

# The Nursing Workforce

IN SCOTLAND

## Review of progress

December 2023



Royal College  
of Nursing  
Scotland

# Contents

<b>Key messages</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Nursing in health and social care context</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Progress report</b>	<b>4</b>
Safe staffing and the Ministerial Taskforce on Nursing and Midwifery	<b>5</b>
Fair pay and student finance	<b>7</b>
National care services, community and primary care	<b>9</b>
Workforce data	<b>10</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>12</b>

# Nursing Workforce in Scotland - Review of progress

## Key messages

**1**

The workforce challenges affecting health and social care remain as acute, if not more so, than when we called for urgent action in our second Nursing Workforce in Scotland Report (RCN Scotland, 2023a).

**2**

We have been involved in a number of significant pieces of work that have provided the opportunity to call for progress towards the recommendations in our 2023 workforce report. These include the Ministerial Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce, the Agenda for Change review, the Healthcare Staffing Programme, proposals for a National Care Service and on nursing student finance.

**3**

Despite this extensive influencing work, progress has been slower than needed, given the scale and severity of the workforce crisis.

**4**

At every available opportunity, we will continue to press for meaningful, sustainable and fully funded proposals to tackle persistent nursing vacancies, improve retention and expand domestic recruitment.

**5**

In turn, we expect and call for stakeholders, including Scottish government and health and care providers, to step up their efforts in tackling the workforce crisis. The status quo is simply not sustainable nor is it in the interest of patients and service users.

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## Nursing in health and social care context

In May 2023, we published our second Nursing Workforce in Scotland report (RCN Scotland, 2023a). The report set out trends in nursing workforce data which illustrate the extent and urgency of the staffing crisis facing Scotland's health and social care sectors.

We made 10 recommendations that we believe are needed to tackle persistent nursing vacancies, improve retention of staff and expand domestic recruitment.

This interim report tracks progress towards achieving these recommendations. It acts as a reminder for decision makers, stakeholders and partners, that these recommendations remain crucial if the staffing crisis which persists in nursing in health and social care is to be tackled. This report also updates RCN members on our work to influence for this change.

The 2023 workforce report was published in the context of negotiations with Scottish government over NHS pay. Campaign activity by RCN members in Scotland secured a commitment from the Scottish government to establish a Ministerial Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce to recommend actions to address the challenges facing Scotland's nursing and midwifery workforce. Through the Taskforce, as well as other key areas of work - including the Agenda for Change review, proposals for a National Care Service, the Scottish government's Healthcare Staffing Programme (HSP), and influencing on nursing student finance - we have pursued action from government and stakeholders focused on the 10 recommendations from the 2023 workforce report.

*“The current staffing challenges remain stark. We are now in the busy winter period where service pressures become even more acute, but extreme pressures in both health and social care are now the norm across the year.”*

The latest NHS workforce statistics show that there are almost 5,300 nursing vacancies in the NHS, including over 3,700 registered nurse posts unfilled (NES 2023a). As noted in our 2023 workforce report, access to robust nursing workforce data for social care is limited. However, data published since then shows that in care homes for older people, 65% of services had nursing vacancies in December 2022 (SSSC and Care Inspectorate, 2023a), compared with 64% the previous year (SSSC and Care Inspectorate, 2022) and 48% the year before that (SSSC and Care Inspectorate, 2021). The number of registered nurses employed in care homes also continues to fall (SSSC and Care Inspectorate, 2023b), despite the acuity of the care needs of residents rising.

In this context, our recommendations are clearly needed now more than ever.

## Progress report

The recommendations made in our 2023 workforce report can broadly be grouped together under four headings: safe staffing, fair pay and student finance, national care services and data.

## Safe staffing and the Ministerial Taskforce on Nursing and Midwifery

- Recommendation 1:** Scottish government must ensure the Ministerial Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce delivers funded, timely, meaningful and sustainable actions that make a positive difference for the nursing profession, including developing and implementing a detailed nursing retention strategy.
- Recommendation 2:** In partnership with the trade unions and other professional bodies, the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act must be implemented in full by April 2024, and be accompanied by the investment and resources to allow health and care employers to meet their duties under the Act. An accurate, transparent baseline must be published before April 2024 to enable trend data to emerge over time.
- Recommendation 5:** Scottish government must take steps to grow the domestic nursing workforce by continuing to increase the number of nursing student places and expanding the routes into nursing, including implementing the recommendations that come from the Ministerial Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce.
- Recommendation 7:** NHS Scotland must complete and publish an evaluation of the consistency of application and effectiveness of the current nursing and midwifery workload and workforce planning tools and take steps to address any inconsistencies identified.

