



Northern Ireland Audit Office

MEDIA RELEASE

Workforce planning for nurses and midwives

More than one in ten registered nursing posts here were vacant in late 2019, with annual spend on temporary nursing staff reaching £115 million. These are among the main findings of a new report published today (Friday 31st July) by the Comptroller and Auditor General, Kieran Donnelly CB.

Mr Donnelly's report on 'Workforce planning for nurses and midwives' examines the nursing and midwifery workforce within both the Health and Social Care (HSC) and independent care sectors. It reviews whether the workforce is capable of dealing with future challenges and increasing demands on services.

The report finds that total HSC nursing and midwifery staffing vacancies have risen very significantly, from 770 in 2013 to over 2,700 in 2019. These vacancies include 2,100 unfilled registered nursing posts, with as many as 1,600 additional nurses also required to ensure safe staffing levels.

Although the HSC registered nursing workforce has increased by 8.8 per cent between 2012 and 2019, the report finds that an increase of more than 23 per cent would have been required to meet the rising level of demand. To date, recruitment of the vacant posts has been hampered by a shortage of nurses and a recurrent funding gap

The report also finds that a decision by the Department of Health to reduce the training budget for pre-registration nursing¹ has contributed to the workforce shortages, with 732 fewer nursing training places being created between 2011-12 and 2016-17, compared with 2009-10 levels. The training budget was reduced from an annual average of £30.1 million between 2008-09 and 2010-11, to £28.8 million between 2011-12 and 2016-17, in response to financial and affordability pressures. However, the report notes that these cuts were implemented when demand for care was continuing to rise. This has had longer-term implications, contributing to an increased reliance on more expensive temporary staffing solutions.

Today's report finds that expenditure on temporary staff (from internal banks and external agencies) has increased dramatically, from £14.6 million in 2006-07 to £115 million in 2018-19. It concludes that the increase in agency costs, from £8.6 million to £52 million has provided particularly poor value for money. In 2018-19, Trusts incurred costs of up to £1,700 for single nursing bank holiday shifts.

Commenting on the report's findings, Mr Donnelly said:

"At a time when the focus should have been on growing the nursing and midwifery workforce, short-term savings were instead pursued. Substantially reducing the number of training places over a lengthy period has left the HSC and independent care sectors with an insufficient staffing pool to

¹ Successful completion of the pre-registration degree results in participants becoming registered nurses and midwives.

cope with the rising demand for care. I accept that workforce planning is a challenging area to manage, particularly given the rising demands, limited resources and intense global competition for staff facing the health service. Nonetheless, short-term decisions taken at a strategic level have meant that overcoming these serious challenges will take even longer.

“The reliance on temporary nurses, particularly agency staff, has not only resulted in soaring costs, it also can compromise the quality and safety of patient care as staff are deployed in less familiar clinical settings. It is clear that this does not represent value for money”

The report does note significant action taken by the Department to address staffing gaps, including:

- 746 pre-registration nursing places commissioned in 2016-17, which has increased to an average of 974 places between 2017-18 and 2020-21, with 1,210 places commissioned in 2020-21 alone;
- 205 midwifery places commissioned in 2019-20 and 2020-21, which is substantially higher than previous levels;
- An increase in the post-registration training budget, which rose to £10 million in 2020-21, with the Department planning to further increase this to £11.3 million in 2021-22; and
- An international nursing recruitment campaign launched in May 2016, which has resulted in the appointment of 458 staff who were still working in the HSC sector at March 2020.

Mr Donnelly added:

“The Department has recently taken important steps to counter the situation through considerably increasing the number of nursing and midwifery training places and by publishing an HSC wide workforce strategy. However, substantial further action and monitoring, as well as achieving progress in reconfiguring services, will all be essential to building a sustainable and more cost-effective workforce”.

ENDS

Notes for Editors

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). He and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. He certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. He has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. His reports are published as Assembly papers.
2. This report was completed before the outbreak of COVID-19. To ensure that audit work did not disrupt the efforts of severely stretched public bodies dealing with a most challenging set of circumstances, the NIAO took a conscious decision not to publish during the pandemic even though the report had been finalised. We also recognise that the demands associated with COVID-19 are likely to have future implications for workforce planning across the HSC sector.
3. The reduction in the pre-registration nursing budget followed the publication of a Department of Health workforce review for 2009 to 2013 recommended no changes to the number of commissioned pre-registration nursing training places. However, the report found that the Department's review did not formally consider the rising demand for care, and so likely underestimated training requirements.

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4. An interactive data tool, providing information on vacancies and agency staff costs across the health trusts, can also be accessed at the following link:
https://niao-data-analytics.shinyapps.io/Health_workforce_planning/
5. Other key findings include:
 - The 22,500 staff within the HSC sector's nursing and midwifery workforce group include 16,000 registered nurses, 1,340 registered midwives, and 5,100 support staff. Accounting for 34 per cent of the HSC sector's 66,500 employees, they provide the widest range of patient services. Estimates suggest that the independent care sector may also employ up to 3,500 nurses.
 - The post-registration training budget, which helps nurses acquire new specialist skills, was also reduced from almost £9.5 million in 2008-09 and 2009-10, to an average of £8 million between 2010-11 and 2018-19. The Department cannot confirm the extent to which the number of commissioned training programmes and places also reduced.
6. The report will be available on the Audit Office website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk. The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on 31 July 2020.
7. Background briefing can be obtained from the Audit Office by contacting Roger McCance (028 9054312).