



Sonographer Workforce Survey Analysis

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Summary

In May and June 2014, the Society and College of Radiographers (SCoR) surveyed ultrasound departments in the UK. The aim of the survey was to obtain data on the number of sonographers employed and the number of vacancies. Nearly sixty ultrasound departments responded to an online questionnaire covering a range of questions about staffing and vacancy levels. This report presents the results of this survey.

Executive Summary

In May and June 2014, the Society and College of Radiographers (SCoR) surveyed ultrasound departments in the UK. The aim of the survey was to obtain data on the number of sonographers employed and the number of vacancies. Nearly sixty ultrasound departments responded to an online questionnaire covering a range of questions about staffing and vacancy levels. This report presents the results of this survey and the following bullet points highlight the main findings.

- The departments responding to the survey have an average of 8.6 whole time equivalent (WTE) sonographer establishment posts per department.
- The sonographer vacancy rate across the responding departments is 18.1%. This compares to a vacancy rate of 10.9% in the 2011 survey. The main reason for the shortage is an inability to recruit suitable applicants.
- The sonographer absence rate across the responding departments is 9.0%. The main reason for absence is paternity or maternity leave.
- Around two-thirds of sonographers (65%) in the responding departments work part time.
- A third of sonographers in post in the responding departments are over 50 years of age.
- A total of 49 trainee sonographers are due to qualify in the next 12 months across the 57 departments who responded to this question.
- 14 responding departments (25% of those who responded to this question) have sonographers working who are not registered with a statutory regulatory body (Health and Care Professions Council or Nursing and Midwifery Council). They employ 25 staff in total (headcount) who are not registered with a statutory regulatory body.
- Of those departments (42) who only have sonographers working who are registered with a statutory regulatory body, 90% say their organisation insists their sonographers hold statutory registration.
- 17 responding departments (30%) employ agency or locum sonographers regularly (on more than ten days per month).
- In 36 responding departments (65%) sonographers work additional hours on at least one day a month to meet demand.

- 33 responding departments (59%) provide extended working outside normal office hours.
- 10 departments (18% of those responding to this question) have sonographers working who are not UK citizens.
- 16 departments (33% of those responding to this question) undertake work under the Any Qualified Provider (AQP) provision in England.
- Respondents were asked to comments on sonographer recruitment and retention or sonographer workforce issues in general. Difficulty recruiting was raised as the most frequent issue, with increased training and improvements in pay mentioned as potential solutions.

1. Introduction

In April and May 2014, SCoR surveyed ultrasound departments in the UK. The aim of the survey was to obtain reliable data on the number of sonographers employed and the number of vacancies.

