

Standards for safe staffing in children and young people's mental health and learning disability services¹

Purpose

The Association of British Paediatric Nurses (ABPN) aims to promote the development of children's nursing through evidence-based information about practice and education. This position statement has been produced by officers and members of the Association to provide the nursing workforce requirements for health care services accessed by children and young people.

The standards contained within this position statement are the minimum essential recommended for all providers of services for infants, children and young people

Background

The intensity of workload within all services and across all settings continues to increase as a result of changes in complexity of illness, advances in medicine, increased public expectations and changes in how services are configured, such as primary care out-of-hours provision². The Kings Fund highlighted that such changes have resulted in increased numbers attending emergency care departments, with more children and young people requiring assessment, observation and short stays, in acute settings^{3,4}.

The Association of British Paediatric Nurses (ABPN) has repeatedly stated that all health services accessed by children and young people must be age appropriate and delivered by suitably educated and skilled practitioners⁵.

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) previously clearly defined the nursing workforce and safe standards related to the care of children and young people across all health care provision, including for example acute or mental health settings, community, social care or independent sector provision. The ABPN actively contributed to the first edition of the standards published in 2003⁶, including subsequent iterations^{7,8}. However, many of the RCN publications have over recent years been archived creating a void in the availability of evidence-informed, quality assured standards for practice guidance.

In this document, the ABPN has drawn upon more recent international comparisons in respect of paediatrics^{9,10}, acknowledging the increasing complexity in the needs of children and young people accessing health care services today.

Within children and young people's mental health and learning disability services

- a minimum of band 7 supernumerary supervisory ward sister/charge nurse
- all registered nurses must be trained in Basic Paediatric Life Support skills and

safeguarding children to level 3 as defined by the intercollegiate framework¹¹

- a minimum of one practice educator to update all staff
- various support roles including¹²:
 - a ward receptionist +/- administrative support for the ward sister/charge nurse
 - one housekeeper +/- one hostess as appropriate

The minimum baseline establishment should be increased by 27 percent to cover annual leave, sickness, study leave, parental leave and other leave¹³.

The number of students on a shift should not exceed university, and individual clinical areas, agreed numbers¹⁴.

Children and young people's mental health service standards^{15,16,17}

For District General Hospitals per 20 inpatient beds (covering inpatients and outpatients)¹⁸

- 0.2 WTE CAMHS nurse¹⁹

For designated paediatric liaison service in teaching hospital or regional centre or specialist children's hospital per 80 beds (covering inpatient and outpatients)

- 1 WTE specialist CAMHS practitioner²⁰
- 3 WTE CAMHS practitioners (skill-mix: systemic family therapy, mental health nursing and occupational therapy)²¹

Inpatient children and young people's mental health units^{22,23,24}

- A minimum 1:1 ratio of ward staff to young person for High dependency/high acuity cases (e.g. high levels of observation, use of seclusion, increased risk of violence or self-harm) which should be increased to 3:1 for the most highly disturbed cases²⁵
- A minimum 1:2 ratio of ward staff to young person for medium dependency (e.g. 10-minute checks, intensive support at mealtimes)²⁶
- A minimum 1:3 ratio of ward staff to young person for low dependency observations²⁷
- A minimum of two staff on duty at night for a 12 bedded unit with low dependency cases, including one registered member of staff and access to additional support as appropriate²⁸
- A minimum of two registered nurses (with relevant experience of working with children and young people) on duty for each day shift for a 12 bedded unit²⁹.

Children and Young People's Learning Disability service standards³⁰

- a *minimum* of 1WTE registered learning disability nurse³¹ in all acute hospitals to educate, train and upskill staff, and to advise on care for children and young people with learning disabilities and/or autism
- an establishment of registered learning disability nurses within community services³² to facilitate care in the community³³.

