

The rota-coaster

A wild ride through the challenges of frontline staffing at the University of Sheffield Library

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Virtual Advisory and Help Service (VAHS)



Take a ride through a period of flux...

- With daily twists and turns, balancing a leaner workforce against rising user expectations can feel like a rollercoaster.
- Success means staying upright and focused through the wild ride of rota management

Sites and services that have rotas

- Western Bank Library
- Information Commons
- Health Sciences Library, Royal Hallamshire
- Diamond (currently unstaffed)
- Virtual Advisory and Help Service



Also...

- Weekend rota
- Evening duty rota
- Open day rota

“Stand by” lane/virtual queue - in the beginning

- Pre 2020, customer services staff in the Library worked in a particular site for most, if not all of their working time.
- Each site looked after their own staff and shortages/gaps were dealt with by that site.
- This “silo” approach meant there was no flexibility to cover when other sites were short staffed, leading to potential service vulnerabilities.
- The exception to this was the Virtual Advisory and Service (VAHS), where customer services staff from all sites were required to do at least two hours on a VAHS rota per week. This was situated in a different building, which meant staff moving between sites.

Tower of Terror? - COVID

The pandemic fundamentally changed the way we did rotas

We were forced to adopt agile working overnight, to support a sudden shift to virtual operations.

It allowed us to end silos (for now) by working collaboratively, outside of traditional departmental boundaries.

Because the virtual service was already established, we were able to lean on existing staff skills to remain “business as usual” with zero extra training required.

It enabled staff to work seamlessly across different times and locations, primarily from home, and also on site once lockdown restrictions were eased.

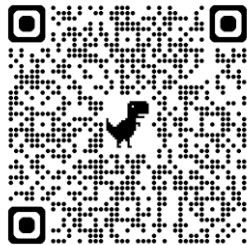


“People Mover” - Nimble staffing model

We introduced a weekday global rota, which took into account everyone's working patterns and availability

Staff still had a “home site” but they may be needed elsewhere to cover urgent/non urgent cover

Most staff work 20% of their working week from home (pro rata - could be asked to come in if needed).



Scan here for an example of the global rota.

The Big One - challenges to staffing after COVID

- With work from home becoming the norm, existing vacant posts and a recruitment pause in 2024, traditional rotas became difficult to fulfill
- We had to work more efficiently, yet still maintain an excellent fully staffed service
- This led to a higher workload for rota leads. For example, before 2024, 10% of our working week was spent on rota management, now some weeks it is around 40%!
- Previously, absences could have been easily absorbed by another member of staff, now each absence had to be considered, severe rejigs of rotas were often needed, lots and lots of emails go round, negotiations necessary with other sites
- The silo mentality was creeping back...

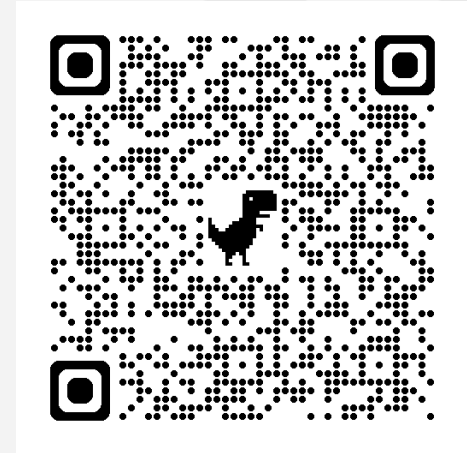
1. Collaboration - the Rota Group

To address these issues...

We created a system-wide rota group for a stronger, more robust framework.

Each site and service involved and meet once a month.

We standardised processes by developing a single flowchart governing urgent and non-urgent staffing across all sites.

