NHS National Uniform Project

RCOT member consultation, February 2022

This is a summary of the key findings of a survey circulated by RCOT to occupational therapy practitioners during February 2022.

We asked for feedback on proposals for a new single-colourway Allied Health Professions uniform for NHS staff in England, as proposed by NHS England and Improvement (NHSE&I) and NHS Supply Chain.

Respondents were asked whether the design and colour choices described in the [NHS options appraisal](https://www.rcot.co.uk/file/9506/download?token=_Z7pblMa) would meet the needs of occupational therapy practitioners, multi-disciplinary colleagues, patients and the public, and whether RCOT should support the proposal.

# The headlines

* 848 survey responses were received from occupational therapy practitioners based in the UK
* 71% do not support the introduction of a single-colourway uniform for all Allied Health Professionals (AHPs) in England
* Loss of professional identity was the top concern for respondents
* RCOT opposes the adoption of the proposed single-colourway uniform.

## Most respondents are against the introduction of a single-colourway uniform for all AHPs

* 606 people (71%) stated that they did not support the proposal
* 150 people (18%) were supportive of the introduction of a single-colourway uniform, as detailed in the [options appraisal](https://www.rcot.co.uk/sites/default/files/Uniform%20survey%20Feb22.pptx) prepared by NHSE&I
* 92 people (11%) supported the introduction of a single-colourway uniform, but with some changes to the colours/design proposed in the options appraisal.

## Professional identity is a top priority and has implications for patient safety

Respondents made over 300 comments about the importance of achieving a strong professional identity through the uniform design. Many respondents felt that a single-colourway uniform would erode their unique occupational therapy identity, which would create challenges for clinicians and the public.

Multiple people felt that public awareness of the unique role of occupational therapy is already lacking, with occupational therapists often mistaken for other professions such as nurses and physiotherapists. There were strong concerns that wearing a uniform of the same colour as multi-disciplinary colleagues would further reduce the visibility and profile of occupational therapists.

Several people drew on their experience of working in Scotland (which has a single-colourway AHP uniform) or of wearing scrubs in their practice setting. These respondents noted that it was challenging for colleagues, patients, and the public to identify the different professions and their roles, which has implications for patient safety.

156 references were made to the strong association between occupational therapy and the colour green. Many of these respondents felt a clear connection between the colour and their professional identity.

Upholding professional identity was also a priority for respondents who were supportive of a single-colourway uniform. Several people noted that the size and visibility of any embroidered professional titles would be important, and may be more helpful for establishing identity than colour alone.

## Alternative suggestions

Respondents who weren’t supportive of the proposal were asked to identify alternative ways of achieving the objectives of the uniform project.

More than 60 people noted that adopting a consistent approach to uniform design and procurement across England would help to reduce current costs and improve sustainability, even if AHPs from different professions have an individual colour. It was also noted that this consistent approach to colour and design across NHS settings would help to reinforce professional identity, and also enable staff to take uniform with them if they move to a different Trust.

92 people made suggestions about standardising elements of the design for all AHPs while still maintaining distinct professional colours:

* 67 people suggested having a standardised colour of trousers for all AHPs.
* 54 people suggested that standardised trousers should be paired with different coloured tops for each profession. Several people noted that coloured tops would be more practical and less prone to staining and ‘greying’ than the white tops that occupational therapists commonly wear.
* 13 people suggested standardised trousers paired with white tops with different coloured trims, collars, or epaulettes.
* 12 people suggested having a standardised top for all AHPs but different coloured trousers, however others felt that having different coloured tops would be clearer for professional identity than coloured trousers.
* 13 people suggested that AHPs should wear profession-specific coloured scrubs.

## Identifying a way forward

We support the concerns of our members that the proposed single-colourway uniform would have an unacceptable impact on professional identity and create challenges for practitioners, patients, and the public.

RCOT, as members of the AHP Federation, have written to NHSE&I and NHS Supply Chain to express concern about the lack of robust consultation with AHPs to date, and to object to the current proposal of a single-colourway uniform.

We are committed to continued discussion with colleagues at NHSE&I and NHS Supply Chain to represent the views of our members and identify a way forward with the National Uniform Project that addresses their priorities and concerns.