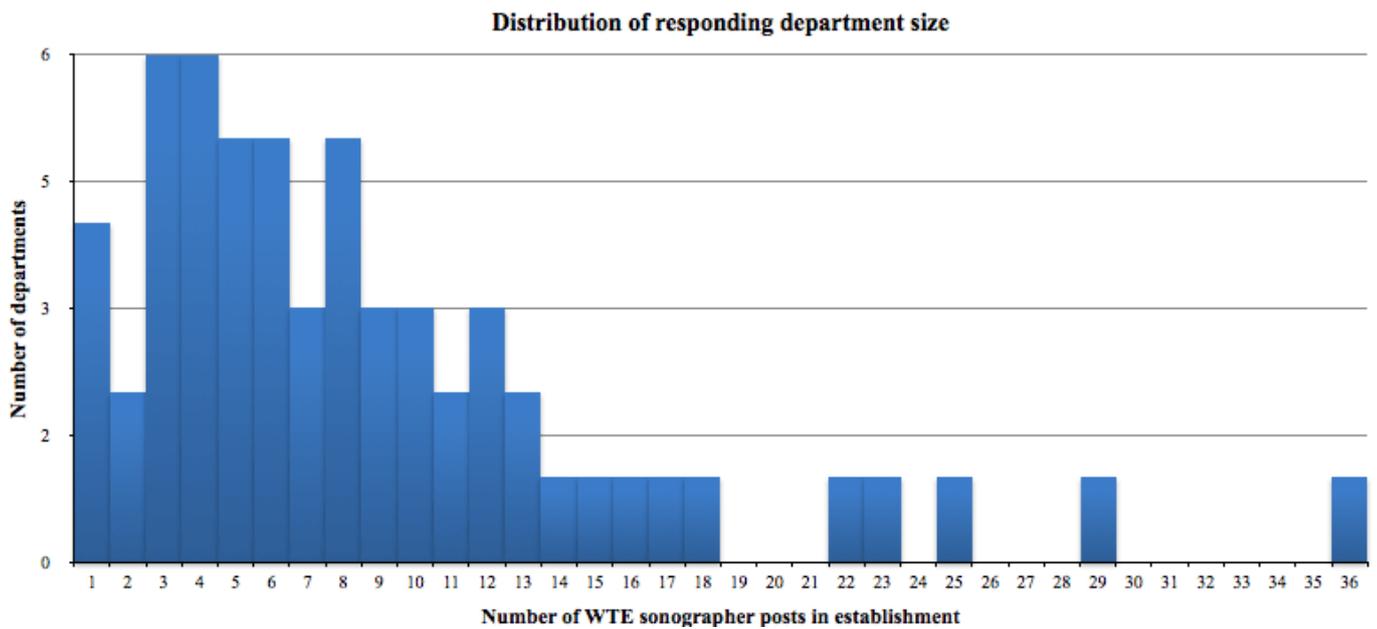
An email containing a link to an online questionnaire was sent to 212 lead ultrasound practitioners asking them to answer the questionnaire on behalf of their departments. 59 ultrasound departments (28%) employing sonographers responded to the survey, answering a range of questions about staffing and vacancy levels in their department. None of the questions were mandatory so different questions may have different response rates. One medical consultant-led department which does not employ sonographers responded to the survey. Their response is excluded from this analysis.

52 of the responding departments (88%) are within NHS health boards or trusts; 4 (7%) are within the independent/private hospitals; and 3 (5%) are self-employed sonographers or small companies. The breakdown by geographical region is: England (50); Northern Ireland (1); Scotland (2); Wales (4); Isle of Man or Channel Islands (1); Unknown (1).

Where appropriate, results are compared to a similar survey in 2011¹.

2. Establishment size

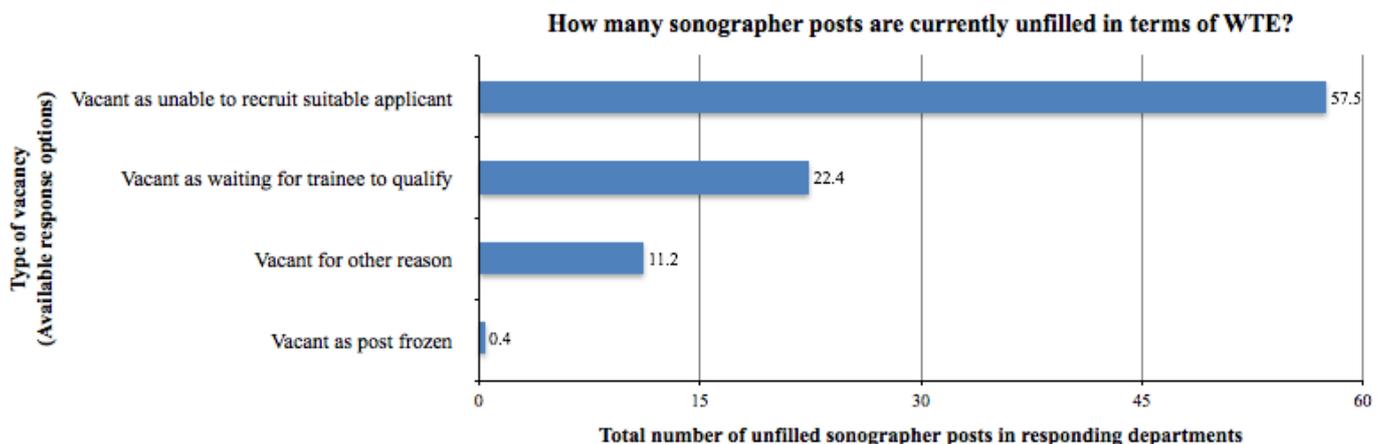
Across the 59 departments there are a total of 506.1 whole time equivalent (WTE) sonographer posts. This gives an average per department of 8.6 WTE sonographer posts per department. The size of responding departments ranges from the smallest departments with only 0.3 WTE sonographer posts to the largest department with 35.7 WTE sonographer posts.



