

Some trusts are gaming race equality targets, says retiring NHSE lead

By [Nick Kituno](#) 30 September 2020

NHS' chief people officer should review the WRES as some organisations are gaming the system, says its former director

· **Yvonne Coghill believes now is the time for Prerana Issar to ensure it is 'fit for purpose'**

· **Says some NHS leaders 'drawing the big £250,000' while leaving black staff 'languishing behind'**

· **'Not a hope in hell' of NHS achieving race equality in a decade, despite efforts**

The NHS' race equality measures must be reviewed as some of them are being gamed by trusts, according to the NHS England director who oversaw them until earlier this year.

In a wide-ranging interview with *HSJ*, Yvonne Coghill also gave a "categorical no" on whether the NHS would have achieved equity in a decade, and criticised senior leaders who said they understood the equalities agenda but did not know how to deliver on it.

She said: "If they don't know what to do, [firstly] they have not been asking the right questions and [secondly] they just don't want to. End of. Because how much more spoon-feeding can you give these people?"

"How much more do you have to give them to get them to be able to do what they should be doing anyway as leaders? When you are a leader, you're not leading for two people or three people, you're actually leading for the whole of the population.

"How does it work that you can support, help, develop, nurture, enable, encourage, empower your white staff so that they say, 'This is really a wonderful organisation to be in', and actually leave your black staff languishing behind?"

"How can you put your head on your pillow at night and sleep well, drawing the big £250,000 [salary] a year, when you know that

you're only working for half of the population? That's half of your staff and half the patients. How does that work?

"And how, pray tell, do we let them get away with it? That's the other question."

Ms Coghill had been the director of NHS England's workforce race equality standard from 2015. [She went on to help shape London's covid-19 race equality strategy until earlier this month and is retiring imminently after 43 years in the health service.](#)

She believes the NHS' chief people officer Prerana Issar should conduct a review of WRES — which oversees a series of metrics for NHS organisations on race equality — to ensure it remains "fit for purpose".

NHS trusts are required to report their WRES data each year as it monitors how the health service is closing the gap on workplace inequalities between white and ethnic minority staff.

It has been mandated through the NHS' standard contract since April 2015, [but its latest 2019 data has shown some indicators have either stalled or slightly regressed.](#)

She said: "We did not review or change the indicators because we needed to measure like-with-like over time, but we made changes to the programme to put more of a focus on changes in culture over the last two years.

"Everything needs to be reviewed, to change, to evolve, as things and systems change. The WRES is a fantastic initiative that has done so much for so many people, the aim is to make it even better and more effective."

She added: "If I were sitting where Prerana is sitting and [thought] that Yvonne Coghill is gone, and Habib is gone, and everybody else is going from the team, I would review the whole thing.

"Particularly [if] Sir Simon Stevens is going as well. Simon was the champion for the WRES. Now, if Simon goes and we get some other person, god knows... I mean who knows what's going to happen next? We'll see."

Clocked on

Even more seriously, Ms Coghill also claimed to *HSJ* that some organisations were effectively gaming certain WRES data.

They had, she said, "found ways" around reporting their data. She used indicator three as an example, which is the likelihood of black, Asian and minority ethnic staff entering disciplinary processes

compared with white staff, and called for a review to ensure the indicators are robust enough.

She said: “Organisations are really clever, and they clocked on to this. If they take it formally it will be recorded, so what do they do instead? They do things like ‘performance management’ or ‘capability statements’ for people.

“Those aren’t formally recorded but they are equally [as] draconian as any other disciplinary process because, if you are under a process for your performance, [or having a] performance review, or your performance isn’t good enough, you are still being monitored.

“You’re still being checked and it’s still making you feel like hell because you’re being watched, and it’s not recorded.

“It’s time to have a review of them [the WRES measures] and to sit down and have a conversation about them, and have a conversation about what works, and what doesn’t work, and what we need to do differently in order to get a better outcome, and how we tighten up the screws.”

Race equality progress

Ms Coghill trained as a nurse and has worked in a range of NHS management roles, including as a private secretary to the NHS’ then-chief executive Nigel Crisp in the 2000s. She was also frank to *HSJ* about the NHS’ progress on the equalities agenda.

It comes as the disproportionate impact of covid-19 on BAME NHS staff, patients and communities, as well as anti-racism protests triggered by the killing of George Floyd, have sparked conversations around racial discrimination.

She said: “Am I confident that we are going to change it within the next five, 10 years? Nah. Not a chance. Not a hope in hell. That’s worldwide, that’s not just the NHS, so we can put initiatives in place, we can move things slowly.

