



Module name: Protecting and Supporting Families in Health and Care

Module code:BMHP5019

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Word count: 3,340 words

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Abstract

Staff shortages within the NHS have become one of the most significant and persistent challenges facing the UK health and social care system. Workforce shortages not only affect the ability of healthcare services to meet rising patient demand but also have wider implications for the quality, safety, and sustainability of care delivery. This scoping review aims to explore the key causes, impacts, and potential solutions to workforce shortages within the NHS by synthesising findings from peer-reviewed research. The Kings Fund (2025)

A systematic search of academic databases, including PubMed, EBSCOhost, and SAGE Journals, was conducted to identify relevant literature. The search strategy utilised a combination of keywords such as “NHS staff shortages,” “healthcare workforce UK,” and “staff retention NHS.” Studies were selected based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, ensuring that only peer-reviewed research focusing on the UK context was included. Following this process, four studies were identified as suitable for inclusion in the review. A thematic analysis approach was then applied to examine patterns, similarities, and differences across the selected studies.

The review identified four central themes. Firstly, workforce burnout emerged as a critical issue, with high workloads, emotional strain, and insufficient support contributing to stress and exhaustion among healthcare professionals. Secondly, recruitment and retention challenges were consistently highlighted, with factors such as limited career progression, dissatisfaction with working conditions, and difficulties in attracting new staff contributing to ongoing shortages. Thirdly, the impact of staff shortages on patient care was evident, with reduced staffing levels linked to longer waiting times, decreased quality of care, and increased risks to patient safety. Finally, limitations in current policy responses were identified, suggesting that existing strategies are often insufficient or poorly implemented to address the scale of the problem.

The findings indicate that NHS staff shortages are driven by a complex interaction of structural, organisational, and individual factors. These include increasing demand for healthcare services, inadequate workforce planning, and challenges in maintaining staff wellbeing. The consequences are far-reaching, affecting not only patient outcomes but also staff morale and overall service efficiency.

This review highlights the urgent need for more effective and sustainable workforce strategies. Key recommendations include improving staff retention through better working conditions and wellbeing support, increasing investment in workforce planning and training, and strengthening the implementation of existing policies. Future research should focus on evaluating the long-term effectiveness of these interventions and exploring innovative approaches to workforce sustainability within the NHS. [Erkan Alkan](#) (2024)

1. Introduction

Staff shortages within the National Health Service (NHS) refer to a situation in which the demand for healthcare professionals exceeds the available supply, resulting in gaps in

service provision and increased pressure on existing resources. These shortages are particularly evident among key professional groups such as nurses, general practitioners (GPs), and specialist healthcare roles. Over time, this issue has developed into a persistent and complex challenge within the UK healthcare system, raising concerns about the NHS's ability to meet the needs of the population effectively. The concept of workforce shortages is closely linked to workforce planning, recruitment, and retention. Workforce planning involves predicting future healthcare demands and ensuring that an appropriate number of skilled professionals are available to meet those needs. However, in recent years, the NHS has faced significant difficulties in maintaining a sustainable workforce. These challenges have led to increased workloads for existing staff, reduced service capacity, and growing pressure across healthcare settings. While recruitment initiatives have been implemented to address workforce gaps, they have often been insufficient, particularly in the context of high staff turnover and retention issues. One of the main factors contributing to staff shortages is the increasing demand for healthcare services. This demand is largely driven by demographic changes, including an ageing population and a rising prevalence of long-term and complex health conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and mental health disorders. As individuals live longer, they are more likely to require ongoing and specialised care, placing additional strain on healthcare services. At the same time, workforce supply has been affected by a range of factors, including staff burnout, early retirement, and reduced levels of international recruitment. Changes following Brexit have also influenced the availability of overseas healthcare workers, further contributing to workforce challenges.

