

Our health and care services continue to face unprecedented pressures. For any health and social care initiatives announced in the Programme for Government to be effective, the Scottish Government must first deliver a sustainable plan to address chronic workforce shortages.

Nursing is a safety critical profession and we are told that patient care is being compromised daily because of dangerously low staffing levels.

The recruitment crisis in nursing is not improving. The vacancy rates have remained stubbornly high for a couple of years, but we're also now seeing an extremely concerning drop off in the number of people applying for undergraduate nursing courses. UCAS data shows a 14% drop in acceptances onto nursing programmes in Scotland compared to this point last year - the number of accepted applicants to nursing courses in Scotland at this point in the acceptance cycle is the lowest in the last 5 years. This follows an 8% drop in the number of acceptances onto nursing courses in Autumn 2022 compared to the previous year. These trends are a serious threat to the continued supply of new nurses to ensure a sustainable workforce. Meanwhile retention remains a serious challenge with the number of nurses leaving the NMC register in Scotland increasing again over the past year.

Staff and patients need to see light at the end of the tunnel, they need to know that things are going to improve. That is why the Ministerial Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce and the review of Agenda for Change, must deliver positive change for the nursing workforce.

RCN Scotland priorities for the Programme for Government

Delivering positive change through the Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce

The Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce was secured as a direct result of the RCN's campaigning on safe staffing and fair pay for nursing. Work is being progressed under the following themes: the wellbeing of nursing and midwifery staff; how to attract more people into nursing and midwifery; how to improve culture and leadership; how to support and expand education and development opportunities; how all of these can better support the retention of Scotland's existing dedicated and experienced registered nurses, midwives and nursing support workers.

The Scottish Government must ensure the Taskforce delivers funded, timely, meaningful and sustainable actions to retain nursing staff, address the unsustainable levels of vacancies, expand the routes into nursing and ultimately to grow Scotland's nursing workforce to ensure it is sustainable. This should include the development of a nursing retention strategy.

An improved financial package for student nurses

We are calling on the Scottish Government to implement a cost-of-living increase to the nursing student bursary, and associated allowances, and establish a regular review to ensure the bursary increases in line with the cost of living. The Scottish government and SAAS must also uplift the value-

-of travel and accommodation expenses to reflect the rising cost of living.

Nursing students across Scotland are facing serious financial pressures that are having a significant impact on their education, financial security and physical and mental wellbeing. This is the main conclusion from an RCN Scotland survey of nursing students in Scotland which found that:

- 99% of respondents said their finances cause them some level of concern
- 74% said this was having a high or very high impact on their mental health, and 48% on their physical health
- 58% said this was having a high or very high impact on their academic performance
- **66% have considered dropping out of their course due to financial concerns**

RCN Scotland is therefore calling on the Scottish government to ensure the financial support package for nursing students allows them to prioritise their education, cope with the rising cost of living, and finish their studies without falling into financial hardship.

Fair pay for nursing staff across health and social care

The 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. Nursing staff employed within publicly funded social care services should have equal pay, terms and conditions to equivalent roles in the NHS.

The Scottish Government must also deliver on its commitment to review Agenda for Change to support recruitment, sustainability and retention. Modernisation of Agenda for Change is a fundamental part of the 2022/23 and 2023/24 pay settlements and no doubt a key factor in resolving the RCN dispute on pay in Scotland. Given the small majority of members who voted in favour of the pay offer, and the feedback from members on the importance of the review of Agenda for Change, in particular the review of Band 5 nursing profiles, real progress needs to be made on this work and adequate investment to deliver the changes required.

Implementation of Scotland's safe staffing legislation

The Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act has not yet come into force and the Scottish Government has committed to implementation in April 2024. RCN Scotland is calling for implementation to be accompanied by the investment and resources to allow health boards and care employers to meet their duties under the Act and to tackle nursing vacancies. The Act provides tools to facilitate safe staffing levels across health and care, but its successful implementation relies entirely on retaining and recruiting more nurses.

Ministers must also address the unsustainable reliance on temporary nursing staff. Over reliance on -

-temporary staff may result in a lack of continuity of care for patients, add to clinical risk, increase pressure on existing nursing staff and lead to even more financial pressure when budgets are already extremely tight.

Focus on improving community health and social care services and tackling the staffing crisis within these sectors

We have serious concerns about the current National Care Service Bill and the potential huge costs involved in this structural overhaul. We share the desire to improve the quality and consistency of social care and health services across Scotland. However, it is entirely unclear how the current Bill will achieve this or address the serious challenges within a sector that is in crisis.

Figures published by the Care Inspectorate and Scottish Social Service Council in November showed that 60% of care services that employ nurses reported vacancies. The rate of WTE nursing vacancies for these services was 16.2%.

Ultimately improving the quality and consistency of services cannot be achieved without increasing investment, tackling the workforce crisis and recognising (and resourcing) the increasing need to deliver complex clinical care within community and care home settings. Services within the social care and community sectors must have the right numbers of staff, with the right skills, in the right place. This is where the focus needs to be just now. Fair pay, terms and conditions for nursing staff employed within the social care sector are vital and nursing staff should have equal pay, terms and conditions to equivalent roles in the NHS.

Many questions remain about the scope of the National Care Service and how it will operate in practice, but it seems clear that the funding attached to the Bill is nowhere near enough to address the problems facing the sector currently. The Scottish Government must invest now in the social care workforce, in particular tackling low pay and poor terms and conditions.

Grow the domestic nursing workforce

The 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. As outlined above, improving the financial support package for nursing students is vital for attracting and retaining students throughout their education, ensuring sustainable domestic recruitment.