



Royal College of Nursing
Shaping nursing since 1916

Briefing for Lords debate on the implications of the European Union referendum result for government policies on ensuring safe staffing levels in the National Health Service and social care services

The EU nursing workforce in the UK

EU nurses make a vital contribution to the NHS and the health of the nation. There are currently 33,000 EU nurses registered to work in the UK and since 2010¹, there has been a 236% increase in EU nurses in the country.

The numbers show that the UK has an ever increasing reliance on nurses from the EU, who plug serious gaps within the nursing workforce. This is due to Government cuts since 2010 to nurse education commissions in the UK, which have dramatically reduced the supply of nurses coming into the system. There will be serious consequences for patient care if EU health professionals are forced to leave the country en masse.

Successive reports have identified a link between the numbers of registered nurses on duty and patient outcomes.² The supply of nurses from within the UK is insufficient to ensure the numbers needed to meet rising demand and complex care needs within the NHS, and to provide the high quality care that people using health and care services can and should expect.

The RCN is echoing calls from NHS England Chief Executive, Simon Stevens, who is calling for the Government to provide “early reassurance to international NHS employees about their continued welcome in this country”³. The RCN welcomes the Government response that it “fully expects the legal rights of EU nationals already in the UK will be properly protected”. The RCN now calls on the Government to deliver this vital commitment, as uncertainty around the status of EU health professionals is a serious cause for concern for all of us, and poses a threat to the future sustainability of the NHS.

However, it still leaves a huge amount of uncertainty about the rights of nurses coming to the UK in the future, who are essential in plugging the persistent gap in the nursing workforce. The significant gap of registered nurses in the UK has been created as a result of ‘boom and bust’ workforce planning. Therefore, **the RCN is calling for the Government to act now and develop a coherent and sustainable workforce strategy for the future that recognises the critical contribution of overseas nurses as well as the pressing need to educate, recruit and retain a home-grown nursing workforce.**

Student funding for nursing

The decision to leave the EU has created uncertainty about the current and future supply of the nursing workforce. This, together with a proposed move to a loans system for nursing students, could pose a dangerous threat to the quality of patient care. The Government’s proposals are untested and there is currently no evidence to show that removing bursaries

¹ NMC Register, Freedom of Information, Number of EU trained Nurses, 31 March 2016

² For example, the Francis, Berwick and Keogh reports

³ Daily Telegraph, The radical blueprint the NHS needs to survive life after Brexit, Tuesday 19 July 2016. Available [here](#).

will result in an increase in the number of nurse, midwife and allied health professional students in training. In addition, a coalition of over 20 healthcare trade unions, charities and professional colleges, led by the RCN, called on the Government to halt its plans⁴.

The RCN is warning the plans are high risk, that they may have serious unintended consequences and must be suspended until a suitable model of funding can be found. It is essential that the nursing profession is involved in developing, piloting and evaluating any changes to the way nurse education is funded.

Moreover, at a time when the need to develop the nursing workforce to be able to care for patients with complex needs, funding for supporting nurses to develop their knowledge and skills is essential. This must include enabling nurses to move across fields of practice and care settings as well as access specific post registration programmes to develop specialist and advanced practice. Examples of funding for tuition that could be lost include district nursing and mentorship training. District nursing teams, through their vital work in the community, have a crucial role in reducing hospital admissions and supporting early discharge. Despite this critical role we know that the numbers of district nurses has fallen dramatically over the last 10 years and the loss of funding for post-registration tuition would only exacerbate the current difficulties. This will lead to a further drop in numbers and further reduce the provision of essential community based nursing care.

New nursing roles

The Government has identified an opportunity to increase the skills of Health Care Support Workers through a new “Nursing Associate” role, which has potential to improve career pathways and skills for these important staff. While this provides an opportunity to expand the Health Care Support Worker workforce, the role must not be used to substitute the clinical decision making skills of registered nurses. Having the right numbers of nurses with the right mix of clinical skills, is essential for good patient care.

Ensuring nursing representation within the Department of Health

Nursing has an important part to play in finding solutions to the issues facing the health service following the EU referendum result. However, recent structural changes within the Department of Health mean there will no longer be senior nursing representation at the heart of Government, therefore, losing the voice for the largest workforce in the NHS.

Questions must be asked about the future of the EU Professional Working Directive, which enables the free movement of professionals within the EU, including nurses, doctors and midwives. What will become of this directive? The lack of a nursing voice within the Department raises serious concerns about the UK’s ability to influence such issues in the best interests of safe and patients alike.

In addition, the lack of an independent nursing voice blocks opportunities to model new initiatives and test policies before they are implemented. Nursing leadership will be crucially important for steering through any policy changes affecting the NHS.

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⁴ Open Letter to the Prime Minister, 17 June 2016. Available [here](#).