

A Roundtable Meeting of 'A School Nurse in Every School' Expert Group.

Joint initiative by the College of Medicine, SAPHNA (School and Public Health Nurses Association) and the QNI, (Queen's Nursing Institute).

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HEALTH



 The
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Campaign for 'A School Nurse in Every School' gaining momentum

Executive Summary

- The school nursing service is in crisis: 82 percent of school nurses say not enough staff to deliver a school nurse service¹
- NHS workforce data shows that school nurse (whole-time equivalents) numbers have dropped by more than 31 per cent since 2009 from 2,915 to 1,997, and post-graduate qualified, Specialist Community Public Health Nurses (SCPHN) school nurses have dropped by more than 25% from 1,135 in 2009 to 847 in 2024²
- School nursing is not commissioned at all in some local authority areas
- The average school nurse now cares for an average of 2,850 pupils³
- There is a time-bomb of health problems in young people with 40 per cent of 11-year-olds overweight or obese, and a quarter (1 in 4) 14-to-16-year-old girls self-harming
- There are reports of burnout in school nurses and an ageing workforce with more than a third of qualified school nurses aged 51 or over; 37 per cent of those saying they plan to retire within three years³
- School nurses say most of their time is spent supporting children on child protection plans with not enough time to deliver the wider offer of the Healthy Child Programme 5-19³
- Cuts to the Public Health Grant over a decade to local authority public health departments is significant and one of the key issues for school nursing
- Minimum standards, including safe staffing levels, are required for school nursing service provision and local authority public health departments
- The school nursing budget needs to be ringfenced

Urgent action is required by the new government to stem the crisis in school nursing to boost the health of the next generation.

This was the clear message to emerge from a roundtable convened by the College of Medicine, SAPHNA (School and Public Health Nursing Association) and the Queen's Nursing Institute.

The meeting heard insights from representatives of more than 30 organisations involved in public health, including local government, directors of public health, academics, nursing charities and the NHS, reporting on progress made so far in A School Nurse for Every School Campaign, (launched after a roundtable discussion⁴ in December 2023).

Dr Mike Dixon Chairperson of the College of Health, a Devon GP told the meeting:

“The reason we are all here is that things are in a fairly desperate state, and I say that as a GP who is seeing young people every day who are in a distressed state. The statistics are quite horrifying. In London we have 40 per cent of 11-year-olds who are obese or overweight and then there's that extraordinary burden in mental health with the frightening statistic of one quarter of girls aged 14-to-16-years-old self-harming^{5,6}. That is exactly what GPs are seeing in surgeries even in rural Devon.

When we refer to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), 75 per cent of our referrals are turned down. Until the misery is so bad that something really disastrous happens, nothing is done.

We are dealing with a generation that is in trouble and in desperate need of help in terms of where they are now and for preventing how they came to be there. That of course is where school nurses come in, four years ago I knew all my local school nurses very well and was in touch with them daily but nowadays it just does not happen.”

Sallyann Sutton, Professional Officer for SAPHNA, reported back on the results of SAPHNA’s soon-to-be-published school nursing workforce survey ‘The Forgotten Frontline: Public Health School Nursing. Unveiling the Realities of School and Public Health Nursing in the UK: A Survey Report (2024)’.³

“The workforce is in crisis, struggling to meet escalating demand with the survey exposing a stark postcode lottery of provision across the UK.”

The report on the survey says that school age children are missing routine and targeted health assessments, missing opportunities to identify health and wellbeing issues, facing delays in accessing early intervention and support.³

“I don’t think any of the survey findings will surprise anyone around the table. Some of the headline figures are that 82 per cent of those surveyed said there were not enough staff to deliver a school nurse service, many nurses said they spent the majority of their time on child protection issues.

96 per cent said they had seen increases in mental health issues, 86 per cent said there had been increases in children and young people self-harming/suicidal behaviour and 72 per cent said they had seen increases in childhood obesity.”

Sallyann Sutton, Professional Officer, SAPHNA

Dr Naveed Akhtar, GP in Chigwell, Essex, Council Member of the College of Medicine and Co-Chair of the Integrated Medicine Alliance,

told the meeting that he had approached his local ICB to find out how school nursing was being funded and was shocked by what he discovered.

