



Aspiring Workstream: Foundational Phase Report

Overview

The Aspiring workstream was established to address a well-documented gap in the visibility and profile of the Operating Department Practitioner (ODP) profession among prospective entrants to the healthcare workforce. The ODP workforce scoping report (Health Education England, 2022) identified that public perception, knowledge and awareness of the profession remains poor, to the extent that at least one university recruitment campaign adopted the slogan ‘the profession you have never heard of’ as a deliberate recruitment strategy. The same report identified raising the profile of a career as an ODP as a formal recommendation, including investment in careers advisors, early schools’ engagement, and a national publicity campaign.

Addressing this gap requires more than generic promotion. It requires a structured understanding of who the prospective audience is, how different groups discover and evaluate the profession, and what barriers prevent conversion from awareness to application. The foundational phase of the Aspiring workstream was therefore designed to develop the marketing intelligence and operational infrastructure required to support effective, audience-differentiated recruitment communications and career promotion activity.

This report covers the foundational phase of activity. It describes the rationale for the marketing methodology adopted, the development of a marketing and audience intelligence framework, the design and deployment of a multi-cohort survey programme, and the findings and planned outputs arising from the foundational phase.

Methodology

Methodological Rationale: Applying a Marketing Framework to Workforce Recruitment

The decision to apply a marketing methodology to the challenge of ODP workforce recruitment was a deliberate evidenced based design. Treating prospective entrants as a defined audience with differentiated needs and decision-making pathways draws on three areas of established practice.

First, the NHS Employers Inspire, Attract and Recruit Toolkit explicitly recognises that communicating with potential new and young talent requires a different approach to that used with older or more experienced individuals, and that an effective attraction and recruitment strategy must be enticing across all demographic groups (NHS Employers, 2024). A single undifferentiated message directed at a broad population is unlikely to achieve the reach or conversion required to address ODP supply challenges. Audience segmentation is therefore not a commercial import but a principle endorsed within NHS workforce communications practice.

Second, audience persona methodology is an established, evidence-based approach to understanding who an organisation is trying to reach and why current communications may not be reaching them effectively. Section 2 of this report addresses this methodology in detail.

Third, customer journey mapping provides a validated framework for understanding how individuals move through a multi-stage decision process over time. Section 3 of this report addresses this methodology in detail.

Together, these three elements form a coherent and evidence-grounded methodological framework for the foundational phase of the Aspiring workstream.

Audience Persona Methodology

A persona is a structured, research-informed profile of a representative member of a target audience. Rather than describing an average across an entire population, a persona gives that audience segment a name, a background, a set of motivations, and a set of physical and psychological barriers, making it possible to think concretely about what that person needs, what they already know, and where they can be reached. The term was first developed in product design to guide software development decisions (Cooper, 1999). The methodology was subsequently adopted and refined within marketing, where it became a standard tool for understanding the people an organisation is trying to reach before designing communications aimed at them.

Revella (2015), defines the process as conducting structured research with real members of a target audience to understand their mindsets, their decision-making processes, and the factors that drive or block a particular course of action, in order to build three-dimensional profiles that guide communications strategy. Critically, the approach moves beyond demographic description. Knowing that a prospective ODP entrant is 17, male, and studying A-levels tells you very little about what would prompt him to consider ODP as a career. Understanding that he encountered the profession by chance through media, that his parents are unfamiliar with it, and that peer-produced digital content on platforms he already uses would be the most credible source of information for him, tells you a great deal about where and how to intervene.

Revella (2015) specifically identifies high-consideration decisions, those that involve significant personal investment, research over time, and comparison of multiple options, as the context in which persona methodology is most valuable. Career choice is precisely this kind of decision. It is not impulsive; it involves extended research, the influence of family, peers, and advisors, and a comparison of multiple potential pathways. Generic communications aimed at a broad population are unlikely to be effective in this context because different groups are at different stages of the decision process, have different sources of influence, and face different barriers to entry.

The use of persona methodology has also been applied in professional development and workforce contexts beyond commercial marketing. Research into designing

targeted resources for professional audiences has demonstrated that plotting participants across key differentiating characteristics, such as level of prior knowledge, motivations, and barriers, produces meaningful groupings that can be used to develop tailored interventions, with saturation across the sample used to validate the profiles (Madsen et al., 2014). This approach is directly analogous to the Aspiring workstream's use of audience personas to structure survey instruments and career communications activity across groups with materially different entry contexts.

The four personas developed in the foundational phase should therefore be understood as research tools rather than stereotypes. They are not claims that every 17-year-old school leaver or every ex-forces medical technician will share identical characteristics. They are structured representations of the dominant patterns within each group, designed to make the development of targeted communications more systematic and evidence-grounded than a single undifferentiated message directed at all prospective entrants simultaneously.

