

# Adult inpatient wards in acute hospitals<sup>1</sup>

## Safer Nursing Care Tool (SNCT)

The National Quality Board (NQB) publication '[Supporting NHS providers to deliver the right staff, with the right skills, in the right place at the right time: Safe, sustainable and productive staffing \(2016\)](#)' outlines the expectations and framework within which decisions on safe and sustainable staffing should be made to support the delivery of safe, effective, caring, responsive and well-led care on a sustainable basis. The publication makes reference to the NICE guidance - the '[Safe Staffing Guideline for Nursing in Adult Inpatient Wards in Acute Hospitals](#)', which was published in 2014 and advises that it is considered in conjunction with the National Quality Board guidance.

Both publications emphasise the need for developing evidence based, patient need driven, staffing levels in inpatient ward settings utilising a NICE endorsed toolkit alongside the guidance. The Safer Nursing Care Tool (SNCT) is one method that can be used to assist chief nurses to determine optimal nurse staffing levels. The SNCT received NICE endorsement in 2014 acknowledging that it meets the requirements set out in the NICE guidelines 'Safe staffing for adult inpatient wards' (NICE, 2014). A refreshed version of the tool was launched in 2023, and updated in 2026. **All previous versions of the tool are invalid.**

### Ensuring safe, sustainable and productive staffing

The Safer Nursing Care Tool is:

- ♦ A NICE endorsed, evidence based tool which enables nursing staff to assess the acuity and dependency of patients which is aligned to a staffing multiplier to provide a recommended establishment based on the actual needs of the patients
- ♦ Appropriate for use in any adult inpatient ward in acute hospitals within England.
- ♦ Used in conjunction with Nurse Sensitive Indicators (NSIs), patient and staff outcomes that can be linked to nurse staffing such as patient falls and pressure ulcer incidence
- ♦ Able to support benchmarking activity in organisations when used across trusts. This will guide consistent decision making in setting safe and sustainable nurse establishments in line with agreed standards across similar care settings in England.

### Benefits of the Safer Nursing Care Tool

SNCT is a NICE endorsed tool embracing all the principles that should be considered when evaluating decision support tools described in '[Safe, sustainable and productive staffing - An improvement resource for adult inpatient wards in acute hospitals](#)' (NHSI 2018)

**Measurement** of acuity and/or dependency

**Accurate** data collection methodology

**Nurse Sensitive Indicators** organisation level metrics to monitor the impact of staffing levels on the quality of patient care and outcomes, the use of resources and on staff themselves (NHSI 2018), allied to acuity and/or dependency measurement

**Evidence based Nursing multipliers** to support professional judgement.

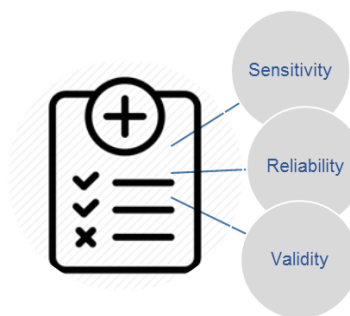
<sup>1</sup> "Wards that provide overnight care for adult patients in acute hospitals, excluding intensive care, high dependency, maternity, mental health, day care, acute admission or assessment units or wards. Other than these exceptions, the guideline covers all general and specialist inpatient wards for adults in acute hospitals." <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/SG1/chapter/6->

## The development process

The Safer Nursing Care Tool was developed and validated by NHS experts. This included recalibrating the tool using the UK Nursing Database, which at that time included 1,000 best practice wards (those achieving a pre-determined quality rating) and some 119,000 nursing interventions delivered to almost 2,800 patients in 14 care groups over two years. This was important to ensure the staffing recommendations derived were not perpetuating poor practice standards.

The SNCT tool (2006) was tested in Teaching and District General Hospitals in England and across NHS Scotland, to confirm that the tool was robust and easy to use and provided appropriate nursing establishments.

In 2018, the Shelford Chief Nurses commissioned an expert working group to complete a review of the tool, its criteria definitions and to update the multipliers values (associated nursing resource) to ensure the SNCT is still current and applicable.



The multiplier values reflect the whole time equivalent (WTE) nurse staffing required to provide care for patients who have been assessed at the appropriate SNCT levels. The review was undertaken to take account of the changes such as:

- ◆ The ageing population's impact on inpatient acuity and dependency
- ◆ Single room ward design
- ◆ Supporting inpatients with increasing care requirements due to risk of falls, confusion or mental health needs (enhanced care)

The 2026 version of the tool incorporates 236,079 staffing interventions, with 123,250 service quality standards as well as updated patient care levels descriptors aligned to refreshed nursing resource multipliers.

They provide for traditional ward layout with a separate module for single roomed wards as well as levels of care for one-to-one care and two-to-one care.

**The updated tool was formally approved by the Shelford Chief Nurses, supported by NHS England in 2026.**

## The opportunity

To license the adult inpatient ward Safer Nursing Care Tool.

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