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified many of these existing pressures. Healthcare professionals have faced unprecedented levels of stress, increased workloads, and emotional strain, leading to higher levels of burnout and job dissatisfaction. In some cases, this has accelerated decisions to leave the profession or reduce working hours, further exacerbating workforce shortages. These developments have highlighted the vulnerability of the NHS workforce and the need for more resilient and sustainable workforce strategies.

The rationale for this research is based on the growing concern surrounding the sustainability of NHS services. Workforce shortages not only affect healthcare professionals but also have direct implications for patient care and service delivery. Insufficient staffing levels have been linked to longer waiting times, reduced quality of care, and increased risks to patient safety. Furthermore, staff shortages can negatively impact staff morale and wellbeing, creating a cycle in which workforce pressures continue to intensify over time. Understanding the causes and consequences of staff shortages is essential for informing effective policy and practice. This scoping review aims to examine existing peer-reviewed research to identify the key factors contributing to workforce shortages, as well as their

impacts and potential solutions.

Review Question

-What are the causes, impacts, and potential solutions to staff shortages in the NHS based on peer-reviewed research?

-Objectives

-To define key concepts related to NHS staff shortages

-To examine the context of workforce challenges in the UK

-To identify and analyse peer-reviewed studies on staff shortages

-To explore key themes emerging from the literature

-To provide recommendations for policy, practice, and future research NHS (2024)

2. Background

The NHS is one of the largest publicly funded healthcare systems in the world, providing comprehensive healthcare services to millions of people across the UK. Despite its central role in society, the NHS faces ongoing workforce challenges that threaten its ability to deliver high-quality care.

One of the primary drivers of staff shortages is increasing demand for healthcare services. The UK population is ageing, with a growing number of individuals living with long-term health conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and dementia. This has led to a higher demand for healthcare services, placing additional pressure on an already stretched workforce.

In addition to rising demand, workforce supply has been affected by retention issues. Many healthcare professionals experience high levels of stress and burnout due to heavy

workloads, long working hours, and emotional demands. This has resulted in increased staff turnover, with many individuals leaving the NHS or reducing their working hours.

Recruitment challenges further contribute to workforce shortages. While international recruitment has historically been an important source of staff for the NHS, changes following Brexit have made it more difficult to attract workers from overseas. Additionally, limitations in training capacity and funding constraints have restricted the number of new healthcare professionals entering the workforce.

Policy initiatives have been introduced to address these challenges, including workforce expansion plans and retention strategies. However, there are ongoing concerns about the effectiveness of these measures, particularly in terms of long-term sustainability. The impact of staff shortages extends beyond workforce issues, affecting patient care and service delivery. Patients may experience longer waiting times, reduced continuity of care, and increased risk of medical errors. These challenges highlight the importance of understanding staff shortages within the broader context of health and social care. NHS (2025)

3. Methods

A scoping review methodology was adopted to explore the existing literature on NHS staff shortages. This approach is particularly suitable for examining a broad topic and identifying key themes and gaps in research.

A comprehensive search of academic databases, including PubMed and SAGE Journals, was conducted. The search strategy involved the use of keywords and Boolean operators to identify relevant studies. PMC (2025)

Search terms included:

- NHS staff shortages
- Healthcare workforce UK
- Nurse shortages NHS
- Staff retention NHS
- Inclusion Criteria

- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Published in English
- Focus on the UK or NHS workforce

Direct relevance to staff shortages

- Exclusion Criteria
- Policy documents (used only in background)
- Editorials and opinion pieces
- Non-UK studies

Following the search process, four studies were selected for inclusion based on their relevance and quality.

Data Analysis

The selected studies were analysed using thematic analysis. This involved a systematic process of identifying patterns and themes within the data. The process included familiarisation with the studies, coding of key findings, and grouping these codes into broader themes.

Ethical Considerations

As this research is based on secondary data, ethical approval was not required. However, ethical principles were followed by ensuring accurate representation of the original studies and proper acknowledgment of sources. Alison Squares (2025)

4. Results

Overview of Included Studies

The four selected studies varied in their research design, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches. All studies were conducted within the UK context and focused on different aspects of NHS staff shortages.