The Ministerial Taskforce on Nursing and Midwifery ('the Taskforce') was announced in February 2023. The Taskforce has been established and four subgroups are now up and running, which is welcome. We are actively engaged with all four subgroups, which are considering issues under the themes of attraction, wellbeing, culture and leadership, and education and development. However, initial progress was slower than we would have liked. In particular, delays in establishing listening project were concerning as this is vital to informing the work of the Taskforce. Through our membership of the Taskforce, we will continue to press for ambitious recommendations that are fully funded and a detailed delivery plan.

Recommendation 2 was around the implementation of the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act 2019 ('the Act'), the need for investment and resources to allow health and

care employers to meet their duties under the Act, and the creation of trend data to measure the impact of this legislation. We have been working closely with the Scottish government on the development of statutory guidance and implementation of the Act remains on track. This recommendation is forming part of our discussions on various Taskforce subgroups.

As part of the 2023-24 Scottish government budget process, we will be strongly pushing for health and care employers to be given additional resources to ensure they are able to meet the new duties under the Act. We have also had some discussion with Audit Scotland on the issue of monitoring the impact of the Act and have engaged with academic stakeholders interested in securing baseline data for nursing, prior to the legislation being implemented.

Another key part of the Taskforce is looking at nursing student numbers. We continue, as part of this work, to call for an increase in nursing student numbers and an expansion of the routes into nursing, as in recommendation 5. We were disappointed that in spring 2023, the Scottish government announced a freeze on nursing student numbers for three years (Scottish parliament, 2023). However, in response to our pressure, the Scottish government has since said that student intakes can be considered by the Taskforce. More concerning is that data published by UCAS (UCAS, 2023) shows that intake targets for Scottish Universities have not been met for the second year in a row. The Taskforce is a key opportunity to revisit attraction into nursing, including a detailed analysis of why people are not choosing to study nursing.

Finally in this section, recommendation 7 called for an evaluation of the current nursing and midwifery workload and workforce tools. We have been working extensively with the HSP Tools Oversight Group, as well as several working groups and within various governance structures over the last few months. This has sparked separate discussions with NHS Education for Scotland and the Healthcare Staffing Programme team. Through this work we have identified areas of significant concern with the calculations underpinning the existing tools, and we continue our discussions with Scottish government and Healthcare Improvement Scotland on this.

## Summary

Taken together, there has been some progress towards these recommendations, particularly around the implementation of the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act 2019. However, progress on the other recommendations has been slow. In particular, we believe it is vital that the Taskforce is able to make meaningful and fully funded recommendations in a timely manner.

## Fair pay and student finance

- Recommendation 3:** Scottish government and employers must ensure that registered nurses and nursing support workers, wherever they work, have fair pay, good employment terms and safe working conditions that reflect their safety critical role. Future pay awards should be restorative, recognising that for over a decade, nursing pay has failed to keep pace with the rising cost of living.
- Recommendation 4:** Scottish government must deliver on its commitment to review Agenda for Change to support recruitment, sustainability and retention.
- Recommendation 6:** Scottish government must ensure that nursing students have adequate financial support to allow them to prioritise their education, cope with the rising cost of living and complete their studies without falling into financial hardship.

During an extended period of time when the cost-of-living crisis is putting pressure on us all, we cannot understate the importance of fair pay for highly skilled graduate professionals and non-registered staff who provide care.

Recommendation 3 argues that registered nurses and nursing support workers, wherever they work, must have fair pay and good terms and conditions, and that future pay awards need to be restorative. While not unexpected, given where we are in the pay negotiation cycle, to date there has been no progress on a 2024-25 pay offer for NHS Scotland Agenda for Change staff. While the Scottish government has made a commitment to a minimum £12 an hour pay rate for staff working in adult social care and children's services, no significant proposals have been made for registered nurses working in social care.

Following our lobbying, in October this year the Scottish government provided funding, through the new General Medical Services contract, for nursing staff directly employed by general practices to receive an uplift backdated to 1 April, equivalent to the 2023-24 Agenda for Change pay award. We are monitoring whether this uplift has been implemented for all eligible RCN members by GP practices.

While the Scottish government aspires to improve pay, terms and conditions and introduce collective bargaining for social care employees through the creation of the National Care Service, no detail on how this will be funded, implemented or monitored has been provided.