“It’s actually quite shocking because the ICB hasn’t really got involved in school nursing. They have washed their hands of it, funding comes from the council, and we’ve become so overstretched that we have one school nurse for 30,000 children.

So, our school nurse who we used to see regularly in multi-disciplinary team meetings, we now haven’t seen for five years. We do invite her, but she is obviously too busy to come.”

“It’s actually extraordinary to think that school nurse numbers have fallen from 3,200 in 2010 to a reported 1,000 now without it ever being a government policy to run the service down.”

Dr Mike Dixon, College of Medicine

Dr Akhtar said more school nurses were needed, and more attention should be focused on the issue. He suggested that if the ICB or even the Primary Care Network controlled the budget there might be more accountability and involvement than there is currently from the local council.

“We are hearing clearly that the new government wants to develop the healthiest generation, and so the question is where public health nursing and school nursing specifically fits within that, and we will be discussing that back in the Department.”

Office of Health Improvement and Disparities

Senior officials representing the Office of Health Improvement and Disparities said that based on what they were hearing at the meeting, there was no doubt that several public health outcomes, particularly related to children, but also families, were worsening and that they had a responsibility to respond to that.

“But what I’m also hearing from colleagues is that there is hope. There is a sense right now that we have an opportunity to do things differently. We can only do this by all of us working together, and that’s the great thing about this group, we’re going to be far more effective working collectively rather than separately.”

They added that:

“There was a commitment to developing a workforce plan to maximise the impact of every nurse, midwife, and nursing associate and secondly there was a need to ensure the capacity and capability of a specialist public health workforce. We would want to set up a workforce group overseen by the Chief Nursing Officer, and we’d want members of this group to join it to help us shape and steer a clear strategy.”

They said there was also a team working on building an improvement plan around the Healthy Child Programme and how it should be delivered.

He said it was ‘crucial and pressing’ that mental health support provision for children and young people is improved and school nursing is integral to that infrastructure.

Crystal Oldman CEO of the Queen’s Nursing Institute said that the QNI had faced similar workforce challenges when district nursing numbers plummeted a few years ago and they had successfully created workforce standards for district nursing with the stakeholders delivering services.

“This meant at Board level we had accountability for meeting workforce standards for district nursing. We acknowledged there may be greater demand in some areas, so it’s not about a ratio, but the standards have been so useful because we now have Directors of Nursing who take them to the Board, and they can say ‘we are not meeting these and these are red flags - similarly, we now need to do something about school nursing’ and investment is made.”

Crystal Oldman – Chief Executive

Sharon White, OBE, CEO of the School and Public Health Nurses Association (SAPHNA) said since the last round table, SAPHNA’s partnerships with other organisations had multiplied and strengthened. These conversations include meetings with ICB Chief Executive Nurses, and resulting in commissions for SAPHNA to work with them.

“We’re very aware that there isn’t a lot of money; we’re being repeatedly told that by our new government. That’s okay as it’s not always about more money but the need to do something differently with budgets.”

“The Children’s Commissioner is also constantly raising school nurses as being key to her work; SAPHNA are working alongside her office on the escalating school attendance agenda and have also been working closely with all political parties including with former MP Luciana Berger, commissioned by Wes Streeting prior to the General Election, as part of Labour’s manifesto, to do a review on mental health in children and young people, as part of Labour’s manifesto and have the ongoing and staunch support of and former health minister, Ann Keen.

We are well connected to influential strategists, who matter and who are now sharing the narrative. We’ve also been in touch with representatives from the Welsh and Scottish governments too, so there is movement in all four countries now to some degree on this issue.

SAPHNA are also currently developing a joint position paper on the safeguarding role of school nurses alongside The Institute of Health Visiting and The Association of Directors of Public Health. Publication of this paper is imminent.

There has been a huge commitment to ongoing funding for mental health support teams in the Labour manifesto and, between our joint lobbying efforts, we have to hope that we have positively influenced future plans.” **Sharon White, OBE, CEO of the School and Public Health Nurses Association (SAPHNA)**

The meeting heard from various representatives that the bulk of school nurses’ time was being taken up with child protection and safeguarding issues, leaving them little time to focus on prevention, promotion, and early intervention through the delivery of the wider elements of the Healthy Child Programme 5-19.