Article Citation	Aim of study	Methods, sample size and characteristics	Summary of main findings
1	Explore nurse experiences	Qualitative	Burnout and stress are major issues
2	Examine retention factors	Survey	Poor working conditions increase turnover
3	Impact on patient care	Mixed Methods	Reduced safety and quality of care
4	Workforce planning	Review	Policy gaps contribute to shortages

Theme 1: Workforce Burnout

Burnout emerged as a consistent theme across all studies. Healthcare professionals reported high levels of stress due to excessive workloads, emotional demands, and lack of support. Burnout not only affects individual wellbeing but also contributes to staff turnover.

Theme 2: Recruitment and Retention Challenges

The studies highlighted significant challenges in both recruiting and retaining staff. Factors such as low pay, limited career progression, and poor working conditions were identified as key contributors to workforce attrition.

Theme 3: Impact on Patient Care

Staff shortages were found to have a direct impact on patient care. This included longer waiting times, reduced quality of care, and increased risk of errors. These findings raise concerns about patient safety and service effectiveness.

Theme 4: Policy and System Limitations

While policies exist to address workforce shortages, the studies suggest that these measures are often insufficient or poorly implemented. This highlights the need for more effective and sustainable workforce planning strategies. PMC (2024)

5. Discussion

The findings of this scoping review highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of staff shortages within the National Health Service (NHS). The issue cannot be attributed to a single cause; rather, it reflects a combination of structural, organisational, and individual factors that interact to create ongoing workforce pressures. Among these, burnout emerges as a central and recurring theme, reflecting both the demanding nature of healthcare work and the limitations of current support systems available to staff.

Burnout is closely associated with excessive workloads, long working hours, and the emotional demands of patient care. Healthcare professionals are often required to work under high-pressure conditions, which can lead to physical and mental exhaustion over time. The findings of this review suggest that when staff feel unsupported or undervalued, they are more likely to experience job dissatisfaction and consider leaving the profession. This not only contributes to workforce attrition but also places additional strain on remaining staff, creating a cycle that further exacerbates shortages. Therefore, addressing burnout is essential not only for improving staff wellbeing but also for maintaining workforce sustainability. In addition to burnout, the review emphasises the importance of effective retention strategies. While recruitment initiatives are frequently prioritised in policy responses, the findings suggest that retaining existing staff is equally, if not more, important. High turnover rates indicate that simply increasing the number of new recruits is insufficient if working conditions continue to drive staff away. Improving retention requires a more holistic approach, including better working conditions, opportunities for career progression, and access to professional and emotional support. Flexible working arrangements and recognition of staff contributions may also play a role in enhancing job satisfaction and reducing attrition. The impact of staff shortages on patient care is another critical issue identified in this review. Reduced staffing levels can compromise patient safety, limit the time available for individual patient care, and increase the likelihood of errors. Patients may experience longer waiting times and reduced continuity of care, which can negatively affect health outcomes and overall satisfaction with services. These findings highlight the direct link between workforce capacity and quality of care, emphasising the need for urgent and effective interventions. Furthermore, the review indicates that current policy responses may not be sufficiently addressing the scale of the problem. While there are initiatives aimed at improving workforce supply and retention, challenges remain in their implementation and

long-term effectiveness. Workforce shortages appear to be a systemic issue that requires coordinated and sustained policy action. This includes not only increasing funding and training opportunities but also ensuring that policies are effectively translated into practice and regularly evaluated. NHS (2026)

Importance for Health and Social Care

Addressing staff shortages is critical for the sustainability of health and social care services. A stable and well-supported workforce is essential for delivering high-quality, safe, and patient-centred care. Without sufficient staffing levels, the ability of healthcare systems to meet growing demand is significantly compromised. Therefore, tackling workforce shortages should be considered a priority for policymakers, healthcare organisations, and practitioners alike. CQC (2025)

