



Royal College  
of Nursing

# Nurse Staffing for Safe and Effective Care

## A resource guide for reps



## Background

Safe and effective staffing is a crucial issue for nursing. It impacts directly and indirectly on both staff and patients. Safe staffing means having the right number of registered nurses with the right knowledge, skills and experience, supported by appropriate nursing support staff, in the right place, at the right time. This leads to improved patient outcomes, reduced mortality rates and increased efficiency.

▶▶ Search for the RCN's position statement, *Nurse Staffing for Safe and Effective Care* (publication code 006878) at [www.rcn.org.uk/publications](http://www.rcn.org.uk/publications)

In 2016, Wales became the first country in Europe with a legal duty

to provide sufficient nurse staffing on hospital wards. The RCN is working with the Welsh Government to extend the legislation to other areas of nursing. In addition, we are calling for legislation in each UK country that guarantees safe and effective staffing levels for all providers across health and care settings.

The issue became a priority following a resolution at RCN Congress in 2016, which called for 'RCN Council to lobby the governments of England, Northern Ireland and Scotland to follow Wales and deliver enforceable safe staffing levels'. Since then a UK-wide project team has been set up and various strands of work begun.

## What's the purpose of this short guide?

There are three main aims and these are to:

1. Highlight the crucial role that RCN reps can play in supporting members to raise questions around safe and effective staffing.
2. Signpost reps to accurate sources of information, guidance and advice, which will help them support members.
3. Raise awareness of the importance of safe and effective staffing in every setting where nursing care is provided.

## What is nurse staffing for safe and effective care?

The RCN defines safe and effective nurse staffing as having ‘the right numbers of registered nurses, with the right knowledge, skills and experience, supported by appropriate nursing support staff, in the right place, at the right time’.

To broaden understanding, we recommend two RCN policy reports. The first is *Safe and Effective Staffing: The Real Picture*, published in May

2017, which looks at the current situation and offers advice to policy-makers on what needs to change.

Following on, in September 2017 the RCN published a policy report, *Safe and Effective Staffing: Nursing Against the Odds*. This is based on an RCN survey of 30,000 members, which describes in detail the impact that poor staffing has on patient care and staff wellbeing.



## As an RCN rep, what is my role?

All reps signpost, represent, support, negotiate and question and influence on behalf of RCN members, whether members have a health and safety, learning or employment-related issue.

As a rep, you play an important role in helping members to raise any concerns about patient care in their workplace. The *Raising Concerns* publication offers a step-by-step guide and there is also online guidance for you on how to support them: *Raising Concerns: Guidance for RCN Representatives*.

## Broadly speaking, what can help me to raise issues and influence for positive change?

For a comprehensive overview of the issues, including planning nurse staffing, best practice principles and some recommended minimums, see the RCN's *Guidance on Safe Nurse Staffing Levels in the UK*.

*Ask. Listen. Act.* provides practical guidance on questioning and influencing, which can be used by learning and safety reps and stewards to improve workplace conditions, including safe and effective nurse staffing.

The RCN's *Healthy Workplace Toolkit* also provides a wealth of

information to support RCN reps to improve working environments which can have an impact on work-related stress and safe and effective nurse staffing.

The RCN's resources on rest breaks, and hydration and nutrition needs for the nursing workforce (*Rest, Rehydrate, Refuel: A Resource to Improve the Working Environments for Nursing Staff*) – including the evidence base, legal requirements and improvement tips – can be used to negotiate changes in practice and culture.

“ There's an incredible level of detail and variety in the RCN's resources for reps. ”

*Alex Scott, former Steward now an RCN Officer, East Midlands region*



## A member has told me there are not enough registered nursing staff on her shift and she believes it's unsafe. What resources can help?

Suggest they raise the issue with their manager, signposting them to *Raising Concerns*, which offers a step-by-step guide.

*Ask. Listen. Act.* offers reps advice about the issues to investigate and consider on staffing levels and the questions reps can ask.

“ I've been contacted by several members who have concerns about safer staffing. You usually find that you have to set short, medium and long-term goals. Short term can be as simple as making sure a shift is covered properly. Medium and longer-term can look at vacancy rates and recruitment issues. As nurses we have a duty to raise our concerns and say what we don't think is safe. For me, the only way we can sort it out is if we approach it in partnership ”

*Margaret Devlin, Steward,  
Northern Ireland*



## We're facing constant under-staffing in some areas of our trust. What can reps do to try to resolve this issue?

*Ask. Listen. Act.* provides guidance on effective joint working and stakeholder engagement that could help you resolve this issue in the longer term.