Customer Journey Mapping Methodology

The theoretical basis for customer journey mapping in the Aspiring workstream draws on three distinct bodies of marketing literature, which together provide a coherent multi-lens justification for the approach.

The earliest foundation is Kotler and Armstrong's buyer decision process model (Kotler and Armstrong, 2013), which describes a five-stage framework: problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behaviour. Although developed in a commercial context, the framework maps directly onto the process by which a prospective entrant to ODP training identifies a career need, research available options, evaluates ODP against alternatives, commits to an application, and forms a post-decision view of the profession. The model establishes that career choice is a decision process with identifiable stages, each of which presents distinct opportunities for targeted communications activity.

Court et al., (2009) challenged the linear funnel model, arguing that it fails to capture all the touchpoints and key factors resulting from the growth of product choices and digital channels, and proposed the consumer decision journey as a more sophisticated framework. Their framework introduced the concept of active evaluation, in which options are added and dropped as individuals research, and the loyalty loop, in which positive post-decision experience compresses future decision journeys. Applied to ODP career communications, this framework highlights that a prospective entrant does not move in a straight line from awareness to commitment, and that the profession can enter and leave the consideration set at multiple points depending on what information is encountered and where.

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) developed this further by operationalising customer experience within a journey framework, mapping the accumulation of interactions across pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages. Their work established that only some of the touchpoints in any journey are controlled by the organisation itself, making it essential to understand both those that are and those that are not. In the context of ODP recruitment, this distinction is important: many of the points at

which a prospective entrant first encounters, or fails to encounter, the profession, such as school careers advice, peer conversations, or media portrayals, sit outside the direct control of the profession or its representative bodies. Journey mapping makes these uncontrolled touchpoints visible and allows for targeted intervention where influence is possible.

Together, these three frameworks establish customer journey mapping as a methodologically grounded approach to understanding how prospective ODP entrants navigate career decisions across multiple stages and channels and provide the evidential basis for structuring the Aspiring workstream's communications and engagement activity accordingly.

Marketing and Audience Intelligence Framework

External Landscape Review

The foundational phase began with a structured desktop research review of how the ODP profession is currently represented across publicly accessible channels. This activity was led by a marketing specialist within the ODP SURGE project team who brought an external perspective to the profession, without prior clinical or professional knowledge of ODP practice. This approach was deliberate: it allowed the team to assess the profession's visibility through the eyes of someone encountering it for the first time, approximating the experience of a prospective entrant. It also reduced the risk of professional bias, those on the team as ODPs may have prior knowledge of where to search for information or organisations etc. The desktop research methodology involved systematic review of publicly available online sources without primary data collection, providing a baseline audit of the profession's existing digital presence.

The review encompassed professional association websites, NHS career information portals, Higher Education Institution course pages, and promotional materials produced by and about the profession. Key observations were:

- Information about the ODP profession is distributed across multiple platforms and sources, with no single authoritative point of discovery for prospective entrants.
- Existing promotional content tends to focus on technical and procedural aspects of ODP practice, with limited representation of the relational and human dimensions of the role.
- The emotional and supportive aspects of ODP work, including the practitioner role in managing patient anxiety, providing reassurance in high-stress clinical environments, and accompanying patients through vulnerable perioperative experiences, were identified as a significantly under-communicated dimension of the profession.
- Career-facing descriptions of ODP roles did not consistently distinguish the profession from adjacent healthcare roles, limiting its ability to stand out to career explorers comparing options.

Existing digital content held by professional bodies, including the CDDP, was frequently text-heavy and densely structured, and was not designed with a career-explorer audience in mind. A prospective entrant encountering the profession for the first time is unlikely to engage with material that reads as a professional or regulatory document. The visual and navigational expectations of that audience, shaped by the platforms they already use, are not met by the current format of much of the available information.

These observations are consistent with the findings of the ODP workforce scoping report (Health Education England, 2022), which identified the challenge of defining a unique selling point for the profession given the breadth of its competencies and the extent to which its skill set traverses multiple areas of the healthcare workforce.

Visibility in AI-Powered Search: Generative Engine Optimisation and Answer Engine Optimisation

Alongside the review of traditional digital channels, the foundational phase included a desktop research assessment of how the ODP profession is represented within AI-powered search and answer tools. This area of work was led by the ODP SURGE marketing specialist and addressed two emerging disciplines in digital visibility practice: Generative Engine Optimisation (GEO) and Answer Engine Optimisation (AEO). As with the external landscape review, this assessment was conducted through systematic review of publicly accessible sources and AI tool outputs, without primary data collection.