Kenny Gibson Head of NHS safeguarding at NHS England told the meeting there was reason for hope.

“A lot has been said about the increase in child protection and child safeguarding incidents and yes, absolutely they are rising, but school nursing is there at the sharp face.

I think it is beholden to us all to listen to these local practitioners because that intelligence is rich, it's never often a data point, but it's real and authentic from lived experience.

The new population approaches to child safeguarding must bear witness to what is happening in our communities. Fewer and fewer children are living in families, they are actually living in houses or placements, and that is the culture that safeguarding has to bring using the data.”

Kenny Gibson Head of NHS safeguarding at NHS England

Mr Gibson said school nurses need to appreciate that they need allies in general practice and local safeguarding teams.

“We've got to support school nurses to realise that they are not the singular person.... it takes a village to safeguard a child, it takes a team of health care practitioners to rescue that child and protect it.”

Mr Gibson said it was also important to support and connect with nurses working in independent schools, particularly with section 20 of The Children's Act.

Members reported multiple positive moves to increase awareness of the role school nurses play and how their numbers have fallen dramatically and that research initiatives on getting more accurate data on staff numbers and future workforce planning is critical. Many spoke of how the role of school nurses was key and should be amplified.

Despite the increasing pressures, the innovativeness and resilience of the school nurse workforce was widely praised and is evident in the SAPHNA survey; this needs applauding.

Action Points

Ring fencing of school nursing budget

Dr Mike Dixon said:

“There’s been agreement that we don’t want to change the status quo of the structures and the funding as that would be too complicated. What we do feel though is that the funding needs to be sorted somehow, whether that is by ring fencing mandates or other.

We’ve also concluded that health has a major role to play in terms of making sure local authorities are accountable in terms of the service they offer. But we now need to work out how we are going to make these changes happen.”

Highlight the significant reduction in school nurse numbers for NHS workforce stock take

Imperative to highlight the school nursing staffing crisis to Lord Darzi’s upcoming stock take of the health system, so increasing their numbers becomes part of the government’s 10-year health plan.⁷

Highlight the real-term cut in the Public Health Grant over 9 years being the key issue.

Dr Rachel Gallagher, Public Health Consultant representing the Faculty of Public Health, said the issue was the real term cut in the Public Health Grant, which made it difficult to commission effectively, rather than the question of whether it should be funded by local government, the NHS or Department of Education. Others echoed this sentiment.

Propose drawing up of standards for local authorities to provide in school nursing service provision.

Crystal Oldman recommended, and others agreed, that we needed to urgently develop workforce standards for school nursing.

Consider ongoing roundtable activities to maintain momentum of the campaign, usefully use as an expert reference and change-making force, review progress and update action planning.

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References

1. Based on 278 replies from school nurses responding to SAPHNA's 2024 survey 'The Forgotten Frontline: Public Health School Nursing. Unveiling the Realities of School and Public Health Nursing in the UK: A Survey Report (2024)' (soon-to-be-published <https://saphna.co/news/>)
2. NHS Workforce Statistics April 2024: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/nhs-workforce-statistics/april-2024>
3. SAPHNA survey: 'The Forgotten Frontline: Public Health School Nursing. Unveiling the Realities of School and Public Health Nursing in the UK: A Survey Report (2024)' (soon-to-be-published <https://saphna.co/news/>)
4. A School Nurse for Every School (<https://qni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Round-Table-Report-A-School-Nurse-in-every-School-December-2023.pdf>)
5. <https://trustforlondon.org.uk/data/child-obesity/>
6. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up>
7. <https://saphna.co/news/darzi-evidence/>

Participants

College of Medicine

- Dr Michael Dixon, Chair, GP, former Co-Chair of the National Social Prescribing Network
- Sir Sam Everington, Vice-Chair, GP, Chair of Tower Hamlets CCG
- Professor Dame Donna Kinnair, Council Member, Non-Executive Director at East London NHS Foundation Trust, former General Secretary, Royal College of Nursing
- Dr Naveed Akhtar, GP, Council Member, Co-Chair Integrated Medicine Alliance
- Amanda King, CEO

