To: NHS foundation trust and NHS trust Chief Executives
Cc: NHS foundation trust and NHS trust Nurse Directors, Medical Directors, Finance Directors and Operations Directors

13 October 2015

Dear colleague

Safe staffing and efficiency

We know that many organisations have taken a systematic and thoughtful approach to staffing wards and services safely over the past two years, by responding positively to the guidance issued by the National Quality Board and by NICE, embracing transparency about their planned versus actual staffing, and focusing on how to make services as safe as possible within available resources. We are also aware that recent messages to the system on safe staffing and on the need to intensify efforts to meet the financial challenge have been seen as contradictory. We recognise that it is important to offer clarity to the system as we work together to close the gaps in health and wellbeing, care and quality, and funding and efficiency identified in the Five Year Forward View.

The current safe staffing guidance has been designed to support decision makers at the ward/service level and at the Board to get the best possible outcomes for patients within available resources. The guidance supports - but does not replace - the judgements made by experienced professionals at the front line. The responsibility for both safe staffing and efficiency rests, as it has always done, with provider Boards.

As set out in the guidance, it is important for providers to take a rounded view of staffing. Providers should be able to demonstrate that they are able to ensure safe, quality care for patients and that they are making the best use of resources. This should take account of patient acuity and dependency, time of day and local factors, such as line of sight for those caring for patients. In some cases, these factors will mean a higher number of nurses per patient, and in other cases it will mean a lower number or different configuration of staff can be justified. Some trusts have taken innovative approaches whereby Allied Health Professionals are included in their ward based teams, and this can have a positive impact on patient outcomes. We support this approach where appropriately implemented.

It is therefore important to look at staffing in a flexible way which is focused on the quality of care, patient safety and efficiency rather than just numbers and ratios of

staff. We would stress that a 1:8 ratio is a guide not a requirement. It should not be unthinkingly adhered to: achieving the right number and balance of clinical and support staff to deliver quality care based on patient needs in an efficient way that makes the best possible use of available resources is the key issue for provider Boards. Where trusts are able to maximise the proportion of time spent by clinical staff focusing on care that contributes most directly to patient outcomes (including through the use of innovation and technology) there are likely to be benefits for both patient care and for efficiency.

Trusts are responsible for ensuring that they get the balance right by neither under-staffing nor over-spending, and are able to secure the right complement of clinical staff to meet local patient need and circumstances.

CQC always assesses staffing levels as part of rating a service on safety in its programme of comprehensive inspections. These assessments include observation of care delivery, listening to staff and patients, assessing outcomes of care and discussions with nurse managers about assessment of acuity levels and achievement of planned staffing levels. Staffing ratios are never the sole determinant of a rating.

We will continue to work with and support trusts to secure both safe staffing and greater efficiency. This will include:

- further progress on the Model Hospital led by Lord Carter, who will be working with providers to develop a way to use data on the nursing and care hours per patient, so that staffing arrangements remain safe across a range of different times and situations. Lord Carter's team will be working closely with front-line staff to put in place a more sophisticated approach to measurement of nursing time and its connections with outcomes, costs and other critical measures; and

- development of further safe staffing guidance. We are currently reviewing the responses we had to the letter dated 4 August 2015 and will confirm further details on the development of the guidance and timescales in due course.

In order to support your efforts to manage your agency staffing costs, the mandatory use of approved frameworks for procuring nursing agency staff will come into effect from 19 October. Further work is being taken forward at pace by Monitor and the NHS TDA to introduce a national rate-cap for all agency staff, to include medical and other agency staff later this autumn.

As we collectively work on both the efficiency and the safe staffing agendas, we recognise the need for clarity and consistency across the work of all teams in the arm's length bodies in this area. We will be working hard across the national organisations and in close partnership with providers and all clinicians to ensure these are delivered in the next phase of work.

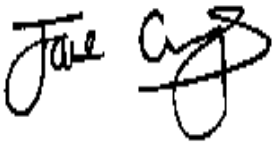
The financial and quality challenges that you are grappling with are unprecedented, and we thank you for all you are doing for patients and their families.

Yours sincerely

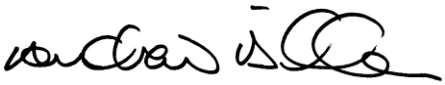
Ed Smith, Chairman-Designate NHS Improvement

Sir Mike Richards, Chief Inspector of Hospitals

Dr Mike Durkin, National Director of Patient Safety, NHS England



Jane Cummings, Chief Nursing Officer for England



Sir Andrew Dillon,
Chief Executive, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence