# A picture of London nursing:

**RCN London safe staffing report 2013**

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# Introduction:

We may come to see 2013 as a pivotal year for staffing levels in the NHS. Authoritative reports by Robert Francis QC, Sir Bruce Keogh and Don Berwick have made an explicit link between staff numbers, skill mix and patient safety. The Government's response to Francis last month showed welcome signs of action on safe staffing.

In July, the Royal College of Nursing in London wrote to every London NHS trust to ask what steps they were taking to ensure safe staffing levels, and to offer our support in working with them to share and promote examples of best practice. We also asked them to supply data about their nursing establishments, broken down by band, in order to put together for the first time a picture of how skill mix in London has changed over the past year. The results are included in this report.

It is clear that nursing directors in our region have worked hard to protect jobs where possible. While NHS data shows that nationally some six thousand posts have been lost since 2010, in London the number has stayed largely stable. Within that total, though, we have found signs that more senior posts are at risk.

Overall we found that senior Band 8 posts have fallen by 3% in the past year. The problem is wider in London's acute hospital trusts which have seen a cut to both Band 7 and Band 8 posts. London's mental health trusts have seen a 4% increase in nurses but a 12% cut at Band 8. Our concern is that this trend of hollowing out leadership positions will increasingly have a negative impact on the management and provision of care.

We found little cause for optimism going into 2014, with London trusts with a combined workforce of almost 17,000 saying they planned an increase of just seven posts between them. The Government and Health Education England have said in recent weeks that the UK can expect an extra 3,700 nurses by April of next year. On the evidence we've found, London will see no benefit at all from that boost. With cuts to out of hospital care driving up attendances and waiting lists, London's NHS trusts must give thought to whether protecting current numbers is enough to support an ever increasing demand from patients.

A significant area of concern for London's nursing workforce remains the vacancy rates in the region. The RCN's *Frontline First* Nov 2013 report sampled 61 trusts across the country, showing a national average vacancy rate of 6%. We are today also including the results of a separate freedom of information survey of London trusts.

Only three trusts in London reported a vacancy rate lower than the national average of 6%. The regional average was 11% and in some cases the rate was over 20%. There is a danger that the hard work of trusts in protecting posts is being undermined by a difficulty in finding suitably qualified nurses to take those jobs. We have seen increasing evidence of trusts having to look overseas to fill posts and we were separately told that the use of agency staff had increased by 14% year on year. There are obvious questions about whether training is being commissioned at the level needed and whether enough is being done to make sure London has an available pool of appropriately registered nurses to keep patients safe.

On transparency, the NHS's Compassion in Practice strategy called for trusts to produce publicly available, six monthly reports showing how their staffing levels relate to patient safety. This initiative was echoed by Keogh. In July we asked trusts to share these reports with us. Of 39 trusts in London only nine were able to provide a safe staffing report published in 2013, a rate of just under one in four. With the Government planning to mandate for these reports next year, and the announcement of a new website to carry monthly data from June next year, we will be looking to monitor progress in the region in 2014.

This report is based on responses and data we received voluntarily from 21 of London's 39 NHS trusts, covering a nursing workforce of over 24,000. We received positive feedback from nursing directors about our initiative, and we are grateful to those who took part. It is worth noting that some of the trusts who have recently faced the greatest financial difficulties and workforce upheavals were among those who could not find the time to respond. It is therefore possible that the results of our survey paint a slightly over-optimistic picture. To update the exercise in 2014 it may be that we have to rely on freedom of information requests to ensure we can build a complete overview.

We think however that our survey of bandings and skill mix provides an important step in the debate around staffing levels in London. In the aftermath of Francis the debate has shifted firmly from a utilitarian management of budgets and structures to a more appropriate priority for the NHS: how we ensure the safety of our patients and have the right skilled staff in place at the right time. We will continue to work with NHS trusts in our region to make sure that patient safety is at the heart of all of our work.

**Bernell Bussue**
**Regional Director, RCN London**
**December 2013**

# 1) Overall, nursing numbers in London are largely stable, but leadership posts are under threat

The aggregated data we received for whole time equivalent (WTE) nursing posts from 21 London NHS trusts is shown in Table 1 below. In total the figures show a rise of around 320 posts. The totals are of a similar scale to the NHS reported data for the same trusts, and are consistent with a region wide nursing workforce largely unchanged in size.