“You know that thing about turning the odd starfish so that you are at least saving a couple or saving one or two? We can do that, but will we change the whole of the society? I very much doubt it.”

Ms Coghill added: “I think there will be lots of initiatives that people are going to put into place to try and make things better in the NHS, and actually that is a good thing. We have to keep trying, you have to keep trying, but whether or not it’s going to make the changes that people want to see is the story, isn’t it? That’s the question.

“In 10 years’ time, are we going to have equity in our NHS? The answer is a categoric no. Without a shadow of a doubt. I’d change my name if that happens.

“For that to happen, you’d have to have changes in the government, you’d have to have changes in the judiciary, you’d have to have changes in society and that’s just not going to happen.”

17 Readers' comments

· **Anonymous** Comment Avatar Label Commented on: 30 September 2020 12:57

Not a shred of contrition, accountability or acknowledgement from Yvonne Coghill that she / her strategy has failed. It's all everyone else's fault. Staggering.

She was told her strategy was floored. She was told that some people would game metrics, as they always do. She was given lots of advice. She ignored it. She is not solely accountable, but to show no accountability for what she says is a disaster that she was at the helm of is embarrassing and reflects very badly on her. It also will suggest to her BAME colleagues that there is no hope, which is patently not true. The last thing NHS staff need right now is to be told by a role model that they may as well not try to make things better because it's an insoluble issue. Terrible leadership.

· **Anonymous** Comment Avatar Label Commented on: 30 September 2020 12:27

I would love Ms Coghill to tell us when 50% of the population were from a BAME background.

· **Anonymous** Comment Avatar Label Commented on: 30 September 2020 12:20

As a senior person working in an NHS trust WRES or no WRES, nothing has changed on the ground. I have hardly heard the WRES metrics mentioned within the Trust. The statistics for BAME staff in senior positions remain stubbornly low. In the main, BAME staff have felt the same for years, I do not see any challenges from WRES or NHSE/I, although they would probably argue it is not their place to challenge. However for those jumping to Yvonne's defence (who I know quite well), I still wonder why she did not raise this whilst she was in a position to influence. After all, don't they say leaders do what is right and should be prepared to stand alone?

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· **Anonymous** Comment Avatar Label Commented on: 30 September 2020 11:50

Not sure why anyone is getting jumpy about this.

Seems entirely reasonable views from Yvonne to me.

Anyone who worked alongside her saw how much effort she put into agenda. Celebrities liked meeting her because she was authentic and made things happen.

She developed a great team from scratch and people are being treated differently because of WRES across NHS.

Suggesting we review it and take forward new approaches isn't rocket science either - surely?

National NHSIE colleagues have it in for her - she pressed hard from within a team that do not like being challenged.

Truly applying the new people promise would mean showing those values it asks us all to commit to - listening to and respecting (her) views..

Unsuitable or offensive? [Report comment](#)

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· **Anonymous** Comment Avatar Label Commented on: 30 September 2020 11:28

It feels paranoid to say that trusts are 'gaming the system' - in all honesty, so little thought is given to the metrics other than by a small number of people and once a year, that this sort of system-wide coordination is laughable (as it usually is).

But yes we do need more examples of what good looks like, and more effective and measurable ideas. Yes leaders are leading for the whole population: but if we make expectations so high (of overturning centuries of racism) then people will feel too hopeless to even start small.

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· **Anonymous** Comment Avatar Label Commented on: 30 September 2020 10:47

Anon [10:28](#) makes a fair challenge. Are we not able to challenge senior leaders and their rhetoric vs reality ?

What Yvonne says here in this article (and suspect it is from the heart and true) is incongruous with NHS England press notice for their win at the HSJ awards last year and social media channels :

'A national team working to ensure the NHS is a good place to work for people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds has been recognised for its actions and achievements over the last twelve months.

NHS England and Improvement's Workforce Race Equality Standard (WRES) team has been shortlisted for the 'Workforce Initiative of the Year' at this year's HSJ Awards, recognising its outstanding contribution to addressing racial inequalities across the diverse NHS workforce.

The judging panel, made up of a diverse range of highly influential and respected figures within the healthcare community, have shortlisted the WRES initiative based on its ambition, visionary spirit and the positive impact it is having on staff experiences within the NHS.

So which is true ?

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. **Anonymous** Comment Avatar Label Commented on: 30 September 2020 10:28

Some of the comments here is exactly why no progress was made . Yvonne and her team did amazing work but they need others involved to drive this agenda forward . I would say that I am surprised by some of the comments but thsi is what I deal with every day . Cynicism, whataboutery and plain nasty behaviour.

