

## RCN Scotland Briefing:

### Scottish Labour Debate: Addressing Scotland's Medical and Nursing Workforce Crisis

The Scottish government has committed to protecting, strengthening and renewing our NHS but this must be underpinned by a robust workforce strategy and cannot be achieved without investment and a recognition of the unique contribution that each profession makes. The same applies within social care where nursing staff continue to report feeling undervalued and overlooked. Delivering and supporting a sustainable nursing workforce will be key, yet there are significant challenges and urgent action is needed. The Scottish government must follow through on its existing commitments and take the action needed to allow the nursing profession to grow, develop and maximize its contribution to the health and wellbeing of the nation.

- There are over 2,600 nursing vacancies in the NHS alone. NHS employers and the Scottish government have never filled the large gap between the number of staff health boards say they need, to deliver services safely, and actual nursing staff in post.
- There are over 1,400 fewer registered nurses employed in care homes for adults since 2013, a 28% decrease. This is despite the fact that registered nurses working within care homes play a key role in preventing hospital admissions and managing increasingly complex health conditions within that homely environment.
- The NHS Scotland sickness absence rate has risen to 6.4%. However, we know from FOI data that the rate is higher for nursing, with an average nursing absence rate of more than 7% across NHS Scotland.
- Over 2,400 fewer nursing students have started university than planned in the last three years which means the workforce gap is set to widen even further. Our previous student member survey found that nursing students across Scotland are facing serious financial pressures - 66% have considered dropping out of their course due to financial concerns.

It's clear that a whole system approach is needed. Patients and nursing staff feel the effect of workforce gaps every hour of every day. Nursing staff are striving hard to provide the level of care they want to but, because health and care services do not have the numbers of nursing staff they need, patients are not getting the level of care they need.

The ambulance stacking and care in inappropriate places such as hospital corridors and storerooms - that our members highlighted in our recent '[On the frontline of the UK's corridor care crisis](#)' report - are a symptom of years of underinvestment and a failure to workforce plan. The Scottish government should follow the UK government and the Northern Ireland Executive in committing to recording data on the extent care in inappropriate places.

The Scottish government is long overdue an update of its health and care workforce strategy. It also needs to make good on its commitment to implementing, in full, the Ministerial Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce recommendations. The same goes for the Agenda for Change review recommendations, which we know are vital to retaining and recruiting nursing staff. This is how employers will be able to fill the vacant nursing staff posts to ensure people receive the care they deserve.

## **RCN Scotland recommendations:**

1. For the past two years, the Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce has listened to nursing staff and reviewed international evidence. It is now vital that the Scottish government focuses on implementing the Taskforce recommendations with the necessary funding and resources to deliver meaningful change for the current and future nursing workforce.
2. Scottish government and employers must ensure that registered nurses and nursing support workers in the NHS and social care have fair pay and good employment terms and conditions that reflect their safety critical role.
3. The review of the workload and workforce planning tools must include an increase in predicted absence levels. Calculations of the number of nursing staff needed must include: time for breaks and recognise the allocation of protected time for learning; realistic rates of sickness absence; and the reduction in the working week to 36 hours from April 2026. The RCN's updated Workforce Standards for nursing include a call for an uplift to the predicted absence allowance to 27%.
4. The association between higher registered nurse staffing levels and reduced mortality stands and must be recognised through the introduction of safety critical registered nurse-to-patient ratios.
5. The Scottish government's review of nursing student finance must be concluded in a timely manner and include a commitment to a cost-of-living increase in the student nurse bursary.
6. Scottish government and NHS Boards must invest in growing the essential role of the registered nurse in community services including district nursing, health visiting, school nursing and general practice to reduce health inequalities and realise the ambition of shifting the balance of care.
7. The divergence between clinical need and clinical skill within care homes for adults must be reversed. Funding for the sector must recognise the need to significantly increase the number of registered nurses employed directly within care homes for adults.
8. Professional nursing leadership and governance structures must be in place across the NHS and social care, including protecting the Chief Nursing Officer role in statute and giving nurse members of Integration Joint Boards full voting rights.
9. Workforce planning must be based on timely and accurate data. The continued gaps in data collection across social care, general practice and NHS services must be addressed.
10. To ensure ongoing security of how the duties introduced by the Health and Care Staffing (Scotland) Act are being met, an annual parliamentary debate on safe staffing is required

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The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is the world's largest professional organisation and trade union for nursing staff, with members in the NHS, independent and voluntary sectors. RCN Scotland promotes patient and nursing interests by campaigning on issues that affect our members, shaping national health policies, representing members on practice and employment issues and providing members with learning and development opportunities. With over 52,000 members in Scotland, we are the voice of nursing.