By asking trusts to provide us with a breakdown of their workforce by band we are able to publish for the first time a picture of changing nursing skill mix in London. Our analysis shows a rise fairly evenly spread over Bands 5, 6 & 7, but confirms what we have been told by our members: there has been a 3% cut over the last year in the most senior nursing posts, Bands 8a-d.

The cuts to senior posts in acute trusts go even wider (Table 2). Staffing levels are almost exactly static – between these nine trusts employing over 18,000 registered nurses, establishment has increased by 69 posts in the past year. But our analysis of skill mix shows that budgets are being balanced by a hollowing out of leadership positions: there has been a cut in acute trusts at bands 7 and 8.

Overall mental health trusts have seen their nursing workforce grow by 4% this year (Table 3). In part this reflects the reorganisation of community health services following the abolition of the old primary care trusts in 2013. Troublingly, though, even within that total increase, Band 8 posts in mental health have been cut by 12% this year.

## Table 1: WTE posts in London 2012/13

|  | Posts Apr-12 | Posts Apr-13 | Change 12/13 | Change % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Band 5** | 9731.5 | 9933 | 201.5 | 2% |
| **Band 6** | 8927.4 | 9048 | 120.6 | 1% |
| **Band 7** | 4648.0 | 4688.6 | 40.6 | 1% |
| **Band 8** | 1259.9 | 1217.7 | -42.2 | -3% |
| **Total 5-8** | 24566.8 | 24887.2 | 320.4 | 1% |

(Source: 21 NHS trusts in London)

## Table 2: WTE posts in acute hospital trusts in London 2012/13

|  | Posts Apr-12 | Posts Apr-13 | Change 12/13 | Change % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Band 5** | 7054.6 | 7122 | 67.4 | 1% |
| **Band 6** | 6570.5 | 6625.9 | 55.4 | 1% |
| **Band 7** | 3421.1 | 3379.8 | -41.2 | -1% |
| **Band 8** | 960.1 | 948 | -12.1 | -1% |
| **Total 5-8** | 18006.3 | 18075.7 | 69.4 | 0% |

(Source: 9 NHS acute hospital trusts in London)

## Table 3: WTE posts in NHS mental health trusts in London 2012/13

|  | Posts Apr-12 | Posts Apr-13 | Change 12/13 | Change % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Band 5** | 2303.9 | 2446.6 | 142.7 | 6% |
| **Band 6** | 2184.9 | 2239.6 | 54.7 | 3% |
| **Band 7** | 1074.8 | 1144.4 | 69.7 | 6% |
| **Band 8** | 269.3 | 237.6 | -31.8 | -12% |
| **Total 5-8** | 5832.9 | 6068.2 | 235.3 | 4% |

(Source: 7 NHS mental health trusts in London)

# 2) A problem for non-foundation trusts?

A worrying trend in London has been severe cuts to the nursing workforce of NHS trusts which have not yet secured foundation trust (FT) status (Table 4). The figures shared by trusts with the RCN shows that while FTs have grown their workforce by 4% in the last year, non-FTs have seen an overall 3% cut. Non-FTs also told us in their 2014 projections that they plan further cuts for next year.

There are obvious questions about the severity of the financial strains being placed on NHS trusts which are applying for FT status. The prioritisation of financial considerations over patient safety was identified as a major concern by Francis. There is a danger that the demands of the FT application process are still leading some employers to make unsafe staffing cuts in order to balance the books.

**Table 4: Change to qualified nursing numbers 2012/13**

|  | Foundation trusts | Non-FTs |
|---|---|---|
| **Band 5** | 5% | -3% |
| **Band 6** | 3% | -1% |
| **Band 7** | 4% | -4% |
| **Bands 8a-d** | -3% | -3% |
| **Total** | 4% | -3% |

Source: 11 London FTs, 10 non-FTs

# 3) In London there are no signs of a boost to nursing numbers in 2014

Twelve London NHS trusts provided us with projections for their nursing workforce by April 2014. Again the numbers are incredibly static. With information covering some 16,700 nurses these 12 trusts predict a year on year increase of just seven posts. In the face of tighter budgets it seems management are doing their best to protect what they can and no more.

At the time of the Government response to Francis in November, Health Education England announced that, based on data they had received from trusts nationally, they expected to see an increase of some 3,700 nurses by April 2014. The figures we have received show that almost none of that increase is likely to take place within London (Table 5).

This has worrying implications for London. Population growth is estimated at 1.3% a year, double the rest of the UK. Cuts to out of hospital care have seen hospital attendances increasing and waiting lists hit a five year high. With an increasing connection between staffing numbers, skill mix and patient safety, London's NHS trusts must consider whether protecting current numbers is enough to support an ever increasing demand from patients.

