

Royal College of Nursing submission to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Health and Social Care in England

Key issues

- The failure of successive Governments to plan and fund health and social care provision in England based on a robust assessment of population need has led to a national crisis in both health and social care.
- Nursing shortages, particularly in the community, mean that people living in rural communities may find it harder to access the support they need, when they need it.

Recommendations

- The RCN is calling for nurse staffing for safe and effective care to be enshrined in law across health and social care settings in the UK. This law would introduce responsibility and accountability for ensuring there are the right number of registered nurses and nursing support staff to meet the needs of all patients in health and social care settings. We urge members of the APPG to support this call, as we believe this legislation would particularly benefit those in rural communities to be able to access support when they need it.

Supporting information

Population-based planning

Successive Governments in England have not made funding decisions for the health and social care system based on a robust, transparent assessment of population need. This means that local authorities and clinical commissioning groups are faced with impossible choices, and members of the public requiring support and care do not have their needs met. In turn, this then places more pressure on other services, particularly general practice and A&E. This means that funding for acute health services is spent supporting individuals whose needs would be better met in the community, if the provision was there.

Overall, this is a poor use of public funds, and value for money would be better achieved if it was calculated to meet population demand, rather than the arbitrary figure currently selected by Government. While we recognise budget limitations exist, it is appropriate that Government establish a baseline of need to ensure Government is meeting population need. This issue particularly impacts on those living in rural communities, as local decision-makers make efficiency savings through co-locating services together, rather than throughout the area.

Without comprehensive population-need and workforce data, decisions about provision and resource cannot be made effectively. Thresholds for individuals receiving support are increasing, and patients frequently stay in hospital longer than necessary due to a lack of appropriate service provision in the community.

Workforce crisis

There are not enough registered nurses and healthcare support workers to deliver safe and effective care in health and social care settings. Nurses report working unpaid overtime to fill gaps, additional stress caused by a high-pressure environment, and describe occasions when vital care is left undone. In social care, data shows that while the number of

registered nurses is declining, the number of care workers is increasing. We are concerned that inappropriate substitution of skills leads to poorer outcomes for patients.

Impact of changes to nursing student funding

Nursing, midwifery and allied health professional students on courses pre-2017 were eligible for a non-means tested grant each year towards their living expenses along the means-tested allowances when they applied for the NHS bursary. Support with living costs is particularly essential for nursing students who spend 50% of their time on full time placements, with no other means to earn any income. This is critical for students with dependents, including mature students (25+ years), application rates from whom have fallen 9.8% since 2016. The impact of this change could have a particular impact on recruiting students to placements in rural areas due to the additional expenses that may be incurring, in comparison to urban locations near to universities.

Nursing students need bespoke financial support if the UK Government is to meet its commitment to grow the nursing workforce and meet future population demand for health and care services in England. Financial support for living costs to incentivise a wider range of applications could take the form of: universal grants for students in recognition of their placements; means-tested grants to maintain diversity; and/or targeted support for parents and carers. For a local targeted approach, which could benefit rural areas, a central fund could be created within the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC). Employers could access this pot to receive dedicated funding to incentivise and grow the required workforce in their area, for example through tuition fee write off or stipends in recognition of service.

Future funding models

Any future funding model should be based on an assessment of population need, and an analysis of data that identifies and informs appropriate service provision and required resource. Funding should include ring-fenced provision to address gaps in the workforce, and extend the size of the workforce to be appropriate to meet population need. This will include a national recruitment campaign, and incentives to increase supply of nursing staff.

Specific challenges related to rural settings

People living in rural communities have issues relating to accessing health and social care, general practice, domiciliary care, medicines, shopping and transport. Responses times by health care staff are longer and domiciliary care may be less likely to be available. Access to physical activities, clubs, swimming exercise groups can also be difficult which makes it much harder for health professionals to support people to take preventative measures in regard to their health. In addition to this, the effects of loneliness and poverty have significant impact on health.