GEO refers to how a profession, organisation, or brand appears when individuals use AI-powered tools such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini, or Perplexity to search for information, rather than using traditional search engines (Aggarwal et al., 2024). AEO refers specifically to how content is structured and presented online so that AI tools surface it accurately and prominently when generating answers to user queries. Both disciplines are increasingly relevant to workforce recruitment as a growing proportion of prospective entrants, particularly younger audiences, use AI tools as a primary information source when researching career options.

The assessment identified that the ODP profession's current online presence does not adequately support accurate and prominent representation within AI-generated responses to career-related queries. Specifically: search terms such as who works in an operating theatre and how do I work in the operating theatre often missed out on discussing the ODP role.

This finding has direct implications for the planned web-based repository and for AI Agents that will draw on it. Content within the repository will need to be structured not only for human readability but also to meet the technical requirements of Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) and Answer Engine Optimization (AEO), ensuring that AI tools and AI Agents draw on accurate, up to date, and professionally endorsed information about ODP when responding to career queries (Aggarwal et al., 2024; PwC, 2026).

Generative engines synthesise information from multiple sources to answer user queries, and content creators can optimise their content to increase visibility under generative engines by applying a defined set of desired content characteristics (Aggarwal et al., 2024). Google's own developer guidance confirms that structured data, commonly implemented through the Schema.org vocabulary, helps its systems understand and classify page content, and recommends this approach for making content machine-readable (Google Search Central, 2026). On this basis, the repository should be built with structured, machine-readable markup rather than relying on standard HTML formatting alone, to support extraction and citation by AI systems.

From content creation to curation: the case for a centralised repository

An early working assumption within the Aspiring workstream was that addressing the visibility gap would require the creation of new promotional materials, including video content, to represent the profession to prospective entrants. The landscape review challenged this assumption. Rather than an absence of promotional content, the review identified a substantial body of existing material distributed across a wide range of platforms and organisational sources, with no single point through which a prospective entrant could access it in a coherent way.

These findings together reframed the workstream's output priorities. Rather than investing resource in producing new promotional content, the more impactful intervention was identified as developing a web-based repository that brings existing high-quality material together in a single, accessible, and visually engaging location. This would serve as the single authoritative point of discovery that the landscape review identified as absent. The development of this repository was identified as a planned output of the Aspiring workstream.

Audience Persona Development

The foundational phase initially identified four target audience groups for survey and communications activity: existing ODPs, healthcare students, secondary school and further education students, and ex-forces personnel. As persona development progressed, this grouping was refined. The healthcare student category was disaggregated, and internationally qualified theatre practitioners were identified as a discrete audience group with sufficiently distinct barriers and discovery pathways to warrant separate treatment. This refinement reflects the iterative nature of the foundational phase and strengthens the audience intelligence framework by ensuring that groups with materially different discovery pathways and decision-making contexts are not collapsed into a single category.

The finalised persona set comprises four profiles, each accompanied by a detailed customer journey map structured across four stages: awareness, exploration, consideration, and decision. The personas are:

Persona	Summary and key recruitment significance
Jake Thompson, 17 (The Curious Explorer)	A school leaver post-A levels who encounters the ODP profession by chance through media rather than through formal careers guidance. His journey illustrates the profession's near-absence from school careers infrastructure and the importance of direct work experience in converting initial interest into a committed application. Key barriers include limited parental familiarity with the profession and a shortage of peer-produced digital content through the platforms this group actively uses, including TikTok and Instagram.
Sarah Mitchell, 34 (The Compassionate Returner)	A career returner with prior healthcare assistant experience re-entering the workforce following a period out for family caring responsibilities. Her journey highlights the profession's potential to recruit from a largely untapped pool of individuals with directly relevant prior experience, and the extent to which flexible working arrangements and clear apprenticeship progression pathways are the critical decision factors for this group. The primary discovery channel for this persona is NHS Jobs rather than professional or educational channels.
Mark Davies, 42 (The Tactical Professional)	An ex-forces medical technician transitioning to civilian healthcare following military discharge. His journey identifies the systematic failure of civilian recruitment systems to recognise military medical training as a structural barrier, and positions the ODP profession as a strong fit for this population given its emphasis on technical precision, team discipline, and high-stakes patient safety. Recognition of Prior Learning and veteran-specific institutional support are identified as the pivotal factors in the consideration and decision stages of this journey.
Fatima Rahman, 28 (The Global Professional)	An internationally trained theatre technician whose qualifications are not directly recognised within the UK regulatory framework. Her journey highlights the additional structural and emotional complexity faced by internationally qualified entrants, including qualification conversion barriers, the risk of being positioned as overqualified for entry-level support roles, and the absence of a clear visibility pathway between international theatre experience and HCPC-registered ODP practice.