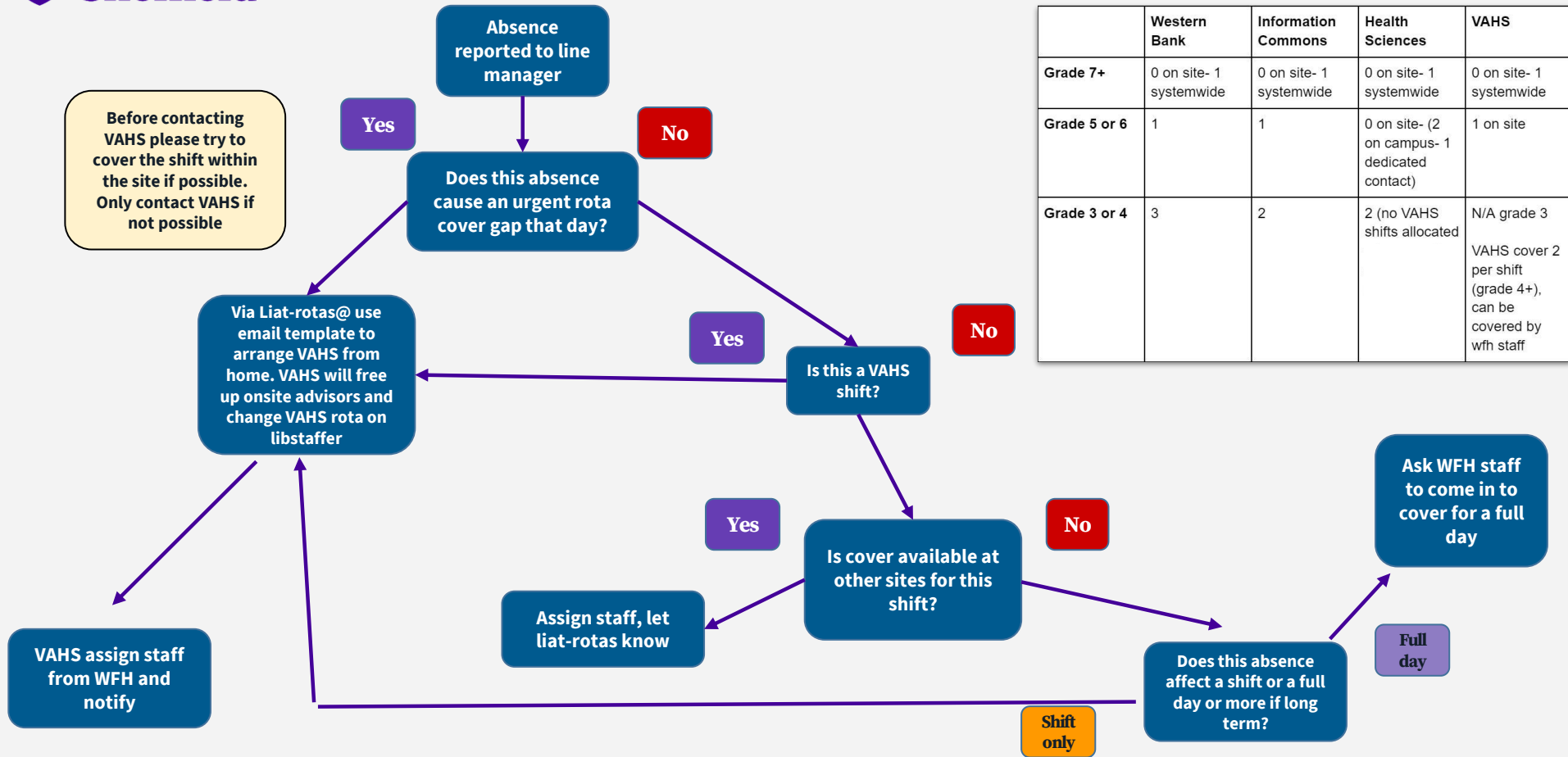


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Flowchart for planned and urgent rota cover

Before contacting VAHS please try to cover the shift within the site if possible. Only contact VAHS if not possible



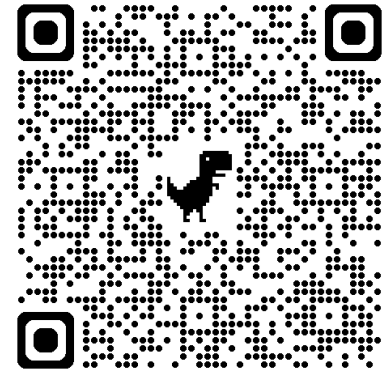
	Western Bank	Information Commons	Health Sciences	VAHS
Grade 7+	0 on site- 1 systemwide	0 on site- 1 systemwide	0 on site- 1 systemwide	0 on site- 1 systemwide
Grade 5 or 6	1	1	0 on site- (2 on campus- 1 dedicated contact)	1 on site
Grade 3 or 4	3	2	2 (no VAHS shifts allocated)	N/A grade 3 VAHS cover 2 per shift (grade 4+), can be covered by wfh staff

2. Strategy for managing planned absences for weekend working

Weekends are primarily staffed by a weekend team, with annual leave covered by particular weekday colleagues.

We replaced a complex, high-maintenance backup rota with a simplified rolling rota for weekday staff covering weekend annual leave.

This eliminated the need to constantly rebuild schedules during staff turnover, while significantly improving team satisfaction



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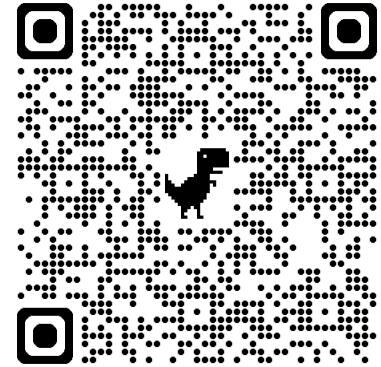
3. Rolling back (a bit)... changing how VAHS is staffed

Enquiry numbers are seen to be decreasing, but complexity of those queries is rising.

Instead of staff from all sites doing 2 hours per week, VAHS is transitioning to a dedicated team of advisors focused entirely on complex enquiries and enquiry management tasks.

This (hopefully) will ease local site rota pressures and drastically reduces the time spent managing shift cover.

Cross-team integration remains a priority to ensure the service does not revert to working in silos.



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“All clear means
you're outta here!”

Thank you for
joining us today!





University of Sheffield

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