

This Scottish Budget comes at a time when our health and care services are under as much pressure as they have ever been. Our members are continuing to highlight significant pressures and patient safety concerns across hospital, community and social care services.

Nursing is a safety critical profession and recent statistics highlight the urgent need for action to address Scotland's nursing workforce crisis:

- Nursing vacancy rates have remained stubbornly high across the NHS and social care. The latest NHS statistics show that **5,400 (7.7%) nursing and midwifery posts remain unfilled**. The number of vacancies has seen a gradual decline since the peak in December 2021, when almost 10% of posts were empty, however the pace of change is not fast enough to ensure safe patient care or to reduce the risk of burnout for nurses and nursing support workers who are continuously working short staffed.
- Meanwhile **65% of care homes for older people, that employ nurses, report vacancies**.
- We're also seeing an extremely concerning drop off in the number of people applying for undergraduate nursing courses. For the second year in a row the number of funded places to study nursing at Scotland's universities have not been filled, with an **11% drop in acceptances onto nursing programmes in Scotland in the last year**. The impact this will have on the number of registered nurses available in the coming years is a significant concern.
- Meanwhile, retention is a huge challenge with a recent NMC report showing that that **the number of nurses and midwives leaving the permanent register in Scotland between April and September this year (1,403) was more than the number of new joiners (1,364)** and an increase on the same period in 2022.

There's a lot at stake. This budget is an opportunity to prioritise our health and care services and set out the investment needed to support and retain our existing nursing staff and grow and develop our nursing workforce of the future.

RCN Scotland is calling on the Scottish Government to make the following commitments:

Deliver the funding required to implement the recommendations from the Agenda for Change (AfC) Review quickly and in full.

- The Review of AfC was agreed as part of the pay deals for 2022-23 and 2023-24. The work was taken forward by the Scottish Terms and Conditions Committee (STAC) over the spring and summer.
- On 22 November, the review completed its work and passed its proposals to the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care, for approval.
- The recommendations from the review include proposals for a reduced working week, protected time for learning and for a review of band 5 nursing roles, alongside other issues. We are calling on the Cabinet Secretary to approve the funding required to implement the recommended outcomes quickly and in full.

- It's important to note that taking forward a review of band 5 nursing roles, delivering protected learning time and a reduction in the working week were agreed as part of the pay deals. The AfC Review has been looking at how to take this forward in practice.
- We know that many of our members remain dissatisfied with their pay, terms and conditions. They voted only by a narrow majority to accept the pay deal earlier this year. Expectations for the difference this review could make are high. Our members need to know that the Scottish government is committed to recognising and rewarding our members' remarkable contribution to health and social care in Scotland.

Provide the financial resources to deliver the recommendations that emerge from the Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce.

- The Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce, chaired by the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care, was established earlier this year as a direct result of RCN campaigning on safe staffing and fair pay for nursing.
- The Taskforce is looking at ways to: improve retention of experienced staff; attract new nurses and expand routes into nursing; improve workplace culture and environments; increase staff wellbeing; and improve access to education and development.
- We are clear that the Taskforce must deliver funded, meaningful and sustainable actions that make a positive difference for the nursing profession and tackle the persistently high vacancy rates, including a nursing retention strategy. This will require investment and we expect to see funding allocated in the Scottish budget.
- The Taskforce provides a vital opportunity to address Scotland's nursing workforce challenges in a sustainable way, and the First Minister must ensure that it delivers.

Boost the financial package for nursing students to enable them to prioritise their education, cope with the rising cost of living, and finish their studies without falling into financial hardship.