The ABPN believes

- children and young people have a right to be cared for in age-appropriate facilities and by nurses who have the right education, training, knowledge and skills to meet their needs^{34,35,36}
- staffing levels should be reviewed at least once a year³⁷
- there should be access to a senior child and adolescent mental health nurse and/or learning disability nurse, as well as a named or designated safeguarding professional for advice 24 hours a day³⁸
- local and national workforce planning is essential, encompassing all services and sectors delivering care for children and young people³⁹
- **the standards contained within this position statement are the minimum essential recommended for all providers of services for infants, children and young people**

It is important to review local workforce priorities and responses alongside national workforce policy which can be accessed via national government websites.

Useful websites

NHS England <https://www.england.nhs.uk/>

Department of Health Northern Ireland <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk>

NHS Scotland <https://www.gov.scot/health-and-social-care/>

NHS Wales <https://www.nhs.wales>

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References

¹ The term 'children and young people' is used to refer to infants (neonates), children and young people up to the age of 18, or at the point at which an individual's transition to adult health services is completed.

²² Kings Fund & Nuffield Trust (2024) Public satisfaction with the NHS and social care in 2023

https://assets.kingsfund.org.uk/f/256914/x/48c40ea52b/public_satisfaction_nhs_social_care_2023_bsa_2024.pdf

³ Kings Fund (2013) Are accident and emergency attendances increasing?

<https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/blog/2013/04/are-accident-and-emergency-attendances-increasing?>

⁴ Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2017) Standards for short stay paediatric assessment units

<https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/search?keywords=short+stay+paediatric+assessment+units>

⁵ Association of British Paediatric Nurses Position Statement on Children and Young People's Rights

[abpn_position_statement_children_and_young_peoples_rights.pdf](#) and Background Briefing paper on Children and Young People's Rights [abpn_background_briefing_children_and_young_people.pdf](#)

⁶ Royal College of Nursing (2003) Defining staffing levels for children and young people's services: RCN guidance for clinical professionals and service managers, 1st Edition London: RCN.

⁷ Royal College of Nursing (2007) Defining staffing levels for children and young people's services: RCN guidance for clinical professionals and service managers, 2nd edition, London: RCN.

⁸ Royal College of Nursing (2013) Defining staffing levels for children and young people's services: RCN guidance for clinical professionals and service managers, 3rd edition, London: RCN.

⁹ Ministry of Health, British Columbia August 2024 https://www.bcnu.org/files/mNPR_Hospital-Based_Care_Setting_Policy_Directive.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.trustednursestaffing.com/nurse-patient-ratios-by-state/>

¹¹ Royal College of Nursing (2019) Safeguarding Children and Young People: Roles and competencies for health care staff

¹² Support roles should be used to ensure that registered nurses are used effectively.