Registered nurses working in rural settings describe the impact that a lack of broadband coverage has on their ability to work remotely. In particular this means nurses are unable to keep truly contemporaneous notes or access diagnostic results and other professional's notes. This poses significant risk to the continuity of safe quality care.

Primary and Community support in rural areas

The disparity between rhetoric and reality in terms of delivering more care in the community is even more acutely felt in rural settings. A key aim of the Sustainability and Transformation Plan (STP) programme is to transfer care away from hospitals, freeing up specialists for acute

care but concerns have been raised about STP plans being overly biased towards urban settings. There could be a risk to community nurse funding in rural areas with less to spend per capita which might be unable to afford the required number of nurses to make the transition. Community services must be involved in, and central to, the development of new care models and STPs with particular regard given to the specific issues and challenges facing rural settings.

Using technology to support people living in rural areas

Rural health challenges are well-documentedⁱ. The key concerns from a technological perspective are digital access and inclusion. Twenty six percent of the offline population are located in a rural areaⁱⁱ and this has implications for the form and function of future service delivery. The work of the NHS Widening Digital Participation Programme is particularly relevant hereⁱⁱⁱ. The pathfinder projects will provide some actionable insights into how building trust and understanding local context can effect outcomes. We are particularly interested in one pathfinder project that looks at how digital inclusion can enable nurses to tackle problems and improve the care they give to the people they care for^{iv}.

The place-based approach will be crucial to addressing health and deprivation indicators in rural areas^v as many of the factors contributing to poor health in rural areas relate to the wider social determinants of health as well as to access to services. Scotland^{vi} and Wales^{vii} have had a greater policy focus on care in remote communities. However, many of the STPs in England are focusing on the benefits of shared records to facilitate greater mobile working^{viii} which will be a vital part of rural health services. While the emphasis may vary, most STPs state the importance of digital technology to their plans for self-management and prevention. It is therefore imperative that adequate funding is identified to increase the availability of digital systems that can effectively support the management of care in rural communities.

This has implications for how the nursing and midwifery workforce learns and develops as working practices evolve. We have consulted with the UK nursing workforce about a digital future^{ix}. Our respondents were generally positive about a future supported by digital tools but were equally clear about the barriers (and enablers) to realising this future state. This includes developing nursing leadership so that nurses and midwives can play an active role in the digital agenda. This is key to our Every Nurse an eNurse initiative^x.

About the Royal College of Nursing

The RCN is the voice of nursing across the UK and the largest professional union of nursing staff in the world.

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ⁱ LGA and PHE (2017). Health and Wellbeing in Rural Areas.

ⁱⁱ Basic Digital Skills Report (2016).

ⁱⁱⁱ NHS Widening Digital Participation. <https://digital-health-lab.org/>

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- iv <https://digital-health-lab.org/lancashire-and-south-cumbria>
- v NLGN and Collaborate (2016). Get well soon. Reimagining place-based health. The Place-Based Health Commission Report. http://wordpress.collaboratei.com/wp-content/uploads/Get-Well-Soon_FINAL.pdf
- vi Scottish Government (2008) Delivering for Remote and Rural Healthcare: The Final Report of the Remote and Rural Workstream. <https://www.gov.scot/Publications/2008/05/06084423/0>
- vii Welsh Assembly Government (2008). Rural Health Plan. <http://www.wales.nhs.uk/healthtopics/populations/ruralhealth>
- viii King's Fund (2017). Delivering sustainability and transformation plans. From ambitious proposals to credible plans. https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/field_publication_file/STPs_proposals_to_plans_Kings_Fund_Feb_2017_0.pdf
- ix Royal College of Nursing (2018). The digital future of nursing. <https://www.rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/ehealth/rcn-digital-ready>
- x Royal College of Nursing. Every nurse an eNurse. <https://www.rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/ehealth/every-nurse-an-e-nurse>