- We surveyed our student members this year and found that nursing students across Scotland are facing serious financial pressures that are having a significant impact on their education and physical and mental wellbeing. 66% have considered dropping out of their course due to financial concerns.
- We're calling on the Scottish government to implement a cost-of-living increase to the bursary and establish a regular review to make sure it rises in line with the cost of living.
- Nursing is a fantastic career choice, full of variety and opportunity. It's a hugely diverse profession attracting people of all ages and from all walks of life, often as a second career. However, being a nurse should not be at the expense of personal wellbeing and financial security.
- For the second year in a row, the number of places on nursing degrees have not been filled. The number of acceptances onto Scottish nursing courses for 2023 is 3,520; a significant shortfall of over 800 students compared to the number of places funded by Scottish government. This means the gap between the number of registered nurses that are needed, and the number entering the workforce, is set to widen even further.

- It's important to recognise that nursing is unlike other degrees with students required to spend an average of 34 hours a week meeting academic and clinical requirements during term time. This limits the opportunity to supplement income and many are mature students with dependants.

Deliver fair pay for nursing staff across health and social care.

- The Scottish Government must work with STAC to secure a mechanism for the future AfC pay negotiations.
- The recommendations of the AfC review, modernisation of the pay system and other broader issues will likely form part of pay negotiations for 2024/25.
- We are working with other Trade Unions on submitting a joint pay claim calling for at least an above inflation pay increase to recognise the continuing cost of living challenges and to take some steps towards restoring the pay lost during the years of austerity.
- Reform of the social care sector must deliver fair pay, terms and conditions for nursing staff employed within the independent sector. We support the establishment of a sectoral bargaining system and for nursing staff to have pay, terms and conditions at least equal to equivalent roles in the NHS.

Provide the resources to allow employers to meet their duties under the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act 2019.

- Scotland's safe staffing legislation comes into force in April 2024. Effective implementation of the Act is expected to address some of the workforce challenges in the NHS and care homes. However, the Act itself is not a single solution to the nursing workforce crisis in Scotland.
- If implemented well, provisions within the Act should ensure that nursing staff can raise concerns about staffing levels without fears of repercussions. There are also robust reporting requirements with which health and care providers must comply.
- However, this ground-breaking legislation will only make a long-term positive difference if services have the nursing establishment they need. The Act needs to be accompanied by increased investment in services to enable providers to tackle vacancies and recruit and retain the workforce that Scotland needs.

Take urgent action now to tackle the major challenges facing the social care sector, rather than wait until the creation of a National Care Service.

- RCN Scotland has serious concerns about the crisis in Scotland's social care and community health sectors and the need for urgent action now. Individuals that require social care and community health services, and those who work in these sectors, cannot afford to wait until the creation of an NCS for the issues around workforce shortages and access to services to be addressed in a sustainable way.

- The winter preparedness plan did not provide much relief or hope for our hard-pressed nursing staff working in health and care services. This winter is anticipated to be the worst on record and members continue to report concerns about the pressures in acute hospitals as a result of the lack of capacity in community and social care services. Instances of patients being cared for in inappropriate areas, such as corridors and waiting rooms, continued over the summer. With winter pressures the extent of this unsafe practice is on the increase and we are hearing regular reports of additional beds being added to wards or non-medical areas being used for patient care. Hospital staff do not have an option to turn patients away, but this unacceptable practice must be addressed.
- The latest workforce statistics show just how much pressure our community nursing teams are under with 10.5% of posts vacant. Meanwhile 61% of care services that employ nurses report vacancies and the vacancy rate for these services is 17%.
- There is a pressing need to recognise, and resource, the increasing demand for complex clinical care within community health and care home settings. Registered nurses play a key role in meeting this need, and services must have the right numbers of nursing staff, with the right skills, in the right place. While this should be a key focus of work to create an NCS, we cannot wait for an NCS to tackle the nursing shortages across community and social care.
- We also need to see action now to ensure that staff working within social care receive fair pay, terms and conditions as well as improved access to training and development and clear career pathways. Fair work is a vital element in tackling the workforce crisis in the sector and ensuring that staff working in social care are recognised and valued.
- The challenges are so acute, and the pressure on services so great, that we can't wait for the proposed National Care Service to address these.