

MARK KIRKPATRICK

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SOUTH TYNESIDE AND SUNDERLAND NHS FOUNDATION TRUST

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

My name is Mark Kirkpatrick, and I am the Associate Director of Finance – Contracting at South Tyneside and Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust. I lead our contract management arrangements with commissioners, NHS providers and partners across the independent and third sectors, and I support professional development within our department. I am a CIMA qualified accountant and completed an MBA to strengthen my leadership and strategic capability. I am committed to improving services for patients and creating an environment where colleagues enjoy coming to work.

CAREER PATH

My career path has combined typical progression with unplanned opportunities. Before university, I worked in a stockbrokers, which taught me accuracy and discipline. My first NHS role—secured through an agency—was in payroll at Band 3. From there I moved into Financial Management, then became a Capital Accountant while studying. I later returned to Financial Management as a Divisional Finance Manager, gaining broader operational understanding.

A key moment came when I took a secondment into contracting and the PMO while completing my MBA, which expanded my perspective and interest in system working. I then led the delivery of a new service model supported by a major capital scheme, before returning to finance to lead on contracting, a role I've held for around ten years. I was also involved in the merger of two local organisations, one of the most significant projects in my career.

I didn't plan to stay in one organisation, but at each point a new internal opportunity emerged. I entered NHS finance by chance, but more than twenty years later I still find purpose in the work. Highlights include the everyday wins—solving problems and supporting teams. COVID 19 was extremely challenging but demonstrated the resilience and commitment of NHS staff and helped modernise our ways of working.

Setbacks taught me compromise and perspective. Many of my opportunities came from people who trusted and supported me, even when I made mistakes.

MY CURRENT ROLE

A typical day involves commissioner meetings, contract discussions, system engagement and supporting operational teams. My work centres on analysis, negotiation and problem solving, with a steady flow of issues requiring careful judgement.

I particularly enjoy helping design new service models that improve access or waiting times and, ideally, deliver financial benefits. Creative problem solving and supporting teams to find workable solutions is what I find most motivating.

The hardest part of the role is navigating national and system level guidance that doesn't always align. Financial constraints and competing priorities can create challenge, but I focus on collaboration, clear communication and building strong relationships.

I am naturally analytical, and skills such as influencing and communication have grown through experience. Diplomacy is the skill I have worked on most, as contracting often requires sensitivity and balance. Negotiation, leadership and coaching skills have developed through secondments, my MBA and excellent informal mentors, although looking back I would have valued a formal mentor.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Secondments have been the most valuable development opportunities, exposing me to new teams, cultures and ways of thinking. I've also been fortunate to have supportive leaders who encouraged me to take on challenges.


The best career advice I've received is to stay curious and keep learning. I set aside time each month for development and always have something more formal in progress. I'm currently particularly interested in AI and how it can support finance, planning and decision making.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Balancing work and home life is always a work in progress. I'm lucky to work in a supportive team, and with two children I often feel like a taxi driver, but I try to maintain boundaries where I can. Outside work, we enjoy holidays and sport, and I listen to far too many history podcasts — they help keep me grounded.

REFLECTIONS

My biggest achievements include contributing to the merger of two organisations, delivering a new service model, and developing contracting into a trusted and stable function. These improved services, strengthened partnerships and supported better patient care.



I still have aspirations. While I enjoy my current role, I am interested in progressing into business development, transformation, or wider system level leadership. I enjoy working across organisational boundaries and contributing to meaningful service change.

If I could change anything, I would have embraced diplomacy earlier, though I value the lessons learned along the way. And while it's too late to play football for Scotland, becoming an accountant has worked out well.

My work contributes to patient care through pathway improvements, stronger contracts, support for operational teams and enabling financial stability. Finance may not be visible, but its impact is significant.

To succeed in NHS finance, you need resilience, curiosity, adaptability, humility and strong relationships. My advice is to work hard, trust your instincts and recognise the real social value in what we do. We help improve the services our communities rely on — and that is something to be proud of.