3. Vacancies

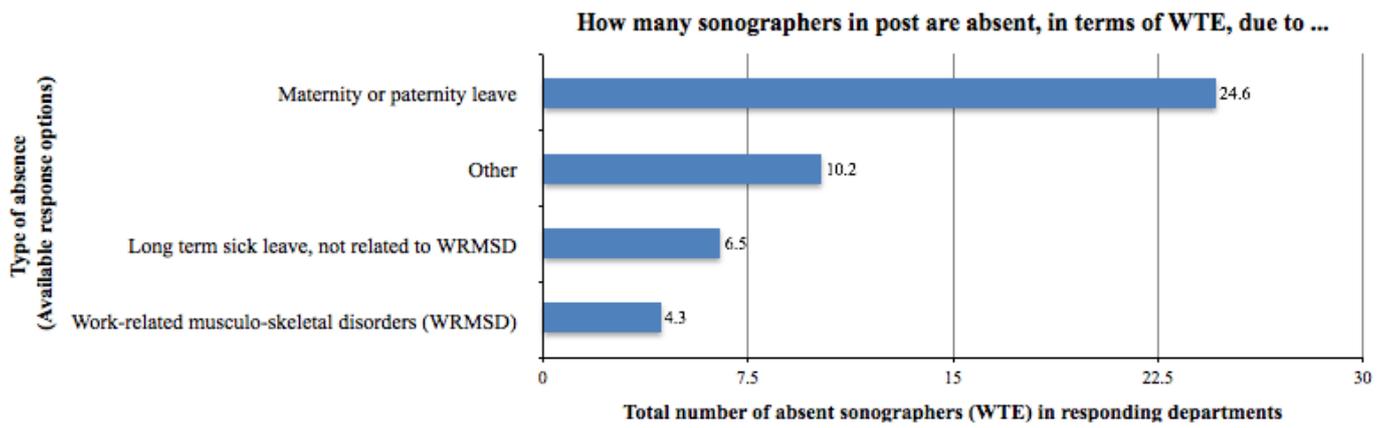
36 responding departments (61%) reported unfilled sonographer posts in their department. The sonographer vacancy rate across the 59 responding departments is 18.1%. (The vacancy rate is calculated using the number of WTE unfilled posts as a percentage of the WTE establishment figures.) This compares to a vacancy rate of 10.9% in the 2011 survey.

The main reason for vacancies is that departments are unable to recruit suitable applicants.