The health and wellbeing of staff facing constant shortages may also

be an issue. See the RCN's *Healthy Workplace Toolkit* for guidance. This includes questions that can be asked on the organisation's culture, rates of sickness absence and access to mandatory training.

“ I'd encourage reps to get involved in their employer's influencing groups and committees. If there aren't any, then initiate them. ”

*Gordon Lees, Steward,  
Northern region*



## **Another member has told me that that his mandatory training has been delayed again because of staffing issues. Where can I find help?**

*Ask. Listen. Act.* includes some useful information on staff development, including mandatory training.

The RCN's *Improving Mandatory Training: How reps can play their*

*part* sets out the responsibilities and benefits of undertaking mandatory training, alongside the potential adverse consequences of failing to complete it, both for individuals and their employer.

## **A member has asked whether they can refuse to work because they believe staffing levels are unsafe. Any RCN advice?**

It should never come to this. Initially the matter should always be raised with the member's manager, following the advice in *Ask. Listen. Act.* particularly the section on staff wellbeing. See the guidance listed above for help to support members who want to raise concerns themselves.

*The Nursing and Midwifery (NMC) Code* also has useful guidance. Specifically, while this says that you must act without delay if you believe that there is a risk to patient safety or public protection, it also says you must always offer help if an emergency arises in your practice setting or anywhere else. The NMC has also produced its own guidance on raising concerns.

## Are there any specific guides to help me represent members who work:

### in care homes

The RCN's *Guidance on Safe Nurse Staffing Levels in the UK* includes a brief section on care homes.

In addition, in 2012 the RCN published a report, *Persistent Challenges to Providing Quality Care*, which looked at the views and experiences of frontline nursing staff in care homes in England. It includes sections on staffing levels, skill mix and recruitment and retention.

### with children and young people

The RCN has produced *Defining Staffing Levels for Children's and Young People's Services*.

### with older people

The RCN has produced *Safe Staffing for Older People's Wards*.

### in mental health settings

In 2017, the Royal College of Psychiatrists published the fifth edition of its *Quality Standards for Liaison Psychiatry Services*, which include minimum staffing levels and skill mixes for psychiatry liaison teams serving different functions.

### in the community

The RCN's *Guidance on Safe Nurse Staffing Levels in the UK* includes a section on working in the community.



“ I represent members in a community trust. What is safer staffing in a district nursing team? It's important to remember the whole nursing family and not just those on acute wards ”

*Paul Brown, Learning Rep,  
Eastern region*

For lone workers, see the RCN's *Personal Safety when Working Alone: Guidance for Members Working in Health and Social Care*.

### **as bank and agency staff**

The RCN has produced a *Healthy Workplace Toolkit for an Agency Workforce* which provides

a voluntary framework for organisations to follow, supporting compliance with standards and legal requirements.

### **as nursing students**

The RCN provides online advice about raising any concerns relating to placements.

## **What specific advice is there for nursing staff in:**

### **England**

There is no law related to nurse staffing. NHS Trusts have not been told to use specific workforce planning tools, but resources and national guidance are used to support local decision-making on staffing. There are also NHS Improvement resources, including acute care, learning disability, children and young people, emergency care, district nursing, maternity and mental health. Further information can be found on the safe staffing pages of the NHS England and NHS Improvement websites.

### **Northern Ireland**

Again, there is no law on nurse staffing levels here, but the Department of Health has outlined nurse staffing in *Delivering Care: Nurse Staffing in NI*.

### **Scotland**

The Scottish government is developing a bill on safe and effective staffing in Scotland and the RCN has responded to initial proposals. The RCN has produced a briefing paper for members in Scotland: *Safe Staffing in Scotland – Briefing for Scottish Members*.

### **Wales**

*The Nurse Staffing Levels Act (Wales)* places a duty on Health Boards and NHS Trusts to calculate and maintain nurse staffing levels in adult acute medical and surgical inpatient wards. It also has a broader duty to consider how many nurses are necessary to provide the right level of care for patients sensitively in all settings.