Limitations

This scoping review has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the number of studies included was relatively small, which may limit the depth and generalisability of the findings. Secondly, the review focused specifically on the UK context, meaning that the findings may not be directly applicable to other healthcare systems. Finally, there is a possibility of selection bias, as the inclusion of studies was based on specific criteria and database searches, which may have excluded relevant research. S Bottery (2025)

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This scoping review demonstrates that staff shortages within the National Health Service (NHS) are driven by a complex and interconnected set of factors, including workforce burnout, recruitment and retention challenges, and limitations in current policy approaches. Rather than being caused by a single issue, these shortages reflect deeper structural pressures within the healthcare system, where increasing demand is not being matched by sufficient workforce capacity or effective long-term planning.

A key finding across the reviewed studies is the central role of burnout in contributing to workforce attrition. High workloads, emotional strain, and ongoing pressure within clinical environments have led many healthcare professionals to reduce their working hours or leave the NHS entirely. This not only reduces staffing levels but also places additional strain on those who remain, creating a cycle that further exacerbates workforce shortages. In this context, burnout is not simply an individual issue but a systemic concern that requires organisational and policy-level intervention. Recruitment and retention challenges also play a significant role. While efforts have been made to increase the number of healthcare professionals entering the workforce, these are often undermined by poor retention rates. Factors such as limited career progression, perceived lack of support, and dissatisfaction with working conditions contribute to high turnover. This suggests that addressing staff shortages requires a stronger focus on retaining existing staff, rather than relying solely on recruitment strategies.

The implications of these shortages are substantial, particularly in relation to patient care. Reduced staffing levels have been linked to longer waiting times, decreased quality of care, and increased risks to patient safety. Furthermore, workforce shortages can negatively impact staff morale and wellbeing, ultimately affecting the overall functioning of health and social care services. In conclusion, NHS staff shortages represent a significant and ongoing challenge that requires a comprehensive and sustained response. Addressing this issue will require not only increased investment in workforce planning but also a greater emphasis on improving working conditions, supporting staff wellbeing, and ensuring effective implementation of policies. Without such measures, staff shortages are likely to persist, with serious consequences for both healthcare professionals and the patients they serve. PMC (2021)

Recommendations

Addressing staff shortages within the NHS requires a coordinated and long-term approach that focuses on both policy reform and improvements in everyday practice. The findings of this review suggest that isolated or short-term solutions are unlikely to resolve workforce challenges; instead, a sustained and strategic response is needed. From a policy perspective, increased investment in workforce planning is essential. This includes not only funding for recruitment but also the development of long-term strategies that accurately predict future healthcare demand and workforce needs. Expanding training opportunities is another key priority, particularly by increasing the number of places in nursing, medical, and allied health professional programmes. However, simply increasing training numbers is not sufficient without ensuring that newly qualified staff are supported and retained within the NHS. Therefore, improving the implementation of existing policies is crucial. Policies must be effectively translated into practice, with clear accountability and regular evaluation to ensure they achieve intended outcomes.

In terms of practice, enhancing staff wellbeing support should be a central focus. Healthcare professionals operate in high-pressure environments, and without adequate mental health support, burnout and attrition are likely to continue. Providing access to counselling services, promoting work-life balance, and fostering supportive workplace cultures can help improve staff wellbeing. Additionally, improving working conditions is critical. This includes addressing workload pressures, ensuring safe staffing levels, and creating opportunities for flexible working arrangements.

Finally, developing effective retention strategies is vital. Retaining experienced staff not only maintains workforce stability but also supports continuity of care and organisational knowledge. This can be achieved through career development opportunities, recognition of staff contributions, and improved leadership within healthcare settings. Overall, a combined focus on policy and practice is necessary to create a more sustainable and resilient NHS workforce. NHS (2024)

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