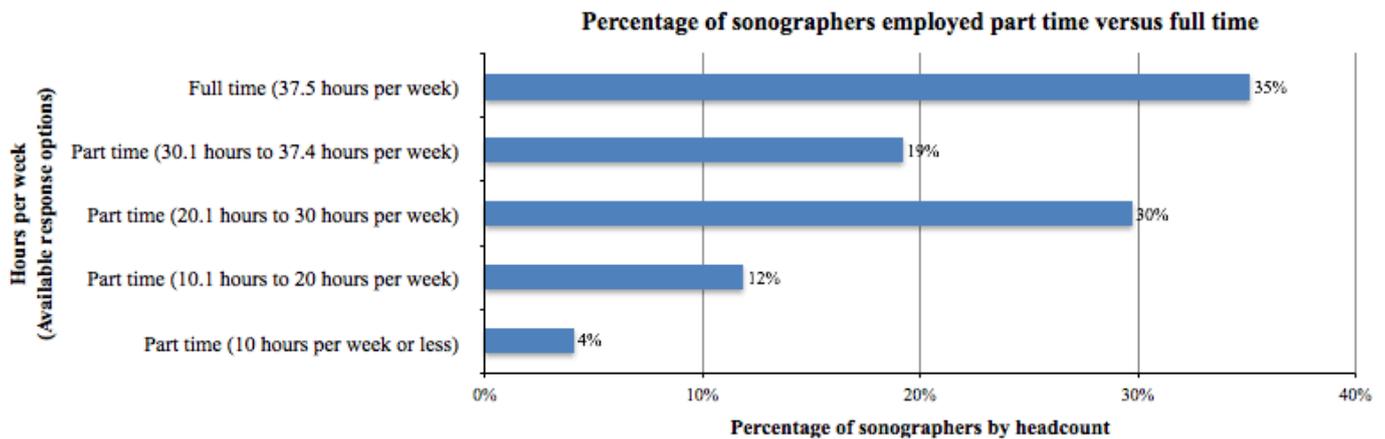
4. Absences

32 responding departments (54%) reported sonographers in post who were absent. The sonographer absence rate across the 59 responding departments is 9.0%. (The absence rate is calculated using the number of WTE absent sonographers as a percentage of the WTE establishment figures.) The main reason for absence is maternity or paternity leave.



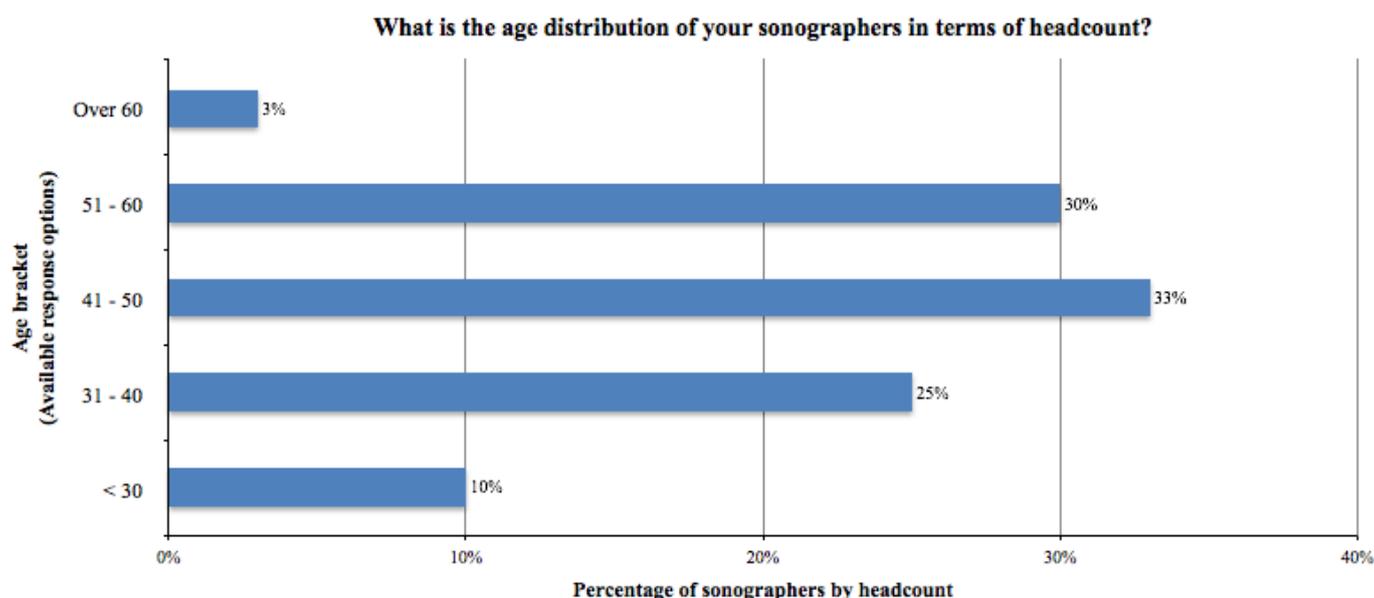
5. Full or part time

Around two-thirds of sonographers (65%) in the responding departments work part time.