Across all four personas, a consistent set of cross-cutting barriers emerged from the journey mapping exercise: limited visibility of the profession within mainstream careers channels; information gaps around day-to-day role reality and career progression; confusion about entry routes; and an absence of formal peer support or mentoring networks during the transition process. These common themes provide

the evidential basis for the communications and engagement activity planned for the subsequent phase of the Aspiring workstream.

Survey Programme Design and Deployment

Question Bank Development

A structured question bank was developed, mapping potential survey items against the four audience groups. Questions addressed the following thematic domains:

- Awareness of AHP professions, including ODP, prior to career decision-making
- Sources of information used in career research
- Factors influencing career choice
- Retrospective views on the adequacy of ODP promotion at school or college level
- Preferences for how career information is delivered and accessed
- Willingness to advocate for the profession among future entrants

Question formats included free-text responses, Likert-style rating scales, and binary yes/no items, selected to balance depth of insight with respondent burden across groups with varying levels of engagement with formal research instruments.

Survey

Three surveys were developed from the question bank:

- Survey 1: Existing ODPs

This included questions relevant to the Aspiring workstream alongside items supporting data collection for other ODP SURGE workstreams. It was distributed as a single combined document to minimise respondent contact burden. Questions explored career discovery pathways, sources of influence, and retrospective views on the profession's visibility.

- Survey 2: Career changers

This targeted individuals considering a career change into healthcare, with a focus on ODP as a potential destination. It explored existing healthcare knowledge, perceptions of ODP, and the information sources that shape career change decisions.

- Survey 3: School-age students

This was designed for secondary school and further education students and addressed baseline awareness of healthcare careers, including ODP, and preferences for how career information is communicated.

Findings and Limitations

Survey 1 Findings: Existing ODP Workforce on Career Discovery and Profession Visibility

Survey 1 was completed by 280 existing ODPs and explored career discovery pathways, sources of influence on career choice, and retrospective views on the visibility and promotion of the profession. Four thematic findings emerged from this instrument.

Career discovery pathways

Respondents identified a range of routes into the profession, including prior interest in operating theatres, encouragement from family or a careers advisor, personal research, and prior experience as a support worker in theatres. Free-text responses added further detail, with university open days, word of mouth, and existing workplace contacts cited as common discovery routes. No single dominant pathway accounted for a majority of respondents. This pattern is consistent with the absence of a single authoritative point of discovery identified in the external landscape review, and supports the case for a centralised repository that can serve multiple discovery routes rather than assuming one primary channel.

Promotion and visibility of the profession

This theme produced the clearest findings from Survey 1. The majority of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the profession is adequately promoted in schools and colleges (234 of 278 responses). Views on the accessibility of information about becoming an ODP were more mixed, with a slight skew toward disagreement. Respondents also disagreed that the profession stands out clearly among other Allied Health Professions, and disagreed that promotion clearly distinguishes ODP from Nursing. By contrast, there was strong agreement that different entry routes into the profession need to be better promoted (238 of 278 responses).

These findings, drawn from the existing workforce rather than from prospective entrants, corroborate the visibility gap identified independently through the external landscape review, the GEO/AEO assessment, and the contextual literature review on awareness among 16 to 18 year olds reported below. The convergence of practitioner perception with the desktop research findings, obtained through two methodologically distinct approaches, strengthens the evidential basis for the planned repository and careers advisor resource package.

Professional distinctiveness as perceived by the existing workforce

Respondents were asked to rate statements about what distinguishes the ODP role. Strong agreement was recorded for;

- the profession's reach across anaesthetics, surgery and recovery,
- its coordination and leadership function within theatres,

- its application of expert perioperative knowledge to patient care problem solving,
- its interprofessional team working.

Agreement levels across these items ranged from 85 to 95 percent. These findings provide a practitioner-validated account of the profession's distinguishing characteristics, which can inform the framing of content developed for the repository and for careers promotion materials.

Career development and progression

Survey 1 also included items on continuing professional development, manager support, and perceived career advancement opportunities across the clinical, leadership, education and research pillars of practice. These items relate primarily to workforce retention and progression rather than to career discovery and promotion, and fall more directly within the scope of other ODP SURGE workstreams. They are noted here for completeness but are not developed further within the Aspiring workstream's findings.

