

# Standards for safe staffing in children and young people's wards and departments<sup>1</sup>

## 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 provision<sup>2</sup>. 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<sup>3,4</sup>.

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 practitioners<sup>5</sup>.

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 2003<sup>6</sup>, and subsequent iterations<sup>7,8</sup>. However, many of the RCN publications have over recent years been archived creating a void in the availability of evidence-informed, quality assured standards for practice guidance.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<sup>9,10</sup>, acknowledging the increasing complexity in the needs of children and young people accessing health care services today.

## General children's wards and departments

Nurse staffing must reflect the acuity of children and young people<sup>11</sup>. All hospitals should use a recognised and validated methodology to assess the acuity of patient care that clearly reflects the needs of children, not those of adult patients.

Regardless of the number of children present on a children's ward, there must be

- a minimum of two registered children's nurses on each shift in all children inpatient and day care areas
- a band 7 supernumerary supervisory ward sister/charge nurse
- a competent and experienced band 6 throughout the 24-hour period to support and advise on the clinical nursing care across the organization
- at least one nurse per shift on each ward/department trained in Advanced Paediatric Life Support (APLS)/European Paediatric Advanced Life Support (EPALS) recognising specific clinical and service needs
- registered children's nurses trained in Basic Paediatric Life Support and safeguarding children to level 3 as defined by the intercollegiate framework<sup>12</sup>
- a minimum of 70:30 per cent registered to unregistered<sup>13</sup> staff (although the precise ratio will vary throughout clinical areas<sup>14</sup>)

The minimum baseline establishment should be increased by 27 percent to cover annual leave, sickness, study leave, parental leave and other leave<sup>15</sup>.

The number of students on a shift should not exceed university, and individual clinical areas, agreed numbers<sup>16</sup>.

- *The standard for bedside, deliverable hands-on-care is 1:3-1:4<sup>17</sup> registered nurse: child<sup>18</sup> (throughout the day and night)*

All staff providing care must have the right knowledge, skills, expertise, and competence to meet the specific needs of the children and young people in the particular clinical area.

In addition to the registered and unregistered nurses for bedside, deliverable hands-on-care there should be various support roles including<sup>19</sup>

- a ward receptionist +/- administrative support for the ward sister/charge nurse
- at least one health play specialist
- one housekeeper +/- one hostess

Specific Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) resources are increasingly required to provide support to acute children's inpatient services in respect of self-harm and other emergency services i.e. crisis intervention team.

### **Specialist children's wards and departments**

Many specialist wards such as oncology, cardiac and neurosurgery care for high dependency children and young people<sup>20</sup>:

- *The standard for high dependency care is 1:2 registered nurse: child<sup>21</sup>*
- The minimum standard for all other children and young people on specialist wards is 1:3 registered nurse: child<sup>22,23</sup>.

Additional standards:

- 70% of registered nurses must possess the specialist knowledge, skill and

competencies for the specific clinical area

- a minimum of one registered nurse with the required specialist knowledge, skill and competencies on duty throughout the 24-hour period.
- A minimum of one practice educator to update all staff in specialist areas

In addition to the registered and unregistered nurses for bedside, deliverable hands-on-care there should be various support roles including<sup>24</sup>

- a ward receptionist +/- administrative support for the ward sister/charge nurse
- at least one health play specialist
- one housekeeper +/- one hostess

Specific Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) resources are increasingly required to provide support to acute children's inpatient services in respect of self-harm and other emergency services i.e. crisis intervention team.

### **Adolescent and young adult units**

The specific configuration of services may vary from organisation to organisation so as to ensure the needs of young people between 16 and 25 years, with life-limiting and/or long-term conditions are met.

Staffing requirements for adolescent areas have not been clearly defined. Key principles include:

- the psychosocial needs of adolescents should be taken into account
- the required registered nursing workforce should consist of 50 per cent registered children's nurses and 50 per cent registered adult nurses with knowledge, skills and competence in child and adolescent mental health and the care of those whose health is impacted by drugs and alcohol
- transition to a service with appropriate expertise for each individual young person<sup>25</sup>.

