

Scottish Government Debate – COVID-19: Next steps for the NHS

RCN Scotland Briefing

This crisis has demonstrated beyond doubt the importance of nursing to our nation and our governments. Nurses and health care support workers have not changed what they do over recent months, but they have stepped up and intensified their work because that is what has been needed. It shows the potential of the nursing contribution to health and care and to society as a whole, if nurses and health care support workers have the resources and recognition to optimise that contribution.

RCN Scotland key messages

Recovery and restoring wider health services

- A whole system approach needs to be taken to planning the next steps. The three core tasks set out in the Scottish Government's Framework for NHS Scotland need to be considered in this context. Plans need to consider acute, primary and community, mental health and social care services. This needs to be wider than the NHS.
- The cessation of preventative and elective health interventions should be reversed as soon as possible, with suitable infection prevention and control measures in place, to maintain the wider health of the population. This must include cancer screening and treatments and long term condition pathways, among others, in order to prevent future crises in these areas.
- We expected to see more reference to mental health services in the Scottish Government's Framework for NHS Scotland. We would suggest that mental health service planning and resourcing should be prioritised, recognising the impact of lockdown including, but not limited to, economic problems and isolation, and that these issues will not immediately be resolved. CAHMS, in particular, require prioritising to prevent a future widespread mental health crisis emerging.
- We recognise the complexity of this issue and the need to take this forward in a careful and controlled way which ensures the safety of patients and staff. However, we believe that this must be pursued as urgently as possible in order to balance the wider health harms caused by the virus. A greater understanding is required of the wider health impact caused by lockdown measures and pausing all non-urgent and preventative services. More data on this is needed urgently to enable decisions to be taken to balance the various, inter-related harms caused by the virus.

- Service models need to be developed for the short, medium and long term. These need to be in place before we can assess the workforce that will be required to deliver it. The principles that the RCN has campaigned for on safe staffing remain important and should be considered when health and care services are developing these plans. The government must develop a plan which is realistic and transparent.
- Plans need to include contingency for a potential future COVID infection spike. These contingency plans must consider community services and care homes, not just acute hospital care.
- There is a need for excellent cooperation and coordination among Scotland's Health Boards, and mobilisation and recovery plans should review existing agreements in this regard to make sure that national priorities can be delivered Scotland-wide.

Care homes

- Care homes are at the centre of this pandemic and a clear recovery strategy is needed to protect residents and staff. The role of the registered nurse staff in Scotland's care homes is critical in responding to increasing clinical complexities and rapid deterioration of residents.
- We need to continue to ensure timely access to PPE, availability of nursing staff and better data about who has and does not have the virus, regardless of whether or not they have any symptom, to support decisions on the best care for each individual.
- As testing is extended, care home staff who are required to self-isolate or shield should be paid as if at work in the same way that NHS staff are. There remains inconsistency in the sector around testing, furlough arrangements and sick pay. We welcome the Labour Party's and Scottish Government's commitment to provide additional financial support for social care staff.

Testing

- We would like to see the Scottish Government go further to improve access to testing for all health and care workers to reduce transmission in hospital and community health settings and better protect staff and the patients they care for.
- Testing needs to be easily available and accessible, including to those who don't have access to a car, and the workforce implications considered as more staff are required to isolate.

Technology

- We are pleased that the Scottish Government and Health Boards are committed to learning from the service changes that have had to happen during this crisis period. The expansion of NHS Near Me, the use of Attend Anywhere, and the priority given to keeping people in place, can all be maintained alongside in person services to create a more efficient, personalised health and social care system in Scotland.
- Technology should be used to create a better experience and drive better outcomes for the person requiring care. People who are digitally excluded must not have their experience or health outcomes affected negatively by their lack of access to or lack of confidence in using digital technologies.
- All nurses and health care support workers should have access to, and to be able to use with confidence, the technology they need to deliver safe and consistent care. Many RCN members experience frustration in relation to IT systems and connectivity. Some report gaps in their knowledge and skills in relation to the use of new technologies, while others are impatient to see use of these technologies grow¹.

Workforce

- The focus has changed greatly to what we were expecting when we began this International Year of the Nurse and Midwife. The reaction of nursing staff to the pandemic has demonstrated in the clearest way possible how essential the nursing role is. There can be no doubt now about the importance of and value in investment in education, nursing posts and nurse leadership across health and social care.
- Mobilisation and recovery plans need to consider the impact the pandemic has had on the nursing and wider workforce. Particular attention needs to be paid to maintaining resilience including adequate resourcing levels, staff safety and wellbeing. This must include ongoing review and ensuring access to adequate PPE for all settings.
- The mental health support needs of health and social care staff who will have been greatly affected by this pandemic must be prioritised.
- There have been some positive steps taken by boards to support wellbeing of their workforce during this time e.g. spaces for breaks, changing facilities and increased occupational health and psychological support. We need to ensure that all health care staff have access to quality counselling and psychological support services during and after this critical time, no matter where they work, and that positive wellbeing initiatives are maintained after the crisis for the long term.
- It is essential that the future nursing workforce is not compromised. Current nursing students who have had their undergraduate programme changed must be enabled to

¹ <https://www.rcn.org.uk/about-us/policy-briefings/sco-pol-enhanced-care-in-the-palm-of-their-hand>

complete their education with as little detriment as possible. Those in the final six months of their course need a smooth transition onto the NMC register and into permanent employment.

- Looking ahead to future students who are anticipating starting their nursing university degree programme this autumn, the arrangements for this year's intake must be appropriately secured. It is vital that the next cohort of nursing students are supported to begin their education programmes, to ensure that the nursing workforce for future years is secured.
- The nursing profession has spent recent years making a considered case for patient safety and our expectation of professional respect. As we move forward we are confident of building a better future for nursing which truly values the profession and ensures it is an attractive career across all settings.

ENDS

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