

In this article...

- Research into tools used to estimate the number of nursing staff needed on a ward
- Comparison of Safer Nursing Care Tool estimates with professional judgements
- Development, content and use of the Professional Judgement Framework

Nurse staffing decisions: the Professional Judgement Framework



EVIDENCE IN BRIEF

This article is based on research by the team at the School of Health Sciences, University of Southampton, who are exploring how the use of staffing tools informs staffing requirements.

Key points

Many tools can help managers to estimate the number of nursing staff needed on a ward

As not everything is measurable, the results of any tools should be used alongside professional judgement

Research found that the reliability of the Safer Nursing Care Tool's estimates depended on several factors

The Professional Judgement Framework was developed to help new managers make staffing decisions and help more experienced managers to structure theirs

The Professional Judgement Framework consists of a staffing review cycle and a series of questions to consider

Authors Christina Saville is senior research fellow, Peter Griffiths is professor, Zoé Ejebu is research fellow, Carole Fogg is senior research fellow, all at the School of Health Sciences, University of Southampton.

Abstract Calculating safe nurse staffing levels on a hospital ward is complicated, as many factors affect workload. Many tools can help with the calculation; however, professional judgement remains important. The Professional Judgement Framework was developed to guide nurse staffing decisions, based on safe-staffing research and nurses' expert guidance. It aims to help guide new managers and help experienced managers justify their thinking.

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Working out how many nursing staff are needed for safe care on a hospital ward is complicated. What constitutes a safe number of staff depends on:

- Patient needs;
- Contextual factors (such as ward size);
- Staff experience and education (Griffiths et al, 2020a).

Nursing involves doing multiple things at once, often carrying out unobservable work, such as critical thinking, as well as responding to emerging demands and prioritising tasks (Fasoli and Haddock, 2010). Additionally, the needs and numbers of patients are frequently changing and can be unpredictable (Young et al, 2015).

There are many tools available to help estimate the number of nursing staff needed, some of which are validated and endorsed, such as the Safer Nursing Care Tool (SNCT). However, no single tool captures everything (Griffiths et al, 2020a); as such, current guidance stresses that the following should be used:

- Professional judgement (using knowledge and experience to help reach a decision);

- Triangulation (comparing results from multiple sources of information) (National Quality Board, 2016).

This means that staff numbers that are calculated using a tool may be revised up or down based on other information.

However, when communicating decisions about staffing requirements – for example, in business cases – numbers from objective tools may be trusted more than professional judgement, which can be seen as too subjective, biased and not based on facts (Chin-Yee and Upshur, 2018). There is a lack of guidance around how to apply professional judgement, with experienced staff relying on tacit knowledge, often without resources to help justify their thinking. Less-experienced staff, in particular, lack guidelines to help them (Allen et al, 2023).

This article summarises our research around the use of staffing tools and outlines our work with experts to develop Saville et al's (2023) Professional Judgement Framework. The framework aims to help guide those responsible for making staffing decisions to consider important factors alongside output from a staffing tool to inform staffing requirements.

Nurse staffing tools

We undertook a programme of research into the SNCT (Griffiths et al, 2020b); this is the most-used tool in England for estimating the number of nursing staff to assign to a ward (the establishment) (Ball et al, 2019). The SNCT works by categorising patients according to the acuity of their condition and their dependency on nursing care, and assigning corresponding workload scores.

We observed that the SNCT provides a measure of nursing workload that correlates with professional judgements of staffing adequacy (Griffiths et al, 2020c). However, other factors were also correlated with professional judgements of staffing adequacy, for example, ward type and the proportion of single rooms.

We also found that, for some wards, using the SNCT gave a reliable estimate of the number of nursing staff needed (Saville and Griffiths, 2021). However, for other wards, relying on the tool's estimate without applying professional judgement could lead to unsafe staffing levels for several reasons. As an example, the current guidance recommends setting staffing levels to meet the ward's average requirement (National Quality Board, 2016); this would mean that 18 out of 69 wards in the three trusts we studied would often have been short-staffed (>15% below the SNCT's daily staffing recommendation). Additionally, a quarter of wards needed more than six months' staffing information to precisely estimate the number of staff required, when the current recommendation is to use 20-30 days' staffing data to set the ward establishment.

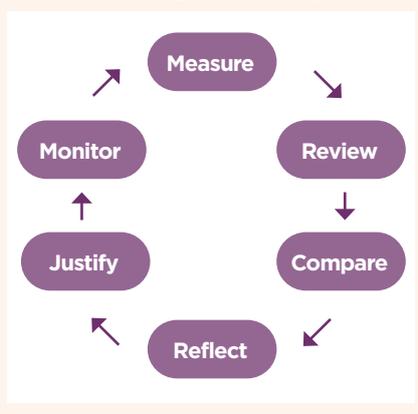
Nursing workforce leaders at the three trusts also suggested other characteristics of wards where the tool performed least well, such as a high rate of patient admissions/discharges and differences in workload between mornings and evenings.

The Professional Judgement Framework

To develop the Professional Judgement Framework, we worked with nurses who were experienced in safe staffing and workforce issues, at both national and local levels, incorporating their expertise as well as research findings. The framework has been endorsed by the National Quality Board and is being used in NHS England's safer staffing programme.

The framework consists of a staffing review cycle (Fig 1) and a series of questions to consider alongside advice. The review cycle highlights that, because reviewing staffing is a continuous process, managers should:

Fig 1. Staffing review cycle



“Relying on the tool’s estimate without applying professional judgement could lead to unsafe staffing levels”

- Measure patients’ acuity and dependency on the ward;
- Review this data, for example, by using the Professional Judgement Framework’s questions;
- Compare the calculated establishment against that of similar wards and consider why it may be different;
- Reflect on the calculated establishment using evidence and what it means for the daily deployment of staff;
- Justify their decision about the establishment;
- Monitor changes on the ward and indicators of insufficient nurse staffing, such as patient and staff outcomes;
- Measure acuity and dependency again when needed.

The framework’s questions are grouped under headings:

- Initial sense-checks, for example, do staffing numbers seem right and has the ward changed?
- Accuracy of measurements, including sample sizes and experience of the staff members taking the measurements;
- Particularities of nursing work on the ward, including use of one-to-one care and ward layout;
- Local staffing context, such as shift patterns, skills and experience.

The Professional Judgement Framework is a tool that new managers might use to guide their thinking around nurse staffing decisions; experienced managers may use it to provide evidence and structure around their decisions.

Conclusion

Staffing tools are useful aids for workload decisions but their results are only starting points to be questioned, because not all aspects of workload can be measured. The Professional Judgement Framework consists of both questions and a review cycle that managers can use to estimate required staffing levels. **NT**

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