Survey 2 Findings: Career Changers and Applicants on ODP Awareness, Discovery and Visibility

Survey 2 received 57 responses. Of these, 27 respondents indicated some familiarity with the ODP role and went on to answer the ODP-specific items; the remaining 29 stated they reside in the UK but are not familiar with the profession, and one respondent residing outside the UK was also unfamiliar. This branching pattern is itself a relevant finding for the Aspiring workstream: more than half of this career-changer sample had no prior familiarity with ODP at all, reinforcing the awareness gap identified elsewhere in this report from an independent respondent group.

Motivational drivers and discovery pathways

Among the 27 respondents familiar with the role, prior interest in operating theatres and a wish to help people were the strongest positive influences on considering ODP as a career. Personal experience of being treated by an ODP and self-directed research also showed moderate positive influence. By contrast, encouragement from a careers advisor, attendance at a career fair, and having had ODP work experience showed predominantly no influence, much of this group had simply not encountered these channels. This corroborates the Survey 1 finding that formal careers infrastructure is not where prospective entrants are currently being reached, this time from a career-changer rather than existing-workforce perspective. One could question whether is this because current material is non-existent for this group or the material design is ineffective or poorly targeted?

Promotion and visibility of the profession

Consistent with Survey 1, this group leaned toward disagreement or neutrality on whether the profession is adequately promoted in schools and colleges, and on whether it stands out clearly among other Allied Health Professions. Agreement was comparatively stronger that different entry routes into the profession, such as

apprenticeships and university courses, are available. This last item asks about availability rather than promotion, a distinct construct from the Survey 1 item on whether entry routes need better promotion, and the two should not be merged when reporting.

Information channel effectiveness

This is new evidence not captured in Survey 1. Respondents rated specific information channels for helpfulness in learning about ODP. Internet searches and the NHS Careers/Health Careers website were rated most helpful. Social media, YouTube/Vimeo, online forums, and government careers services were dominated by "have not used" responses, most markedly for online forums and YouTube. This points directly to channel selection for the planned repository: it suggests current digital-native channels are underused by this audience rather than simply underperforming once used.

Professional distinctiveness

The same four distinctiveness statements used in Survey 1 were presented here as a measure of influence on considering ODP as a career rather than agreement. Strong or moderate influence to consider ODP was the dominant response across all four items, consistent with Survey 1's finding that these statements function effectively as positive message content for careers communications.

School-Age Survey: A Finding on Under-18 Research Participation Barriers

Survey 3, targeting secondary school and further education students, returned zero responses during the foundational phase. This outcome is reported here not as a failure of the instrument design, but as a substantive finding in its own right about the structural barriers to conducting workforce awareness research with under-18 populations.

The absence of responses was attributable to a multi-factor consent requirement that operates when research involves participants under the age of 18. This requirement typically necessitates institutional approval from the school or college as an organisation, parental or guardian consent for individual participants, and, in many frameworks, the assent of the young person themselves. In practice, securing all three tiers of consent within the timeframe of a funded programme presents a significant logistical challenge, particularly where the programme does not have pre-established relationships with secondary education settings.

This finding has several implications for the design of future workforce engagement activity targeting this population. Direct survey-based research with under-18s requires early and sustained relationship-building with school and college institutions and should not be treated as a rapid or low-resource activity.

Alternative methodologies that do not require individual participant consent, such as analysis of existing career choice data, secondary analysis of published careers education research, or engagement through T Level industry placement frameworks where institutional relationships are already established, may offer more practicable routes to evidence generation with this group.

The T Level perioperative placement guidance being developed under ODP SURGE represents a structural mechanism through which sustained engagement with younger prospective entrants can be built over time, creating the institutional relationships that would support future primary research.

The zero-response outcome for Survey 3 is therefore a finding that should inform the design of future research and engagement activity rather than a limitation that diminishes the overall value of the foundational phase.

Contextual Literature Review: Awareness and Promotion of ODP and AHP Careers among 16–18 Year Olds

The zero-response outcome for Survey 3 prompted a structured desktop research review of existing evidence concerning the awareness of ODP and AHP careers among 16–18 year olds in the UK. This review was conducted through systematic examination of publicly available published literature, grey literature, and online sources, without primary data collection. It informs the Aspiring workstream's understanding of the external landscape and provides the evidential basis for several of the planned outputs described below, including the careers advisor resource package and the web-based repository.