6. Age distribution

A third of sonographers in post in the responding departments are over 50 years of age.



7. Students / Trainees

A total of 49 trainee sonographers are due to qualify in the next 12 months across the 57 departments who responded to this question. 31 of the responding departments have at least one trainee sonographer due to qualify in the next 12 months (all NHS).

14 of the responding departments count the above students in their current qualified staffing establishment.

Across the 57 responding departments, 32 (all NHS) are planning to have trainee sonographers start training with them in the next 12 months. A total of 46 trainee places are planned, of which 21 places are confirmed.

Respondents were asked for any additional comments on their local circumstances with respect to sonographer recruitment, education and training. The themes in the table below were mentioned by three or more responding departments.

Theme	Number of departments	Illustrative comment
Recruitment is difficult	20	<i>"We have been unable to recruit full time sonographers for the past 2 years despite 3 rounds of advertising."</i>
Sonographers leave once qualified	4	<i>"We train sonographers and then they leave once qualified which is very frustrating. Often it is due to personal circumstances but a lot of time and effort goes into these candidates and just when we think we will have more sonographers to tackle our ever increasing workload we are back to square 1."</i>
Recruitment difficult due to location	4	<i>"Very difficult due to relatively isolated position and lack of employment opportunities for sonographers' partners."</i>
Recruitment is a lengthy process	3	<i>"In general our US posts are vacant for 6-12 months."</i>

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Training because recruiting qualified sonographers is so difficult	3	<i>“Recruitment very difficult/impossible. Training and retaining only way forward.” Have employed agency sonographer almost continuously for 4 years.” “No funding for training sonographers for nearly 7 years.”</i>
Rely on agency workers	3	
Difficult to get funding / permission to recruit	3	

The following table gives the distribution of responses by Local Education and Training Board (LETB) in England for the 48 departments who responded to this question.

Local Education and Training Board (England)	Number of responding departments
East Midlands	3
East of England	8
Yorkshire and the Humber	5
Wessex	2
Thames Valley	1
North West London	2
South London	3
North, Central and East London	0
Kent, Surrey and Sussex	8
North East	1
North West	2
West Midlands	4
South West	9

8. Registration

14 responding departments (25% of those who responded to this question) have sonographers working who are not registered with a statutory regulatory body (Health and Care Professions Council or Nursing and Midwifery Council). They employ 25 staff in total (headcount) who are not registered with a statutory regulatory body. They are largely permanent staff, but include 2 agency staff and 1 locum.

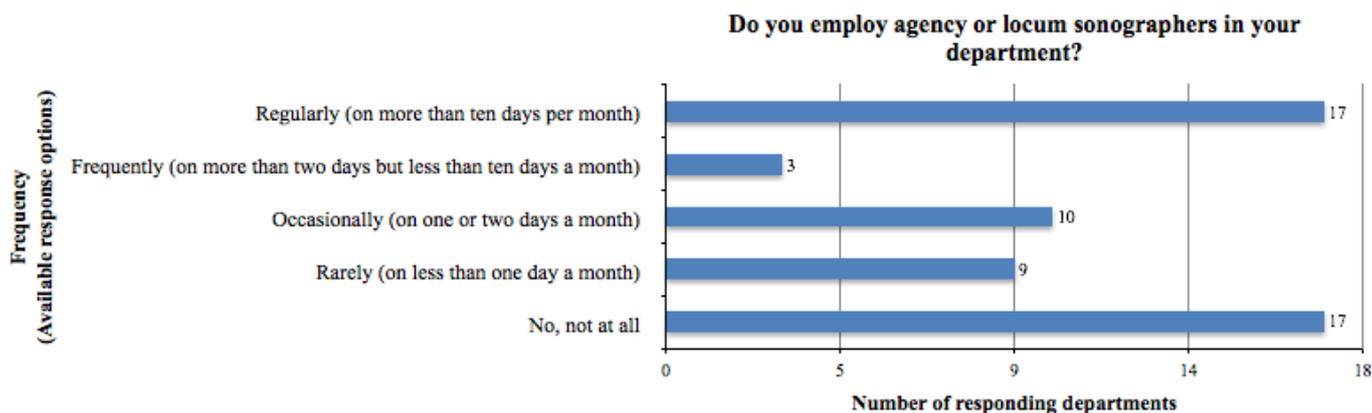
Of those departments (42) who only have sonographers working who are registered with a statutory regulatory body, 90% say their organisation insists their sonographers hold statutory registration.

