

RCN Employment Survey 2025: Scotland summary

Background

The RCN Employment Survey, which runs every two years, is a significant barometer of how our members feel in their jobs. Wherever they work – NHS or the independent health and social care sectors – the survey gives our members the opportunity to tell us what it is really like in nursing at the moment. This briefing provides a summary of the key findings from members in Scotland.

The survey ran during autumn 2025 and received nearly 1,900 responses from registered nurses, nursing support workers and nursing students in Scotland.

While the Scottish government has made changes in policy and investment in health and care services since the last survey in 2023, this year's results underscore just how much more is needed for recovery and securing a sustainable nursing workforce for the future. Despite nursing staff stepping up to meet the challenges head on, the picture remains one of continued pressure, increased demand, poor staffing levels, and pay, terms and conditions that fail to recognise the level of knowledge, skills and autonomy asked of nursing staff every day.

Summary of findings

Retention challenges

- 37% of respondents said they are actively planning on leaving, or thinking about leaving, their job; pointing to a significant level of workforce instability.
- Almost three quarters (74%) of respondents who are thinking about leaving their job said that feeling undervalued is a key reason, closely followed by feeling under too much pressure (57%), feeling exhausted (55%) and concerns about low staffing levels (53%).
- If they did leave their current job, 48% would prefer to move into a job outside of nursing.

"I would dearly love to leave my job, I'm ashamed to say it as used to be so proud of my role but I'm exhausted, mentally drained and emotionally burnt out, however I simply cannot afford to leave. Patients deserve better than this. We also deserve not to go home and breakdown every night after a shift finally ends." - Clinical nurse specialist, NHS cancer care

Appropriateness of pay

- More than two thirds (68%) said their pay level or band/grade is inappropriate or very inappropriate given their role and responsibilities; signaling a disconnect between pay levels and the realities of nursing roles.

Appropriateness of pay (Cont.)

- Just 20% feel their pay is appropriate or very appropriate – this has fallen sharply from 43% in 2015.
- 21% were considering opting out of their pension to help with living costs, suggesting current pay levels are insufficient to meet basic living costs and raising concerns about the long-term financial security of many nursing staff.

“Despite extra learning and increased experience there is no scope for more pay. The role expands and the skills required increase with new technology related to my role.” - Clinical nurse specialist, NHS acute/urgent hospital setting.

Working hours

- 66% of respondents reported that they work over their contracted hours at least once a week with around half (53%) saying that these hours were unpaid.
- 14% of respondents said they were working beyond contracted hours every shift, 31% reported this was several times a week.
- The proportion of respondents stating they work excess hours several times a week or every shift has barely changed since the last survey undertaken in 2023, suggesting a continued reliance on nursing staff working additional hours.
- Satisfaction with working hours is recovering, with 47% satisfied, compared to a low of 40% in 2023. However, only around a third (37%) of respondents feel able to balance their work and home lives.
- More than half (57%) of nursing staff believe they spend too much time away from nursing care on things like paperwork and dealing with administration.

“I work in a very busy, fast-paced ward. The largest and highest patient turnover in the hospital which is frequently understaffed with unrealistic expectations. I rarely ever finish on time and often stay at least 1-2 hours over my finishing time every shift to finish tasks/paperwork or notes. None of this is paid.” - Staff nurse, NHS Surgical ward

Impact of working pressures

- 61% said they are under too much pressure at work, with 60% feeling too busy to provide the level of care they would like.
- 83% reported working when unwell at least once over the previous 12 months, despite feeling too ill to do so.

Impact of working pressures (Cont.)

- Despite a requirement for NHS employers to provide nursing staff with protected time for non-mandatory training and continued professional development, it is clear this is not happening, with 25% of respondents stating that even mandatory training was done in their own time.

“The pressure of waiting lists and taking on extra patients is becoming too much, staffing levels are not being increased to keep up with the extra demands. This puts patient safety at risk and also affects the quality of care that patients receive.” - **Senior charge nurse, NHS acute/urgent hospital ward.**

Workplace culture and safety

- 71% of respondents have experienced verbal abuse at work and 37% have experienced physical abuse.
- 77% of those who reported physical abuse, and 72% who reported verbal abuse, did not express satisfaction with the response, indicating that more needs to be done to deal with this unacceptable behaviour.
- Poor workplace culture remains a problem, with 37% reporting that they’ve experienced bullying or harassment from a colleague in the past 12 months.

“Repeated episodes of violence and aggression in units and no real change occurs. Been waiting four years for security doors at one site and still no plans for this to be fitted. Recurrent episodes of patients using weapons.” - **Senior charge nurse, NHS community mental health assessment unit.**

Perceptions of nursing as a profession and career

- Nursing remains a rewarding career for many, but while many still find deep personal satisfaction in their roles, this survey suggested growing uncertainty about whether nursing will remain a fulfilling profession in the long-term. 57% of respondents in Scotland described nursing as a rewarding career, falling from a high of 71% in 2019.
- The proportion of respondents who said they would recommend nursing has dropped by 15% over six years to 31%.

“I feel that nursing used to be considered a meaningful and well respected career however due to poor pay raises and more responsibilities and significant changes/demands placed on nurses, becoming a nurse is no longer a career that people are drawn to. Which is causing shortages of nurses throughout the UK, which is putting a strain on staff and affecting the quality of care patients are receiving.” - **Team Leader, NHS learning disability community setting.**

Conclusion

These are damning and worrying statistics for now and the future. Scotland can ill-afford more nursing staff to leave their jobs – we simply do not have enough to meet current demand. For the past four years places on nursing undergraduate courses have gone unfilled, a deep threat to the future nursing workforce.

The situation is not irredeemable. We remain committed to championing the work of our members and the nursing profession as a whole, because we know nursing offers a deeply rewarding career. With the right action and investment, nursing can once again become an attractive career choice - boosting retention and building a sustainable workforce for the future.

Urgent action is required and the next Scottish government - whichever party is elected after May 2026 - must step up to the task in the same way nursing staff have been doing for years. In the meantime, the Scottish government must fully fund and implement speedily all 44 recommendations from the Ministerial Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce. Failure to do so will only deepen the current nursing workforce crisis.