

# Expanding the NHS Nursing Workforce:

## Retention and recruitment



# Executive Summary

The nursing profession is the largest clinical workforce in the NHS but a sustained undersupply of registered nurses relative to demand led to a significant shortfall in the NHS. In December 2019, the previous government launched an ambitious plan to increase the total number of registered nurses working in the NHS in England by 50,000 by March 2024.

**This research is a large-scale evaluation of a national NHS workforce policy (The N50k Programme) to understand ‘what works’ and ‘what could be improved’ in recruiting and retaining nurses in the NHS.**

Whilst the 50,000 target was met early, this was largely due to international recruitment. Here we outline four key findings and actionable lessons to ensure long-term sustainability in the NHS nursing workforce; with the key message that long-term sustainability requires a balance between domestic training and recruitment, international recruitment, and retention of existing nurses.

## Getting the balance right



**Domestic Training**



**International Recruitment**



**Retaining Existing nurses**

# The policy context

The nursing profession in the NHS has faced substantial challenges over the past decade, with high vacancy rates, nurses leaving the NHS and the profession, and declining student nurse applications. The COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit have significantly influenced nursing workforce dynamics, affecting work pressures, turnover, and levels of international recruitment. In England, the gap between supply and demand for NHS nurses has been predicted to reach 140,000 posts by 2030/31<sup>1</sup> and between 260,000 to 360,000 by 2036/37<sup>2</sup> without substantial long-term interventions and funding.

The NHS 10 Year Health Plan<sup>3</sup> acknowledges that there will be fewer NHS staff in the workforce by 2035 than was projected by the 2023 Long-Term Workforce plan.<sup>2</sup> A shortage of nurses threatens the effectiveness of healthcare services. Heavy workload and failure to reach safe staffing levels compromise the quality of care, as fundamental tasks are left undone, increasing the risk of adverse events and further exacerbating patient waiting lists.<sup>4</sup> Previous initiatives have included tackling student attrition from higher education programmes. Multiple intervention strategies have been devised to retain nurses, reflecting the NHS People Promise, to address the myriad factors that influence why nurses stay or leave the profession.<sup>5</sup>

In December 2019, the government launched a plan to increase the total number of registered nurses working in the NHS in England by 50,000 by March 2024, referred to here as ‘The N50k programme’ The programme consisted of multiple interventions aiming to expand the workforce by: 1) increasing the number of ‘new nurses’, educated in England ; 2) recruit more nurses from overseas; 3) better retain current NHS nurses. Ensuring consistent, integrated, and sustainable workforce planning should be a policy priority, and is a key part of the 2025 10 Year Health Plan, and has implications for the forthcoming 10 Year Workforce Plan.

## Key findings

**Long- term sustainability requires balancing recruitment and retention effort**

- Expanding the workforce by 50,000 nurses was met early largely through international recruitment (347% increase in international nurses comparing 2016/19 period to 2020/23).
- Reliance on international recruitment was needed to meet the N50k target, as it is quicker method of increasing supply compared to training student nurses.
- Apprenticeships were perceived by NHS trusts as an attractive solution, but high investment plus backfill of salary costs make these an expensive option to fund at scale.
- NHS trust and higher education leads perceived a lack of integration between the workstreams, with heavy investment in some areas (e.g. apprenticeships; international recruitment) compared to others (direct entry students, retention).

# Key findings

## Domestic Training

### Undergraduate enrolments did not substantially improve

- 127,000 enrolments in 2023/24 compared to 126,000 in 2014/15
- Flexibility in courses (e.g., entry level, routes into training) stemmed declining numbers rather than increasing intakes.
- National campaigns targeted at potential applicants lacked visibility.
- Participants perceived specific targets are needed for different nursing fields.
- Regional consortiums of Higher Education Institutions and NHS trusts were perceived to improve regional workforce planning.
- Higher education participants perceived exclusion from national level decision-making.

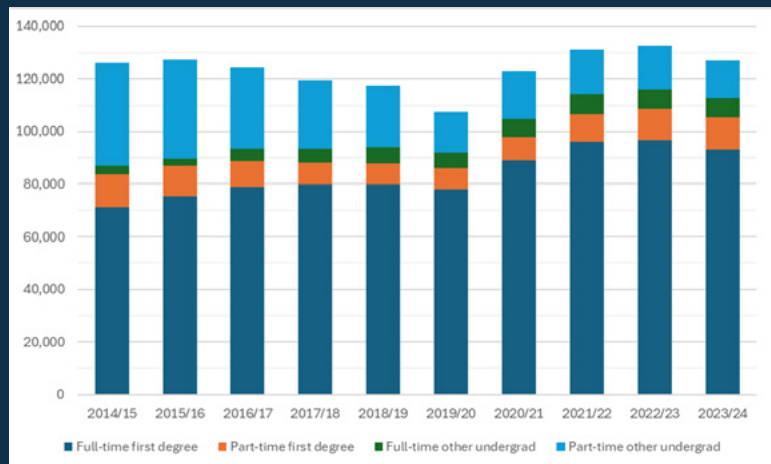


Figure 1. Number of student enrolments on nursing Higher Education courses



## International Recruitment

### The importance of training and onboarding

- N50k funding partly enabled creating infrastructures to manage training, onboarding, and staff integration.
- NMC registration changes enabled international recruits more rapidly translate overseas qualifications to those needed to practice in the NHS.
- Training to support OSCE preparation, onboarding activity, and practical support was extensive and well received.
- The value of these initiatives is reflected in nurses staying in the NHS between 2019/20 to 2022/23.
- International nurses are often treated as a homogenous group rather than acknowledging the diversity of experiences and practice from different countries and cultures.



## Retention

### The importance of pastoral, career and wellbeing support

- 80% of NHS trust leads reported improved retention rates since 2019.
- Only 30% of NHS trust leads agreed N50k had a significant effect on their ability to retain staff.
- Almost all NHS trust leads were satisfied with early career and international arrival support: including induction (92.9%), pastoral support (93.6%), and preceptorship programmes (96.5%)
- The cross-sectional survey showed that nurses were moderately satisfied with career development opportunities.
- Nurses had concern about a lack of clear structure and support for career development and/or progression.
- Nurses suggested retention activities were not always visible to them.

### Nurses value positive working environment and supportive teams

- Working conditions, such as ward environment, teams and culture, were key factors drivers for people choosing to stay in the NHS.<sup>6</sup>
- Low levels of satisfaction with basic facilities e.g., catering, parking.
- Two-thirds of nurses were satisfied with the flexibility in their role.
- Flexibility was not the most important factor for nurses choosing a job role, but NHS trust leads perceived it as particularly important for retaining younger nurses.

# Implications and recommendations

## 1. Longer term, system approach to enable greater focus on the domestic pipeline

Sustainable workforce supply requires better balance of international recruitment, domestic recruitment, and retention efforts.

- 1.1 Shift focus from a single target to an approach balanced across recruitment streams, underpinned by improved forecasting of nurse inflow and outflow.
- 1.2 Slower paced 10-year trajectory aligned with the 10-year plan to enable greater focus on domestic supply to reduce reliance on international recruitment.
- 1.3 Greater integration of higher education at the national level in decision-making about domestic supply and workforce planning.

## 2. Sustained focus to increase pre-registration recruitment

Driving up interest in nursing careers requires sustained and long-term intervention.

- 2.1 The forthcoming 10-Year Workforce Plan should address domestic pipeline challenges (i.e. declining applicants, funding apprenticeships, continuing to reduce levels of course attrition).
- 2.2 Large scale, sustained investment in advertising to raise the profile and attractiveness of nursing.
- 2.3 Greater nuance in setting targets for particular fields e.g., learning disability nursing.
- 2.4 Reduce financial burden and/or incentivise nursing students (e.g., reimbursement for placement travel as per the 10-Year Plan; greater level of support fund, or training grant).
- 2.5 The NHS 10-Year Health Plan aims to create 2000 more nursing apprenticeships over the next three years. Careful analysis is needed of the merits of apprenticeship investment compared to increased subsidies for direct entry students.

## 3. Clinical placements to ensure capacity for acute and community settings

- 3.1 Greater integrated working between higher education and the NHS to agree on definitions of capacity, and agreeing on accessibility and constraints which exist for some students.
- 3.2 Increase placement capacity in specific specialties, such as community settings, mental health and learning disability nursing.

## 4. Support for international recruitment and onboarding

- 4.1 Ensure training and onboarding is more tailored to the diversity of nursing experiences and practices.
- 4.2 Further inclusivity and cultural competency training for existing UK staff to ensure that international nurses are welcomed and supported.

## 5. Retention

- 5.1 Improve basic facilities (e.g., catering, parking, changing rooms), which may be lower cost but have the potential to enhance working conditions.
- 5.2 Implement career pathway conversations / coaching in line with the 10-Year Health Plan.
- 5.3 Ensure internationally educated nurses can access targeted career advice to ensure equality in career opportunity.
- 5.4 Further research to examine if current retention strategies align with motivations and aspirations of younger nurses e.g., flexible and integrated career pathways.
- 5.5 Ensure continued focus on wellbeing and support (pastoral, mentoring, preceptorship).
- 5.6 Ensure support is visible to nurses and information about support is promoted in NHS trusts.

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