9. Agency workers

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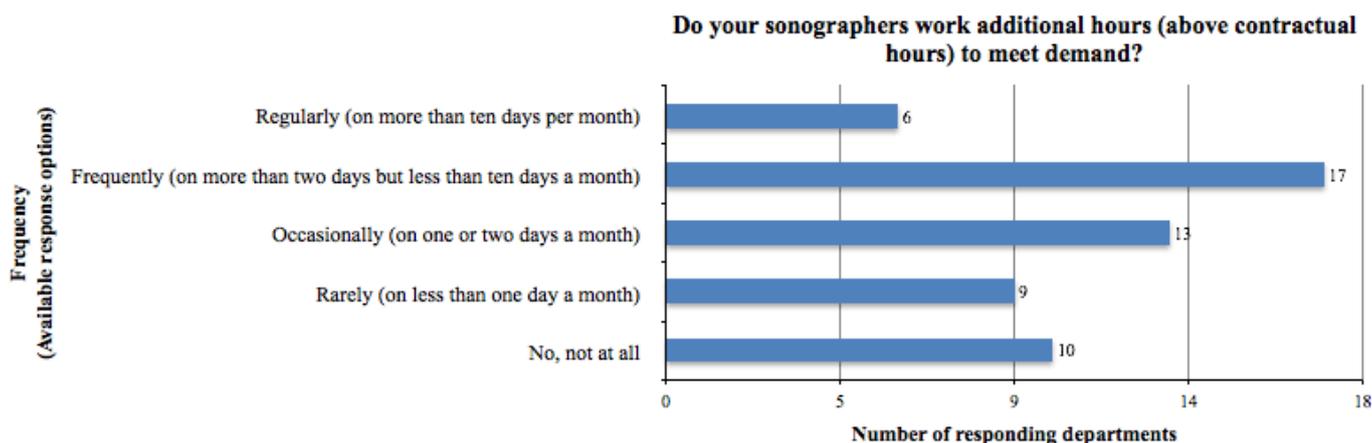
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17 responding departments (30%) employ agency or locum sonographers regularly (on more than ten days per month).



