

‘Nursing Shortages in England’: Westminster Hall Debate, Tuesday 3 March, 9.30-11am.

This debate follows a petition being delivered by Royal College of Nursing (RCN) members to the Prime Minister in February. This petition with over 200,000 signatories, is part of our Staffing for Safe and Effective Care campaign which calls for action to remedy the staffing shortages as a priority.

There have been 37 debates on workforce shortages within health and care settings since 2017, and yet there remain unanswered questions on the changes needed to remedy this crisis.

The nursing workforce in England

Key statistics

- There are **40,000 nursing vacancies in health and care settings in England.**
- The **small 0.4% increase in nursing staff since last year masks the true picture.** Services are struggling. BBC evidence this week highlighted that we have experienced the worst trolley waits this winter for a generation.ⁱ
- Data from the NHS Staffing Survey published this month highlights that:
 - **only 28% of respondents nationally agree/strongly agree that there are enough staff at their workplace for them to do their job.**
 - **67% of respondents nationally worked additional unpaid overtime per week.**
- There are high vacancy rates in public health and social care, however there is a lack of robust data to calculate these figures.
- More widely, across the UK, **one in three nurses are due to retire within the decade.**ⁱⁱ

Current context

The increase of 0.4% to the workforce is welcome. But it is not happening fast enough, or at the scale we need. Sometimes system and health leaders’ responses to concerns about staff shortages cite that there are “more nurses now than there ever have been”ⁱⁱⁱ. This belies the reality that there are also more patients than ever before, and acuity of patients is higher. The nursing workforce has not kept up with rising need for health care^{iv vi}.

Staffing shortages are the responsibility of multiple decision-makers, across all levels of the health and care system. Ultimately, much of this is outside the control of frontline staff and Trusts. It requires political will and decisive action to ensure there are enough skilled health care staff to provide safe and effective care.

We recognise the pledge for 50,000 more nurses in five years and we hope to see the plans for how this will be delivered. Any increase to the nursing workforce must be across all health and care settings, not just in hospitals. Underpinning the pledge with costed and funded solutions, will help this target make a meaningful difference to nursing staff, and the people in their care.

Staffing for Safe and Effective Care

For government to begin to fix the workforce crisis, there are two urgent matters that need to be addressed. Nursing students in higher education need investment, and a law must be secured to protect our ability to provide safe and effective care for the future

Clarifying workforce accountability in law

There is a gap between the numbers of nursing staff we currently have and the number of people who need health care. In part this is due to no person or organisation being legally accountable for growing and developing the nursing staff we need now or, in the future, to deliver patient care.

In England, we are calling for the forthcoming NHS Long Term Plan Bill to be published with a framework which sets out explicit roles, responsibilities and accountabilities for workforce supply and planning, for government and through all levels of decision making. Wales have a Nurse Staffing Levels Act (2016) to protect nurse staffing levels in acute care services, and Scotland passed legislation on safe staffing last year.

We are not alone in calling for accountability to be addressed. In September 2019, NHS England recommended that the government review “*whether national responsibilities and duties in relation to workforce functions are sufficiently clear*”^{vii}. Polling by YouGov found that 80% of respondents in England agreed “*the Government should have a legal responsibility to ensure there are enough nursing staff to meet the country’s needs*”^{viii}.

Our call is also supported by other Royal Colleges and health organisations. Achieving accountability in law will enable decision makers to begin to fix the workforce crisis by clarifying decisions, action plans and funding required for workforce growth to meet population needs. This will prevent health and care services struggling to provide care without enough nurses in future.

Investment in nursing higher education

To begin to resolve the staffing shortages, future nurses must be attracted to study and join the profession. Studying nursing at university is the quickest way to grow the workforce at pace and scale, but this requires investment. The funding reforms from 2016 have not increased the student numbers we need to close the gaps. Funding for nursing students is crucial for attracting more people to study nursing as debt can act as a disincentive, especially to prospective mature students who may already shoulder debt from a previous degree in another subject.

In December 2019, the government announced maintenance grants for nursing students of £5,000, for some it will be £8,000. However, the government must expand these maintenance grants to reflect the true cost of living and provide full tuition fee support in the next Budget. Everything possible must be done to remove financial barriers for nursing students. This should be either full grants for tuition, or forgiveness of tuition loans for people who enter public service.

Taking a cross governmental approach to tackling nursing shortages

Investment in nursing education and clarifying accountability for workforce in law are part of wider strategies and change required to ensure the supply, recruitment, retention and remuneration of nursing staff. Therefore, we are also calling for:

- **Investment in health and care services:** including a long term and sustainable funding solution for social care as well as restored funding for the public health grant allocations.
- **Introduction of an immigration system that supports nursing:** nursing must remain on the Shortage Occupation List and be exempt from the salary threshold when the points-based immigration system comes into force. There must also be an exemption for nursing staff from the Immigration Health Surcharge – an additional fee of £400 to use our health services.
- **Improvement of working conditions and meaningful pay:** so that nursing staff are best supported and valued for their work.

For more information, please contact Rachael Truswell, Public Affairs Adviser on Rachael.Truswell@rcn.org.uk

ⁱ BBC news article, ‘Sickest NHS patients face hours on trolleys’, Nick Triggle, 26th February 2020. Available here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-51565492>

ⁱⁱ Institute for Employment Studies, ‘One in three nurses to reach retirement age within ten years’, press release 7 July 2016, www.employmentstudies.co.uk/news/one-three-nurses-reachretirement-age-within-ten-years.

ⁱⁱⁱ Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Matt Hancock – 7th May 2019. “*The good news is that we have record numbers of nurses in the NHS. We have more staff in the NHS than at any time in its history.*” [Available at <http://bit.ly/2Vuhvyg>]

^{iv} Nursing and Midwifery Council data, England registrant data 2013-2019.

^v NHS Digital data as quoted in House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, Number 7281 31 May 2019. NHS Key Statistics: England, May 2019

^{vi} Number of elective admissions: NHS Digital data on cancelled operations [Available at <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/cancelled-elective-operations/cancelled-ops-data/>]

^{vii} The NHS’s recommendations to Government and Parliament for an NHS Integrated Care Bill (2019) [Available at <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/BM19175-recommendations-to-government-for-an-nhs-integrated-care-bill.pdf>]

^{viii} YouGov commissioned by the RCN. YouGov/Royal College of Nursing Survey Results: All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1,692 UK adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 6th - 8th September 2019. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).