Awareness Gap Among 16–18 Year Olds

Allied Health Professions, including the ODP role, are less well known to school and college students than medicine and nursing. A national survey conducted by Universities UK and the Nuffield Trust in 2024 found that while 73% of 16–26 year olds had considered a healthcare career, interest was concentrated in the most familiar professions. Only approximately 20% of young respondents reported strong familiarity with NHS careers beyond doctor and nurse, indicating a substantial knowledge gap with respect to the wider AHP workforce (Universities UK and Nuffield Trust, 2024). This finding is reinforced by a 2025 survey of UK teenagers conducted for BBC Bitesize, which found the NHS ranked as their most desired employer, ahead of major private-sector organisations, while the most-cited individual career aspiration remained doctor for the second consecutive year (BBC Bitesize, 2025). This suggests that while the NHS as an institution holds strong appeal among teenagers, awareness has not extended evenly across its constituent professions, consistent with the AHP visibility gap identified above

For ODPs specifically, the evidence is particularly stark. Research drawing on a study by Health Education England and the University of Winchester found that only approximately one in five ODP students had chosen the profession while still in school or college, and that nearly half had committed to ODP after pursuing at least one other career first (Wallis et al., 2024). Educational sources were identified as the least influential factor in ODP career choice, with personal role models and self-

initiated research being far more significant (Wallis et al., 2024). This pattern indicates that traditional school career guidance has not routinely introduced students to the ODP profession at the point of post-18 decision-making.

These findings are consistent with the ODP workforce scoping report (Health Education England, 2022), which identified public awareness of the profession as poor and recommended investment in early schools engagement and a national publicity campaign. They also align with the persona work completed in the foundational phase: the Jake Thompson persona specifically illustrates a school leaver who encounters the ODP profession only by chance, with formal careers guidance playing no material role in his discovery pathway.

National and Regional Initiatives to Promote AHP and ODP Careers

A range of national and regional initiatives have been developed to address low awareness of AHP careers among young people. NHS England's Allied Health Professions Careers Awareness Toolkit provides resources for careers advisors, teachers, and AHP ambassadors, including profession-specific factsheets, interactive quizzes, and links to role model content (NHS England Workforce Training and Education, 2023/24). The toolkit also highlights key awareness events, including Allied Health Professions Day and the Health Careers Live virtual conference.

Regionally, the West Yorkshire AHP Faculty launched the Aspiring Allies campaign, which provides a dedicated website, a careers interest quiz, a library of role model stories, and a virtual work-based learning programme covering multiple AHP roles. The campaign established a workforce ambassador network of AHP volunteers who visit schools and careers events to promote these professions, with a specific emphasis on reaching students from underrepresented backgrounds (West Yorkshire Partnership, 2023). A virtual ODP work experience module was in development at the time of publication.

A notable regional example of direct ODP career promotion is the NHS Hampshire and Isle of Wight 350+ Careers Programme, which in 2023 piloted an immersive ODP careers day at a further education college in which students aged 16–18 participated in a mock operating theatre simulation, observed live surgery via video link, and undertook hands-on procedural tasks under the guidance of practicing ODPs and surgeons. The pilot was supported by the national ODP lead at NHS England and has been cited as a model for expanding blended virtual and in-person career experiences for this age group (NHS Hampshire and Isle of Wight, 2023).

At national level, the NHS Step into the NHS programme provides ready-made lesson plans and activities for secondary school teachers at Key Stage 3 and 4. Health Education England has also developed immersive 360-degree virtual reality films for several AHP roles and funded virtual work experience courses via platforms such as Springpod, open to students aged 14–25 (NHS England Workforce Training and Education, 2023/24). The Learning through the Lens: Careers in the Curriculum project, led by HEE in partnership with the Academies Enterprise Trust, supported teachers to embed AHP career examples within standard academic lesson content, connecting subject learning to real healthcare roles. However, the evidence reviewed

does not indicate a single, well-known route through which schools or career advisors locate these resources, suggesting a discoverability gap that sits alongside the resources themselves. This reinforces the case for a consolidated, signposted repository as one of the workstream's planned outputs.

Effectiveness of School-Based Careers Guidance

Despite the range of initiatives described above, the evidence suggests that school-based careers guidance has not consistently communicated the breadth of healthcare roles to students. The 2020 Nuffield Trust literature review on attitudes to non-medical NHS careers noted a recurring theme: students may hold positive impressions of healthcare work but still not envision themselves in AHP roles due to entrenched perceptions, limited knowledge of role realities, and perceived barriers to entry (Palmer, Leone and Hutchings, 2020). A 2019 Department for Education report found disparities in access to careers talks and advice, with students in lower-income and rural settings reporting fewer opportunities (Department for Education, 2019).

Many schools now use the Gatsby Benchmarks as a framework for careers guidance quality. Benchmark 5 requires encounters with employers and employees; Benchmark 4 requires that curriculum learning be linked to careers. AHP ambassador visits and curriculum integration projects such as Learning through the Lens directly address these benchmarks, but their reach remains limited and they have not yet been implemented at scale. Career leaders in schools often lack up-to-date knowledge of the full range of AHP roles, which is part of the rationale for the centralised resources being developed under ODP SURGE.