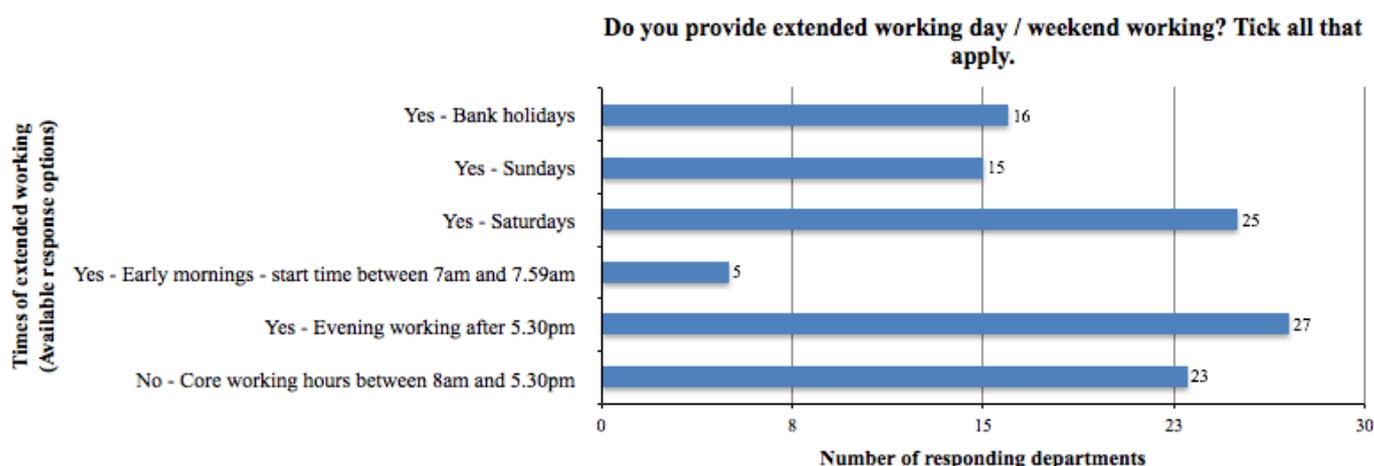
10. Additional hours

In 36 responding departments (65%) sonographers work additional hours on at least one day a month to meet demand.



11. Extended working

33 responding departments (59%) provide extended working outside normal office hours.



12. General

10 departments (18% of those responding to this question) have sonographers working who are not UK citizens. The countries these sonographers have come from include Australia, Canada, Egypt, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Uganda, USA and Zimbabwe.

16 departments (33% of those responding to this question) undertake work under the Any Qualified Provider (AQP) provision in England.

13. General comments

Respondents were asked to comment on sonographer recruitment and retention or sonographer workforce issues in general. The themes in the table below were mentioned by three or more responding departments.

Theme	Number of responding departments	Illustrative comment
Difficult to recruit	9	<i>"Recruitment is impossible - we are at crisis point. No UK trained sonographers to employ."</i>
More training required	9	<i>"Training of sonographers is not keeping up with increase in the demand for ultrasound."</i>
Pay	7	<i>"We are waiting for the trust to agree a R & R fee in order to fill in 2 permanent full time vacancies @ Band 7. The R & R fee may attract sonographers to apply for the 2 vacant posts. I believe the Sonographers are not recognised for the work they do and that there should be a national recognition/pay award for Sonographers throughout the UK. Should be graded as Band 8a, 8b, & 8c."</i>

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Use of agency / locum staff	5	<i>"Shortage has forced up locum rate to silly amounts."</i>
Health and safety issues	5	<i>"I think there should be more robust SOR support to protect sonographers' health and well being. I am particularly concern about the constant pressure to extend the sonographer's working day."</i>
Profession / Registration	5	<i>"Most sonographers still have a radiographic background. Possibility of different education structure and separate registration body and protected title for sonographers."</i>
Competition for staff	4	<i>"The ones who are trained are more likely to work for agencies and private sector because of increased pay."</i>
Sonographer shortage	4	<i>"Been in post as Lead for 12 years-the most stressful time right now-can barely cope due to sonographer shortage and inability to recruit despite continued non-stop sonographer training."</i>
Increasing demand	3	<i>"Increasing service demands requiring ultrasound imaging difficult to deliver on sonographer numbers - leads to breaches and agency support to cover lists."</i>
Good situation	3	<i>"We have been very lucky to be able to recruit by word of mouth. We in the community require well experienced confident lone working sonographers which skills newly qualified do not have."</i>

Appendix A - Survey questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed by Nigel Thomson (SCoR Professional Officer for Ultrasound).

[2014_06_21_Sonographer_workforce_survey_questions_NT_v1.pdf](#)

References

1. [Ultrasound workforce survey analysis](#) (2011) The Society and College of Radiographers

Source URL:

<https://www.sor.org/learning/document-library/sonographer-workforce-survey-analysis>