**Table 5: Projected WTE posts in London 2013/14**

|  | Posts Apr-13 | Posts Apr-14 | Projected change to 2014 | % Change |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Band 5** | 6489.6 | 6508.9 | 19.3 | 0% |
| **Band 6** | 6329.4 | 6330.8 | 1.3 | 0% |
| **Band 7** | 3133.8 | 3124.6 | -9.2 | 0% |
| **Bands 8a-d** | 769.2 | 765.0 | -4.2 | -1% |
| **Total** | 16722.0 | 16729.2 | 7.2 | 0% |

Source: 12 London NHS trusts

# 4) Fewer than one in four London trusts produced a safe staffing report in 2013

Sir Bruce Keogh's report into under-performing hospitals this year states: "As set out in the Compassion in Practice, directors of nursing in NHS organisations should use evidence-based tools to determine appropriate staffing levels for all clinical areas on a shift-by-shift basis. Boards should sign off and publish evidence-based staffing levels at least every six months, providing assurance about the impact on quality of care and patient experience."

We asked every trust in London to provide us with their most recent dedicated report showing the effect of their staffing levels on patient safety. Only nine trusts out of 39 were able to provide a report which had been published this year; a rate of under one in four.

Several other trusts advised us of their reporting methods, but often provided assessments from previous years or relied on board performance reports which made no explicit link with patient care. Other trusts suggested that a safe staffing report did exist, but we would question how publicly available these are after several months of requesting a copy.

In a welcome move, the Government's response to Francis has mandated for six monthly safe staffing reports from next year, as well as creating a new website to allow patients to see monthly data. There is clearly a benefit for patients in publicly available data about the steps trusts are taking to keep them safe. We will continue to work with trusts to monitor progress in our region. We approach this work as a partnership but it also creates an opportunity to raise views early where we have concerns.

# 5) Vacancy rates in London are twice the national average

While the data reported to us by trusts shows a nursing establishment that has remained largely constant, a significant concern remains the vacancy rates for London's nurses.

The most recent official NHS data released in 2010 showed a system-wide vacancy rate for nurses of 2.5%. The RCN believes vacancy data is a helpful indicator for balancing workforce supply with patient demand, to inform staffing levels which deliver safe, high quality patient care. A comprehensive study by the RCN of current vacancy rates was published in November 2013's *Frontline First* report and showed a national vacancy rate of 6% from a sample of 61 trusts.

Today we publish data from a separate freedom of information request carried out within London, which shows the regional vacancy rate for nurses is 11%, twice the national average. Only three trusts of 39 in London have vacancy rates below the national average of 6%, and in some cases the rate is running over 20%. In total we were told of over 6,700 nursing posts lying vacant.

**There is a danger that the hard work of trusts in protecting posts is being undermined by a difficulty in finding suitably qualified nurses to take those jobs.**

Anecdotally we have heard growing reports of members taking retirement earlier than they might otherwise have planned, as cutbacks and reorganisations force upheaval in their workplaces. By our estimates around 300 nurses a month in London are taking retirement. We also have concerns that not enough is being done to systematically encourage young people – from all of London's communities and backgrounds – to consider nursing as a realistic career.

When we asked trusts about their use of agency and bank staff we were told numbers had gone up by 14% in a year (Table 6). In a separate exercise over the summer we also asked trusts about their use of overseas recruitment to fill posts. Five told us that they had recently gone overseas to recruit but a further five told us they would need to do so in the year to come, including from Spain, Portugal, Ireland and the Philippines.

All these indicators point to a growing workforce shortage in London nursing.

**Questions must be asked of workforce planning in the region, and whether suitable levels of training places are being commissioned. Much needs to be done to maintain an available workforce of suitably qualified nurses at a level that trust management themselves clearly believe is required to keep patients safe.**

### Table 6: Use of bank and agency staff (WTE)

|  | Bands 5 to 8 |
|---|---|
| **Apr-12** | 1223.7 |
| **Apr-13** | 1394.3 |
| **Change 12-13** | 14% |

Source: 11 London NHS trusts

## Table 7: Vacancy rates of London trusts at June 2013

Source: In June 2013 RCN submitted an freedom of information request asking each trust; i) How many nursing vacancies do you have as at 1 June 2013; and ii) How many nursing posts did you have including vacancies on 1 June 2013? Where distinction was made between registered nurses and nursing assistants we have used the number for registered nurses. Where no distinction was made we have used the total given, therefore some data may include health care assistants.

