, or careers events. Finance can plug into those existing channels rather than building something from scratch.

Use existing contacts – Careers advisers, school liaison officers, or apprenticeship leads often already have strong links with schools. Tap into those networks rather than trying to find new ones yourself.

Share resources – Templates, timetables, safeguarding forms, and ideas for student activities already exist. Ask for copies and adapt them to your setting instead of reinventing the wheel.

Bring in a mix of voices – Apprentices, Insights placement students, and career-changers are often the most relatable role models. Hearing their stories shows students there are many different routes into NHS finance.

Think beyond finance – Procurement, estates, operations, and workforce teams can all add variety and context. Partnering with other departments or even other local organisations enriches the experience and shares the workload.

Keep expectations realistic – Students may be shy at first and won't always speak up on day one. By the end of the week, though, they usually grow in confidence and contribute enthusiastically.

A MODEL TO FOLLOW

The 2025 NHS England East of England Access Accountancy programme demonstrated the power of collaboration and commitment in widening access to NHS careers. By opening doors for eight students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the initiative not only inspired the next generation but also reminded NHS staff of the value and impact of their work.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

- Key learning: so many different jobs in the NHS; learnt how NHS funding is distributed; differences between public and private sector; how many ways to join NHS Finance as a career; budgeting; supply chain management.
- What they want more of: practical tasks- they want to do the doing
- They were nervous before giving their presentations, but enjoyed working as a team and have more confidence to present in the future
- They enjoyed the sessions on productivity, supply chain, tour of Addenbrookes and seeing the pharmacy robot in action at Papworth the most.
- All students said they would now consider NHS Finance as a career and that we seem to be a good employer, with support to gain qualifications while working and that we pay fairly
- All students would recommend joining the Access Accountancy work experience programme.

USEFUL LINKS

- [NHS Finance Careers Site](#)
- [Access Accountancy Programme Guide](#)
- [An example welcome document for students](#)
- [An example of a confidentiality form](#)
- [An example guardian consent form](#)
- [An example application form](#)

With lessons learned and enthusiasm for repeating the model, this programme provides a strong example for other regions to follow.



FURTHER INFORMATION

You can find further information on our website:
www.onenhsfinance.nhs.uk
 Or contact us at one.finance@nhs.net



One NHS Finance brings together the Future-Focused Finance, National Finance Academy, and the Finance Innovation Forum programmes and networks to make sure that everyone working in NHS Finance has access to skills, knowledge, methods, and opportunities to influence and enhance patient services.



Future-Focused Finance (FFF) is a national programme designed to support our staff by engaging everyone in improving NHS finance. We want to bring finance staff at all levels of the profession together to build a community and platform where everyone feels valued and has a voice to support the delivery of quality services for patients. The programme will facilitate opportunities for finance staff to network, collaborate and share learning and good ideas, alongside working with clinical and other non-finance colleagues. As part of its overall aim FFF, and its networks, will identify new ways to promote NHS finance as a career choice and support our staff to make NHS finance the best place to work.