The Scottish government committed to reviewing the Agenda for Change NHS pay scheme to support recruitment, sustainability and retention, as per recommendation 4. RCN Scotland has been a central partner in this process and recommendations for the implementation of a reduced working week, protected time for learning and for a review of Band 5 nursing roles are now with the Cabinet Secretary for approval. We are calling on him to approve the funding required to implement the recommended outcomes quickly and in full.

To improve recruitment and nursing student retention, recommendation 6 called for measures to ensure students have adequate financial support while studying. Our report on nursing student finances, published in June 2023 (RCN Scotland 2023b) starkly highlighted the financial pressure facing nursing students. This report gained significant media and stakeholder attention. Nursing student members shared their experiences and the challenges they face directly with MSPs at a roundtable in September 2023. We also met Student Awards Agency Scotland and Scottish government officials to discuss nursing student financial support and are hopeful that they will address our recommendations in the student finance report on travel and accommodation expenses during clinical placements.

## Summary

While there has been some progress, a lack of tangible proposals for improving nursing pay in social care plus the ongoing cost of living crisis, means that nursing staff are still facing huge financial pressures. The situation is making recruitment and retention even more challenging. We believe it is vital that Scottish government take action to secure a fairer financial package for Scotland's nursing students. We also believe that pay for nursing staff across health and social care should recognise and value their education, skills and safety critical role, including as part of the 2024-25 Agenda for Change pay offer for NHS staff.



## National care services, community and primary care

**Recommendation 8:** The clinical skill, contribution and impact of registered nurses in community, social care and primary care services must be recognised. Action to increase the number of registered nurses in these settings must be prioritised over large-scale structural reform.

**Recommendation 9:** Funding for Scotland's care home sector must acknowledge the increasing clinical need of residents and the requirement for the skills and knowledge of registered nurses within the sector.

Recommendation 8 outlines how the contribution of registered nurses in overstretched community, social care and primary care services must be recognised. This is one of the key messages in our influencing work around the National Care Service. In September 2023, we held a roundtable with Maree Todd MSP, Minister for Social Care, and members working in social care and community services. The Minister heard first-hand about the contribution of and pressures on nursing staff in these services. The Transforming Nursing Oversight Board, on which we sit, is considering the contribution of community nursing, general practice nursing and advanced practice, but progress has been slow. Scottish Social Services Council data (SSSC and Care Inspectorate, 2023b), published in September 2023, shows further reductions in nursing staff working in social care.

Recommendation 9 relates specifically to funding for care homes and on this there has been little progress. The National Care Service Bill fails to provide detail on how the service will be funded. We have repeatedly raised the point that without adequate funding and resourcing, including for registered nurses, the aims of the NCS will not be achievable.

### Summary

Staffing levels in community, social care and primary care services continue to fall and the National Care Service proposals contains no detail on funding and resourcing. There has been little progress on these recommendations.

## Workforce data

**Recommendation 10:** The data being used to inform workforce planning must be improved. This includes addressing the gaps in the workforce data for NHS, social care and general practice, as well as making health and care activity data publicly available to ensure this informs workforce planning.

Finally, recommendation 10 notes the significant gaps that exist in workforce data, which are limiting workforce planning. The Scottish government has already produced a National Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care (Scottish government 2022). The government is committed to producing indicative workforce projections as part of this strategy, as well as separate mental health and remote and rural workforce plans. A lack of data will continue to limit these pieces of work.

Audit Scotland has recommended urgent progress to improve ‘the availability, quality and use of financial, operational and workforce data to improve mental health workforce planning in primary, community and social care’ (Audit Scotland 2023a), as well as calling for future NHS workforce projections to be published (Audit Scotland 2023b). While the Scottish government, through its Health and Social Care Data Strategy (Scottish government 2023), makes reference to improving data collection for the benefit of modelling including workforce planning, we are not aware of any significant changes or proposals in this area to date.

### Summary

From April 2024, Scottish Ministers will be legally responsible for ensuring there are sufficient numbers of staff, including registered nurses, to ensure employers meet their duty to have appropriate levels of staffing. There remains a significant need to improve workforce data, particularly as these new duties are established.

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## Conclusion

We will continue to pursue the 10 recommendations from our 2023 workforce report in our influencing work. With nursing vacancies remaining at near record levels, the pace and urgency to address this needs to be intensified.

In the coming months significant progress must be made from key pieces of work including the Healthcare Staffing Programme, the Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce and the Agenda for Change Review.

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(all references accessed 24 November 2023)

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