| Trust | Nursing vacancies at 1 June 2013 (WTE) | Establishment 1 June 2013 (WTE) | Vacancy rate |
|---|---|---|---|
| Barking, Havering & Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust | 202.03 | 1738.27 | 12% |
| Barnet and Chase Farm Hospitals NHS Trust | 103.06 | 1453.47 | 7% |
| Barnet Enfield and Haringey Mental Health NHS Trust | 89 | 814.53 | 11% |
| Barts Health NHS Trust | 424 | 4954 | 9% |
| Camden & Islington NHS Foundation Trust | 48.1 | 452 | 11% |
| Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust (minus MK Community) | 16 | 2286 | 1% |
| Central London Community Healthcare NHS Trust | 136.6 | 1,044.70 | 13% |
| Chelsea and Westminster NHS Foundation Trust | 160.14 | 1,050.69 | 15% |
| Croydon Health Services NHS Trust | 232.42 | 1,172.12 | 20% |
| East London NHS Foundation Trust | 124.42 | 1826.72 | 7% |
| Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust | 113.61 | 1462 | 8% |
| Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation Trust | 102.3 | 1269.76 | 8% |
| Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust | 761.3 | 5845 | 13% |
| Hillingdon Hospitals NHS Trust | 27.42 | 750.09 | 4% |
| Homerton Hospital NHS Trust | 123.28 | 1007.19 | 12% |
| Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust | 526 | 4300 | 12% |
| King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust | 214 | 2296 | 9% |
| Kingston Hospital NHS Trust | 88.23 | 860.04 | 10% |
| Moorfields Eye Hospital NHS Foundation Trust | 55.03 | 447.53 | 12% |
| North East London NHS Foundation Trust | 252.83 | 2481.19 | 10% |
| North Middlesex University Hospital NHS Trust | 76.37 | 1020.05 | 7% |
| North West London Hospitals NHS Trust | 385 | 2316 | 17% |
| Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust | 201.71 | 1678.02 | 12% |
| Royal Brompton & Harefield NHS Foundation Trust | 190 | 1324.57 | 14% |
| Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust | 176.22 | 1620.79 | 11% |
| Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital NHS Trust | 40.88 | 519.76 | 8% |

## Table 7 continued...

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust** | 277.84 | 1541.08 | 18% |
| **South London Healthcare NHS Trust** | 269 | 2016.15 | 13% |
| **South West London and St George's Mental Health NHS Trust** | 146 | 691.33 | 21% |
| **St George's Healthcare NHS Trust** | 254.74 | 2709.82 | 9% |
| **Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust** | 0 | 24 | 0% |
| **The Royal Marsden Foundation Trust** | 80.89 | 1092.87 | 7% |
| **University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust** | 501 | 3,501.00 | 14% |
| **West London Mental Health NHS Trust** | 122 | 1160 | 11% |
| **West Middlesex University Hospital NHS Trust** | 94.6 | 923.93 | 10% |
| **Whittington Hospital NHS Trust** | 149.2 | 1,127.70 | 13% |
| **London total** | **6765.22** | **60778.37** | **11%** |

(Lewisham Hospital NHS Trust and Ealing Hospital NHS Trust did not provide information. Hounslow and Richmond Community Healthcare NHS Trust were not asked).

# 6) Appendix: Full list of who took part in this survey

We received replies and assorted workforce information from the following 21 NHS trusts. We also had very full and helpful responses from North West London Hospitals NHS Trust and the Royal Free NHS Foundation Trust just slightly too late for us to be able to include the data in this report. We are, again, extremely grateful to those nursing and HR directors who took the time to help us voluntarily with this project.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health NHS Trust** | **Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust** |
| **Camden and Islington NHS Foundation Trust** | **North East London NHS Foundation Trust** |
| **Central London Community Healthcare NHS Trust** | **Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust** |
| **Croydon Health Services NHS Trust** | **Royal Brompton and Harefield NHS Foundation Trust** |
| **East London NHS Foundation Trust** | **Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust** |
| **Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust** | **Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital NHS Trust** |
| **Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation** | **South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust** |
| **Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust** | **Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust** |
| **Hillingdon Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust** | **University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust** |
| **Hounslow and Richmond Community Healthcare NHS Trust** | **West London Mental Health NHS Trust** |
| | **West Middlesex University Hospital NHS Trust** |

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