School and Public Health Nurses Association

- Sharon White, CEO, former Co-Chair of School Nurses International
- Maggie Clarke, Executive Lead Officer
- Sallyann Sutton, Professional Officer

The Queen's Nursing Institute

- Dr Crystal Oldman, Chief Executive
- Dr Amanda Young, Director of Nursing Programmes (innovation and policy)
- Fiona Rogers, Nursing Programme Manager (innovation)

NHS England

- Acosia Nyanin, Deputy Chief Nursing Officer, Professional and System Leadership
- Duncan Burton, Deputy Chief Nursing Officer, Delivery and Transformation Programmes
- Dr Emma Pascale Blakey, Sustainability and Innovation Lead

Office of Health Improvement and Disparities

- Professor Jamie Waterall, Deputy Chief Nurse
- Lynne Reed, Deputy Director 0-19 Clinical Programmes Unit
- Gillian Turner, National Lead Nurse for Children & Young People

Association of Directors of Public Health

- Marie McLoughlin, Consultant in Public Health, London Borough of Brent
- Shona Okeke, Public Health Strategist, London Borough of Brent

- Ann Keen, Nursing Adviser to the Labour Party, former Health Minister,
- George Plumtre, CEO, The National Garden Scheme
- Liza Jarvis, Children and Young People Social Prescribing Lead, StreetGames. Representing the Social Prescribing Network
- Tamoor Tariq, Deputy Leader, Bury Metropolitan District Council, Cabinet Member for Adult Care, Health & Well-Being. Representing the Local Government Association. (unable to attend on the day)
- Dr Rebecca Rosen, GP, Senior Fellow in Health Policy, Nuffield Trust
- Dr Sarah Bekeart, Senior Lecturer, Children's Nursing Team, Oxford Brookes University, Researcher in public health issues relating to teenagers and school nursing roles
- William Roberts, CEO, Royal Society of Public Health, Deputy Chair of the Terrence Higgins Trust and a Non-Executive Director of Housing 21 and POBL, two large housing and care providers
- Professor Russell Viner, Chief Scientific Advisor, Department for Education, Professor of Adolescent Health at UCL, Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health (unable to attend of the day)
- Helen Bedford, Chair of the Personal Child Health Record Committee, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, Professor of Children's Health, Co-Director GOS ICH (Education), Co-Director MSc Paediatrics and Child Health, UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health
- Professor Patricia Owen, immediate past President, Institute of Health Promotion and Education, Emeritus Professor of Nursing, Keele University, Visiting Professor of Nursing, Birmingham Newman University
- Rachel Gallagher, Consultant in Public Health, Newcastle City Council. Representing Faculty of Public Health
- Andy Bell, CEO, Centre for Mental Health
- Dymrna Cunnane, CEO, OurTime, charity for children of parents with a mental illness
- Alison Dunn, joint Managing Director, Chamberlain Dunn
- Joy Shepherd, Chamberlain Dunn
- Claire Read, Writer, Editor and Editorial Project Manager

College of Medicine and Integrated Health

9th floor, Borough Wing, Guy's Hospital

Great Maze Pond, London SE1 9RT

Email : info@collegeofmedicine.org.uk

Tel: 0844 873 7388

Website: <https://collegeofmedicine.org.uk>

Twitter/X: @collegeofmed

Instagram : @collegeofmedicineuk

School and Public Health Nurses Association (SAPHNA)

Pinfold House, Pinfold Rise, Leeds, LS25 3EN

Email: info@saphna.co

Tel: 07793000950

Website: <https://www.saphna.co>

Twitter/X: @SAPHNAteam @SAPHNASharonOBE

LinkedIn: @saphna-school-and-public-health-nurses-association

The Queen's Nursing Institute (QNI)

1A Henrietta Place, London W1G 0LZ

Email: mail@qni.org.uk

Tel: 020 7549 1400

Website: <https://www.qni.org.uk>

Twitter/X: @TheQNI