Recommendations from the Existing Evidence Base

Across the evidence gathered through the contextual literature review, the survey programme, and the persona and journey mapping work, a consistent set of recommendations emerges for closing the awareness gap across all four prospective entrant groups identified in the foundational phase. These are summarised below, with relevance to the planned outputs of the Aspiring workstream noted in each case.

First, leveraging digital and social media channels is identified as a priority, though the relevant channels differ by audience. Wallis et al. (2024) conclude that there are significant opportunities to use media platforms alongside formal education to raise the profile of ODPs, particularly given the centrality of platforms such as Instagram and TikTok in the information behaviours of younger audiences such as the Jake Thompson persona. For audiences such as Sarah Mitchell, the Survey 2 finding that internet searches and the NHS Careers website were rated most helpful, while social media and online forums were largely unused, suggests that career returners are better reached through search-led and NHS-branded channels than through social platforms. For Mark Davies and Fatima Rahman, veteran and migrant community networks, transition advisor channels, and word-of-mouth through community events are likely to be more effective than mainstream social media. This points to a differentiated channel strategy rather than a single campaign, with content and platform selection led by the persona and journey mapping work already completed.

Second, strengthening institutional and community partnerships is recommended across multiple sources (NHS England Workforce Training and Education, 2023/24; West Yorkshire Partnership, 2023) and is relevant well beyond schools and colleges. For Jake Thompson, this means training of careers advisors and integration of AHP career content into lesson plans, as recommended for the 16 to 18 age group. For Sarah Mitchell, the equivalent partnership need is with Job Centres, recruitment agencies, and family-oriented community channels such as parent networks, which were identified in her journey as key discovery touchpoints. For Mark Davies, partnership with military transition services, veterans' charities, and university veteran support networks is the corresponding mechanism. For Fatima Rahman, partnership with community organisations, NARIC, and existing NHS staff networks supporting internationally qualified professionals is the relevant equivalent. In each case, the principle is the same: sustained relationships with the institutions and networks each group already trusts, rather than one-off promotional events.

Third, facilitating early encounters and direct exposure to the role is identified as a critical mechanism for converting interest into career commitment across all four personas. Health Education England's work experience guidance for AHPs emphasises that even short observation or simulation experiences can consolidate a student's interest and support later application decisions, and this principle held true for Jake Thompson, whose shadowing experience was the decisive trigger in his journey. The same mechanism operated differently but no less significantly for the other personas: Sarah Mitchell's progression was secured through an interview and early team integration, Mark Davies through a visit to a trauma theatre that he likened to a military medical team, and Fatima Rahman through shadowing arranged following a chance community conversation with an anaesthetist. The T Level perioperative placement programme being developed under ODP SURGE represents a structured mechanism for delivering this kind of early, sustained clinical exposure for school and college-aged entrants, but the evidence indicates that equivalent structured exposure opportunities, such as taster days, shadowing schemes, or open theatre visits, would benefit career changer, ex-forces, and internationally qualified audiences as well.

Fourth, addressing structural and recognition barriers specific to each audience is essential to workforce supply objectives, and these barriers vary considerably across groups. For Jake Thompson and other school-aged entrants, the priority identified through the literature review is improving diversity and inclusion in outreach, with the Universities UK and Nuffield Trust survey (2024) finding that students who had received free school meals were more likely to consider healthcare careers than their peers, indicating an underserved recruitment pool that targeted outreach using diverse role models, as exemplified by the Aspiring Allies campaign, could better reach. For Mark Davies, the corresponding barrier is recognition of prior military training, addressed through Recognition of Prior Learning pathways and accelerated degree routes. For Fatima Rahman, the corresponding barrier is recognition of international qualifications and the risk of being assessed as overqualified for entry-level roles despite extensive relevant experience. For Sarah Mitchell, the relevant barrier is less about recognition and more about confidence and flexibility, with family-friendly contracts and term-time working identified as decisive factors in her journey. Addressing each of these barriers requires a distinct intervention rather than a single shared solution.

The NHS Long Term Workforce Plan projects a requirement for 71,000 additional AHPs in England by 2036/37 (NHS England, 2023). Meeting this projection will require sustained and structured engagement with prospective entrants across all stages of the career lifecycle, not solely at the point of initial career formation among school leavers, making the differentiated approach set out above directly relevant to the programme objectives of ODP SURGE.