## Resources

**Safe and Effective Staffing: The Real Picture**, Royal College of Nursing (2017). Available at: [www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-006195](http://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-006195)

**Safe and Effective Staffing: Nursing Against the Odds**, Royal College of Nursing (2017). Available at: [www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-006415](http://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-006415)

**Raising Concerns**, Royal College of Nursing (2017). Available at: [www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-005841](http://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-005841)

**Raising Concerns: Guidance for RCN Representatives**. Available at: [www.rcn.org.uk/employment-and-pay/raising-concerns/guide-for-rcn-reps](http://www.rcn.org.uk/employment-and-pay/raising-concerns/guide-for-rcn-reps)

**Guidance on Safe Nurse Staffing Levels in the UK**, Royal College of Nursing (2011). Available at: [www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-003860](http://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-003860)

**Ask. Listen. Act.**, Royal College of Nursing (2015). Available at: [www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-005357](http://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-005357)

**Healthy Workplace Toolkit**, Royal College of Nursing (2015). Available at: [www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-004964](http://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-004964)

**Improving Mandatory Training: How reps can play their part**, Royal College of Nursing (2018). Available at: [www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-006869](http://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-006869)

**Rest, Rehydrate, Refuel: A Resource to Improve the Working Environments for Nursing Staff** (2018). Available at: [www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-006702](http://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-006702)

**The Code**, Nursing and Midwifery Council (2015). Available at: [www.nmc.org.uk/standards/code/read-the-code-online/](http://www.nmc.org.uk/standards/code/read-the-code-online/)

**Raising Concerns: Guidance for Nurses and Midwives**, Nursing and Midwifery Council (2017). Available at: [www.nmc.org.uk/standards/guidance/raising-concerns-guidance-for-nurses-and-midwives/](http://www.nmc.org.uk/standards/guidance/raising-concerns-guidance-for-nurses-and-midwives/)

**Guidance on Safe Nurse Staffing Levels in the UK**, Royal College of Nursing (2011). Available at: [www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-003860](http://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-003860)

**Persistent Challenges to Providing Quality Care**, Royal College of Nursing (2011). Available at: [www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-004227](http://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-004227)

**Defining Staffing Levels for Children's and Young People's Services**, Royal College of Nursing (2011). Available at: [www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-002172](http://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-002172)

**Safe Staffing for Older People's Wards**, Royal College of Nursing (2011). Available at: [www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-004234](http://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-004234)

**Quality Standards for Liaison Psychiatry Services**, Royal College of Psychiatrists (2017). Available at: [www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/Quality%20Standards%20for%20Liaison%20Psychiatry%20Services%20-%20Fifth%20Edition%202017.pdf](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/Quality%20Standards%20for%20Liaison%20Psychiatry%20Services%20-%20Fifth%20Edition%202017.pdf)

**Personal Safety When Working Alone: Guidance for Members Working in Health and Social Care**, Royal College of Nursing (2011). Available at: [www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-005716](http://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-005716)

**Healthy Workplace Toolkit for an Agency Workforce**, Royal College of Nursing (2011). Available at: [www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-006120](http://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-006120)

**Student Nurses.**

Available at: [www.rcn.org.uk/get-help/rcn-advice/student-nurses](http://www.rcn.org.uk/get-help/rcn-advice/student-nurses)

**Safe Staffing NHS England.** Available at: [www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/safe-staffing/](http://www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/safe-staffing/)

**NHS Improvement resources.**

Search for 'safe staffing' at [www.improvement.nhs.uk](http://www.improvement.nhs.uk)

**Delivering Care: Nurse Staffing in NI**, Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery (2014). Available at: [www.nipec.hscni.net/work-and-projects/adv-guid-info-bt-pract-nurs-mid/delivering-care/deliveringcare-docs/](http://www.nipec.hscni.net/work-and-projects/adv-guid-info-bt-pract-nurs-mid/delivering-care/deliveringcare-docs/)

**Safe staffing in Scotland - Briefing for Scottish Members**, Royal College of Nursing (2017). Available at: [www.rcn.org.uk/about-us/policy-briefings/safe-staffing-briefing-may-2017](http://www.rcn.org.uk/about-us/policy-briefings/safe-staffing-briefing-may-2017)

**Nurse Staffing Levels (Wales) Act 2016: Statutory Guidance**, Welsh Government (2016). Available at: <http://gov.wales/topics/health/publications/health/guidance/staffing-levels/?lang=en>



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