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- ¹³ Royal College of Nursing (2021) Nursing workforce standards, London: RCN.
- ¹⁴ Nursing and Midwifery Council (2019) Education and training standards framework for nursing and midwifery education <https://www.nmc.org.uk/standards-for-education-and-training/standards-framework-for-nursing-and-midwifery-education/>
- ¹⁵ School nurses and health visitors have a key role in providing emotional health and wellbeing support at Tier 1 and 2
- ¹⁶ Specialist CAMHS services at Tier 2, 3 and Tier 4 is provided in inpatient and community settings by multidisciplinary teams including psychiatrists, psychologists and nurses.
- ¹⁷ Nurses in child and adolescent teams may be registered mental health nurses who have acquired additional knowledge, skills and competencies having completed a recognised child-focused post-registration programme or registered children's nurses with mental health experience who have undertaken post-registration specialist mental health educational provision.
- ¹⁸ Where children and young people with mental health problems are admitted to children's wards, the dependency of these patients can be high and should be considered as part of the overall dependency assessment. Specific CAMHS resources are required to provide support to acute children's inpatient services in respect of self-harm and other emergency services i.e. crisis intervention team.
- ¹⁹ Royal College of Psychiatrists (2013) CR182. Building and Sustaining Specialist CAMHS to improve outcomes for children and young people https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/improving-care/better-mh-policy/college-reports/college-report-cr182.pdf?sfvrsn=8662b58f_2
- ²⁰ Royal College of Psychiatrists (2013) CR182. Building and Sustaining Specialist CAMHS to improve outcomes for children and young people https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/improving-care/better-mh-policy/college-reports/college-report-cr182.pdf?sfvrsn=8662b58f_2
- ²¹ Royal College of Psychiatrists (2013) CR182. Building and Sustaining Specialist CAMHS to improve outcomes for children and young people https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/improving-care/better-mh-policy/college-reports/college-report-cr182.pdf?sfvrsn=8662b58f_2
- ²² The number of staff on any shift must relate to the number of patients on the unit and the dependency see - The CAMHS_AID Ables et al. (2007) Measuring patient dependency in child and adolescent mental health, *British Journal of Nursing*, 16 (17), pp. 1064-1072. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18026051/>
- ²³ The use of bank and agency staff unfamiliar with the unit is used only in exceptional circumstances e.g.. in response to additional need
- ²⁴ The ward/unit has a mechanism for responding to low/unsafe staffing levels; when they fall below the agreed levels. This should include a) a method for the team to report concerns about staffing levels b) access to additional staff members c) and agreed contingency plans, such as a minor and temporary reduction of non-essential services.
- ²⁵ See Royal College of Psychiatrists (2019) Quality Network of Inpatient CAMHS Standards for Services
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[https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/improving-care/ccqi/quality-networks/child-and-adolescent-inpatient-services-\(cahms\)/qnic-standards-10th-ed.pdf?sfvrsn=34b75467_2](https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/improving-care/ccqi/quality-networks/child-and-adolescent-inpatient-services-(cahms)/qnic-standards-10th-ed.pdf?sfvrsn=34b75467_2)
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- ²⁸ See Royal College of Psychiatrists (2019) Quality Network of Inpatient CAMHS Standards for Services
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- ³⁰ The Health and Care Act 2022 introduced a requirement that regulated service providers must ensure their staff receive learning disability and autism training appropriate to their role.
- ³¹ Each organisation must assess the number of RN LD nurses required, recognising that some may require a team of RN LD nurses to provide a 7 day a week service to meet the needs of the children and young people with learning disabilities and autism accessing their services
- ³² All children and young people with learning disabilities and autism should have access to a RN LD
- ³³ Each local area should review their children and young people's population to identify the number of children and young people with learning disabilities and/or autism – see Care Quality Commission (2020) Out of Sight – who cares?: Restraint, segregation and seclusion review <https://www.cqc.org.uk/publications/themed-work/rssreview>

³⁴ Association of British Paediatric Nurses Position Statement on Children and Young People's Rights [abpn_position_statement_children_and_young_peoples_rights.pdf](#) and Background Briefing paper on Children and Young People's Rights [abpn_background_briefing_children_and_young_people.pdf](#)

³⁵ ABPN Position Statement on Children's Nurse Education [abpn_position_statement_nurse_education_final_24_november_2024.pdf](#) and ABPN Background Paper on Children's Nurse Education [abpn_cn_education_background_paper_final_22nd_november_2024.pdf](#)

³⁶ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/national-standards-for-neonatal-qualified-in-specialty-qis-education/>

³⁷ To recognise changes in service configurations, reductions in lengths of stay, clinical complexity, increasing acuity, children and young people admitted in emotional distress including those who have self-harmed

³⁸ Royal College of Nursing (2019) Safeguarding Children and Young People: Roles and competencies for health care staff

³⁹ Association of British Paediatric Nurses Workforce planning and nurse staffing position statement [abpn_position_statement_workforce_planning_and_nurse_staffing-final_nov_2024.docx](#) and background briefing paper [abpn_workforce_planning_and_nurse_staffing_background_briefing_paper-final_nov_2024.docx](#)