Specific CAMHS resources are required to provide support to acute children's and adolescent inpatient services in respect of self-harm, as well as expertise from drugs and alcohol services

If a young person between 16-18 years of age chooses to be admitted to an adult inpatient environment the staffing requirements are different.

Some organisations have established specialist transition nurses, as well as youth workers to meet the specific needs of young people.

### **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<sup>26,27,28</sup>
- staffing levels should be reviewed at least once a year<sup>29</sup>

- there should be access to a senior children’s nurse<sup>30</sup> for advice at all times throughout the 24-hour period, as well as a named or designated safeguarding professional for advice 24 hours a day<sup>31</sup>
- local and national workforce planning is essential, encompassing all services and sectors delivering care for children and young people<sup>32</sup>
- **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:

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

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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](https://assets.kingsfund.org.uk/f/256914/x/48c40ea52b/public_satisfaction_nhs_social_care_2023_bsa_2024.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Kings Fund (2013) Are accident and emergency attendances increasing?

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

<sup>4</sup> 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>

<sup>5</sup> 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](#)

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

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

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

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Health, British Columbia August 2024 [https://www.bcnu.org/files/mNPR\\_Hospital-](https://www.bcnu.org/files/mNPR_Hospital-)

[Based\\_Care\\_Setting\\_Policy\\_Directive.pdf](#)

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

<sup>11</sup> Patient dependency scoring and quality indicator monitoring should be used to provide an evidence base for daily adjustments in staffing levels.

<sup>12</sup> Unregistered staff must have completed a course of training specific to the setting, and in the care of infants, children and young people and have undergone a period of competence assessment before carrying out care and delegated tasks

<sup>13</sup> Unregistered staff must have completed a course of training specific to the setting, and in the care of infants, children and young people and have undergone a period of competence assessment before carrying out care and delegated tasks

<sup>14</sup> For example, it is expected that there will be a higher proportion of registered nurses in areas such as intensive care, specialist areas and in many cases general children’s units

<sup>15</sup> Royal College of Nursing (2021) Nursing workforce standards, London: RCN.

<sup>16</sup> Nursing and Midwifery Council (2018) Realising Professionalism: Standards for education and training. NMC

<sup>17</sup> Dependent upon the age, case mix and complexity of care needs

<sup>18</sup> The term child refers to refer to infants, children and young people up to the age of 18

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- <sup>19</sup> Support roles should be used to ensure that registered nurses are used effectively.
- <sup>20</sup> At least a third of children and young people on specialist wards should be classed as requiring high dependency care, although for some clinical areas this may be as high as 50 per cent. Royal College of Nursing (2003) Defining staffing levels for children and young people's services: RCN guidance for clinical professionals and service managers, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition London: RCN.
- <sup>21</sup> The term child refers to refer to infants, children and young people up to the age of 18
- <sup>22</sup> The term child refers to refer to infants, children and young people up to the age of 18
- <sup>23</sup> The minimum nurse staffing requirements including the percentage of uplift are as set out for general children's wards and departments
- <sup>24</sup> Support roles should be used to ensure that registered nurses are used effectively.
- <sup>25</sup> Northumbria Healthcare Trust has developed a toolkit to help health care providers provide developmentally appropriate healthcare, including transition from children's services to adult services (Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, 2017)
- <sup>26</sup> 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](https://assets.kingsfund.org.uk/f/256914/x/48c40ea52b/public_satisfaction_nhs_social_care_2023_bsa_2024.pdf)
- <sup>27</sup> 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](#)
- <sup>28</sup> 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](#)
- <sup>29</sup> 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
- <sup>30</sup> A senior qualified children's nurse is a nurse that holds a children's nursing qualification, and a master's degree in an appropriate health/social care related subject, with a minimum of five years' full-time experience in uninterrupted clinical practice. The expectation is that this post would be at a minimum of Band 8a dependent on the full scope and remit of the position in which case the post may be graded higher where the remit is greater. All post holders of matrons positions in children's services must hold a registered children's nursing qualification.
- <sup>31</sup> Royal College of Nursing (2019) Safeguarding Children and Young People: Roles and competencies for health care staff
- <sup>32</sup> 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](#)