The personal digs about selfies etc are perfect examples of microaggressions. The reason why progress has not been made is because the majority leadership , unions etc are not interested in changing the status quo.

There are a lot of Senior Board members tweeting about equality etc when their staff are suffering and a lot of NHS management staff who are happy to maintain the status quo.

Sad, painful but true

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· **Anonymous**#####CommentAvatarLabel##### Commented on: 30 September 2020 10:14

I'm conflicted by this. I was glad to see Yvonne's comments here, but then reading the comments agree with them too. But where does speaking out (or 'up') become whistleblowing or career destroying honesty? It's clear why you have the freedom to when you are leaving or have left post and have less to lose.

How do we enable more of this, and so that it's not left up to the individual to weigh that risk and it encourages more of it, and when in the position to make that change happen?

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· **Anonymous**#####CommentAvatarLabel##### Commented on: 30 September 2020 09:29

I will quite happily take on the Director's role at WRES. I promise to spend time working for the cause and genuinely driving change rather than taking selfies with celebrities, going on twitter to say how great I am etc etc .

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· **Anonymous**#####CommentAvatarLabel##### Commented on: 30 September 2020 09:23

If Yvonne is so passionate about equality, why is she only speaking now that she has no influence. This was under her watch, so she is partially responsible for any failures she may perceive. Not only is WRES a complete failure in that nothing has changed on the ground, but she then gets awarded with sitting on the 'People plan board'. Same old churning around of old cronies...there is SO much excellent talent out there that exists outside the NHSE/I cult. Go out there and involve new talent, new thinking, more creative ideas.

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· **Anonymous**#####CommentAvatarLabel##### Commented on: 30 September 2020 08:33

How disapointing that these things are exposed when Yvonne retires - she seemed very passionate about change, and the things she was leading, but it all now seems a bit fake. Lots of awards and selfies with friends would indicate that Yvonne was showing things were improving but now she tells

us that aren't basically. The fact that she claims Trusts are gaming the WRES is sad if it's true. I know many of us are very passionate about the WRES and want to see change. Her response to change in ten years is desperately sad for someone in such an influential role - perhaps best that she is going to allow someone to take on the role who can inspire and challenge to ensure we do make progress over the next ten years - it won't change if we have negative people leading the charge

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· **Anonymous** Comment Avatar Label Commented on: 30 September 2020 08:30

One of the issues with WRES (and WDES) is they're not standards (ie. incorporating best, evidence-based practice) but a set of data metrics. We watch them year-on-year: they go up (yay!) and down (oh!) or some go up and others down (err?) We don't know what this means, or what to do about it, or what effect any particular action has had.

We need from the national team clearer evidence of what works, and aligned system drivers - so we're measuring, and talking about, and being performance managed on what actually makes a difference.

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· **Anonymous** Comment Avatar Label Commented on: 30 September 2020 08:26

Gaming, lack of clarity, wrong metrics, no change for BME colleagues, flagging impact, holding to account If only we had a Director of WRES to drive this change. Oh.

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· **Anonymous** Comment Avatar Label Commented on: 30 September 2020 08:19

The second high profile departure from the CPO team who takes to HSJ to vent their frustration including the veiled dig about her and Habibs departure. The rumours of an unhappy team are true then ..

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· **Anonymous** Comment Avatar Label Commented on: 30 September 2020 07:43

So what did Yvonne do about it whilst in post? It's not really that helpful to expose it to the HSJ after retiring, when she could have done something

about whilst in a position to do so.

All I saw were lots of selfies and HSJ awards, she's basically saying the whole wres thing is actually a croc of s***

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· **Anonymous**#####CommentAvatarLabel*##### Commented on: 30 September 2020 07:31

I wonder what we will say when we look back at these policies and initiatives in 50 or 100 years time.

My guess is that, unlike removing structural blocks to participation, they don't really make any difference either way because the good they do is balanced by the harm of perceived window dressing and the promotion of people on an unofficial policy.

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· **Anonymous**#####CommentAvatarLabel*##### Commented on: 30 September 2020 06:53

"Particularly [if] Sir Simon Stevens is going as well. Simon was the champion for the WRES. Now, if Simon goes and we get some other person, god knows... I mean who knows what's going to happen next? We'll see."

Realization dawned that this was the crux of the problem. Feeling insecure? a bit shaky? Change is fine when it doesn't effect you I presume?