The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) is to apologise for ‘unacceptable’ failings that led to a two-year delay in suspending a mental health nurse accused of abusing patients at an eating disorders clinic.

The apology will follow an internal review into the NMC’s delay in imposing an interim suspension order on David Britten, who it is claimed had inappropriate sex with at least 20 patients over 20 years. The review was ordered after the NMC was criticised in an NHS London investigation, published in July.

Mr Britten was dismissed as manager at the Peter Dally Clinic in London in 2002 for gross misconduct and reported to the NMC. He was suspended from the register in March 2004 and removed four months later.

The internal report, due to be released after this week’s NMC council meeting, also says the regulator’s failure to co-operate with the NHS London investigation was ‘unacceptable’.

An NMC statement reads: ‘The NMC profoundly regrets this incident and apologises unreservedly.’

A spokesperson for the regulator told Nursing Standard changes have been made that ‘significantly reduce the likelihood of similar events recurring’.

All cases received are now handled by a ‘triage’ team trained to prioritise complaints and identify areas of concern. Serious cases reach the investigating committee quicker to cut the risk of a case being overlooked for an interim suspension order hearing.

The timescale for legal investigations has been cut to three months and have been reduced since the Britten case.

NHS London chief nurse Trish Morris-Thompson, who led the original inquiry, said: ‘I commend the NMC for undertaking this review and fully endorse their recommendations. Everything possible must be done to minimise the chance of this happening again.’

The whereabouts of Mr Britten is unknown.

England’s former chief nursing officer (CNO) told last week how she challenged the male leadership culture at the Department of Health (DH).

The Reverend Dame Sarah Mullally, who quit her post to join the Church of England in 2004, said she championed an ‘enabling and engaging’ leadership style during her five years as CNO. But some senior civil servants found this difficult because it meant relinquishing power to their juniors.

Giving a lecture at Canterbury Christ Church University last week, Dame Sarah highlighted an example of a DH learning disabilities panel, set up to help clients and carers shape the services they use.

‘People held up a red card if they thought too much jargon was being spoken and a green card if they wanted to speak. Civil servants had to give up power.’ She said they found this ‘one of the hardest things to do’.

Dame Sarah, a team rector at St Nicholas Church in Sutton, Surrey, said more women should take on leadership roles and it is not necessary to adopt a macho culture to get on. A DH spokesperson said NHS chief executive David Nicholson was trying to change the department’s directive style.