The RCN has called for an increase in nurse numbers in response to workforce figures that show supply is not keeping pace with demand.

Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC) statistics show the number of nursing staff has seen one of the smallest proportional increases of any staff group in the NHS.

RCN director of nursing, policy and practice Donna Kinnair said: ‘Such a meagre increase in vital nursing staff is hard to understand against a backdrop of increasing patient demand and services under growing pressure.’

There were 281,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) nurses and health visitors in England and Wales in September last year – an increase of 0.9% since 2014.

The figures also show there were 42,900 FTE consultants, an increase of 3.9% on 2014.

According to NHS England statistics, pressure is mounting on the NHS. In the year to 2015, figures show:

- Emergency admissions were up 2.7%.
- Emergency department attendances were up 1.1%.
- Ambulance call-outs were up 7%.

A Department of Health spokesperson said: ‘There are 10,600 more nurses on our NHS wards since 2010, 50,000 nurses currently in training and our changes to student funding will create up to 10,000 more training places by the end of this parliament.’

RCN Wales associate director Alison Davies said the numbers of nurses ‘remain insufficient to meet the increasing demands faced by the health and care sector’. She said there is still a 1,200 shortfall in the number of nurses in Wales and a reliance on bank and agency staff.

Training places
In Northern Ireland, health minister Simon Hamilton announced a 15% increase in training places for pre-registration nursing, creating 100 extra places. He promised to establish a group led by chief nursing officer Charlotte McArdle to make ‘clear recommendations about the future delivery of nursing and midwifery over the next ten to 15 years’.

Workforce statistics from Scotland published at the start of March show an increase in nursing numbers, but a 3.6% vacancy rate across nursing and midwifery posts. The figures prompted RCN Scotland director Theresa Fyffe to say that the pace of improvement is not enough given the current pressures on staff.