Planned Outputs Arising from the Foundational Phase

The findings of the foundational phase directly informed a set of planned outputs to be delivered in the subsequent phase of the Aspiring workstream. These outputs address the priorities identified through the landscape review, survey programme, and persona development work

- Quality Assurance Framework for CODP endorsement

The landscape review and survey findings identified a substantial body of existing ODP promotional material that lacked a coherent quality standard or single point of curation. In response, the development of a Quality Assurance Framework for the College of Operating Department Practitioners was identified as a planned output. The QAF will provide a structured mechanism through which existing materials can be reviewed and endorsed by the CODP and will establish the quality criteria against which materials submitted to the planned web-based repository will be assessed.

- Targeted webinar programme

The survey and persona work identified further education students and ex-forces personnel as two audience groups with distinct information needs and limited existing access to ODP career information through mainstream channels. Two targeted webinars were planned as outputs: one aimed at further education students, and one aimed at ex-forces personnel considering a career in healthcare.

- Web-based repository

The landscape review concluded that the primary barrier to ODP visibility among prospective entrants was not an absence of promotional material but a lack of accessibility and coherent presentation. Development of a web-based repository bringing existing endorsed material together in a single, visually engaging location that can be discovered by both existing search engines and the new AI Large Language Models was identified as a planned output. Progress on the repository will be reported in the subsequent phase report.

- National ODP Day 2026

National ODP Day was identified as a significant annual opportunity for coordinated profession-wide visibility activity. The date was designated as a key promotional milestone for the Aspiring workstream, providing a nationally recognised platform

through which awareness of ODP as a career could be raised across multiple prospective entrant groups simultaneously. The specific promotional activity to be delivered on and around National ODP Day 2026 was in development at the close of the foundational phase and will be reported in the subsequent phase report.

Summary and Transition to Research Fellow Phase

The foundational phase of the Aspiring workstream established the analytical and operational infrastructure necessary to investigate ODP career awareness and recruitment pathways in a systematic way.

Key outputs from this phase include:

A methodological rationale grounded in marketing and workforce recruitment literature, establishing the evidence base for applying persona development and customer journey mapping to ODP workforce supply challenges.

A structured external review of ODP professional visibility across traditional digital channels and AI-powered search tools, identifying the under-representation of relational and human dimensions of ODP practice as a priority for future communications work, and reframing the workstream's output priorities from content creation to content curation.

- A set of four audience personas with accompanying customer journey maps, providing the basis for tailored engagement with distinct prospective entrant groups across different life stages and backgrounds.
- A validated multi-cohort question bank and three discrete survey instruments developed and deployed accordingly.
- A substantive finding on the structural barriers to primary research with under-18 populations, with implications for future programme design.
- A set of planned outputs identified and scoped for delivery in the subsequent phase, including the CODP Quality Assurance Framework, a targeted webinar programme, a web-based repository, and coordinated activity around National ODP Day 2026.

These outputs provide the research fellow with a well-defined evidence base and a set of active data collection instruments from which to develop the subsequent phase of Aspiring workstream activity, including full analysis of Survey 1 and Survey 2 data and development of career communications materials grounded in the persona framework.

Recommendations

The following recommendations arise directly from the findings of the foundational phase and are intended to inform the subsequent phase of Aspiring workstream activity.

- **Recommendation 1: Complete the careers advisor webinar**

The survey and persona findings identified a consistent gap in the quality and accuracy of ODP career information available through formal education guidance channels. Across multiple audience groups, careers advisors were identified as a key but currently underinformed influence on career decision-making. A webinar specifically designed for careers advisors was identified during the foundational phase but was not progressed. This should be prioritised in the next phase of activity.

- **Recommendation 2: Develop a careers advisor resource package**

A webinar alone is unlikely to produce sustained change in how careers advisors represent the ODP profession. A supporting resource package, designed specifically for use by careers advisors in schools and further education settings, should be developed alongside the webinar. This would provide advisors with accurate, accessible, and visually engaging information about ODP as a career option that they can use independently in guidance sessions with students.

- **Recommendation 3: Prepare and launch a targeted social media campaign**

The contextual literature review identified social media as a priority channel for reaching prospective entrants, particularly the 16- to 18-year-old age group, with Wallis et al. (2024) concluding that there are significant opportunities to use media platforms alongside formal education to raise the profile of ODPs. This is consistent with the Jake Thompson persona, whose journey was shaped by incidental discovery through media rather than formal careers guidance, and who identified peer-produced content on TikTok and Instagram as the most credible source of information available to him.

At present, the profession has limited organic presence on the platforms this audience uses most. A targeted social media campaign, building on the personas and journey maps developed during the foundational phase, would allow content to be designed specifically around the discovery triggers, language, and platforms relevant to each audience group, rather than relying on incidental coverage. It is recommended that this campaign is planned and launched in the subsequent phase, informed by the audience intelligence developed in this report and aligned with the content standards established through the CODP Quality Assurance Framework.

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