

THE GLOVES ARE OFF

**It's time to value
nursing properly**

Because Scotland's
health depends on it.

BRIEFING:
Staffing
for safe and
effective care



Introduction

The evidence couldn't be clearer. When there are enough nursing staff, with the right skills, in any care setting – patients are safer.

Every 10% increase in the number of degree educated registered nurses, is associated with a **7%** drop in risk of death



The price of unsafe staffing is too high. Patient care, and outcomes, are put at unacceptable risk when there are too few registered nurses to deliver nursing care safely. An increase in a registered nurses' workload by one patient increases the likelihood of an inpatient dying by 7%ⁱ. Evidence consistently shows that inadequate nurse staffing is associated with poorer patient outcomes, including preventable complications, increased risk of death, higher rates of falls, medication errors and hospital readmissions. Harms to staff include burnout, occupational injury and lower job satisfaction.

When patients can't access safe care in the community, conditions worsen, and they end up in hospital where workforce shortages are just as severe. This vicious cycle fails staff and patients – it can't go on.

Too often staffing decisions are based on affordability rather than need, yet this is a false economy. Recent economic analysis in the NHS suggests that investing in better nurse to patient ratios is likely to be highly cost effective and may lead to net cost savings due to reduced length of stay and readmissions as well as reduced staff sickness.

Scotland needs the **right numbers** of nursing staff, with the **right skills**, in the **right place**.

This election we're calling for nursing to be recognised as **an asset**, rather than viewed as a cost.

The case for change

Nursing shortages

Despite Scotland's safe staffing legislation coming into force in 2024, nursing shortages continue to have a damaging impact, with many nurses caring for unsafe numbers of patients, in turn causing overwhelming pressure and burnout. At no point has the NHS in Scotland employed the number of nursing staff it says it needs. NHS nursing vacancies remain stubbornly high, with over 2,800 posts unfilled, and care homes report significant retention and recruitment challenges.

In response to a 2025 RCN Scotland member survey:

27% of respondents said their work setting rarely or never has enough registered nurses or nursing support staff, with the right skills, to care for patients safely

61% said that the numbers of nursing staff working during their last shift was insufficient to meet the needs of patients

44% were concerned about the skill mix of the staff working during their last shift, with **21%** feeling concerned that support staff were being expected to perform the duties of registered staff

A study published in 2025ⁱⁱ looked at establishing a baseline of nurse staffing standards when Scotland's safe staffing Act was implemented. Most nurses surveyed disagreed that current staffing levels met the eight guiding principles set out in the legislation and most reported that the common staffing method and duties regarding real-time staffing decisions were followed, at best, occasionally.

We have significant concerns that the workforce planning tools, mandated for use in the Act, are not fit for purpose.

Scotland's Auditor General has been calling for the Scottish government to publish an update to the National Workforce Strategy for health and social care for a number of years. However, the Scottish government's recent suite of three planning documents failed to include an accompanying workforce plan.

Care in inappropriate places

Corridor care is now not only a winter problem but a year-round crisis in the NHS, yet due to a lack of data and reporting on corridor care, its true scale and impact are unknown.

More than 500 RCN members in Scotland answered questions about the safe delivery of care last summer, with almost a third reporting having to deliver care in inappropriate settings as frequently as every week, or even every day. The impact goes far beyond the doors of emergency departments, with nursing staff across many acute settings desperately struggling and demoralised as they are forced to create space for additional unstaffed beds in wards or provide patient care in corridors and other inappropriate locations.

When patients are put on trolleys, chairs, in corridors, cupboards and even offices, it leaves nursing staff without access to vital lifesaving equipment such as oxygen and suction, while patients are often forced to endure intimate examinations in public areas.

In the absence of published data on corridor care, A&E waits of over 12 hrs are an indicator of the capacity challenges facing our hospitals. Over the course of 2025, 77,735 people waited over 12 hours in Scotland's A&Es. More people waited for more than 12 hours in December 2025 (7,451) than in the whole of 2019 (5,562)ⁱⁱⁱ.

While the Scottish government has committed to “eliminate non-standard care areas,” our members continue to report that corridor care has been allowed to persist and is now normal practice. The Scottish government's Health and Social Care Service Renewal Framework contains a number of commitments, but lacks sufficient detail, with no specific actions or timescales outlined.



Corridor care is a symptom of a healthcare system under immense pressure.

To consign corridor care to history where it belongs, we need Scottish government to boost capacity at the front door, improving staffing levels and the number of beds in hospitals. At the back door, we need to see much greater investment to grow capacity in primary, community and social care. Ministers must also commit to publishing the data on just how widespread corridor care is as we believe that accurate data is required to address the issue effectively.

The case for change

Attracting more people into nursing

It's clear that Scotland needs more nurses. Yet over the last four years, thousands fewer students have begun nursing degrees than were originally planned in the targets set by Scottish government. This means the gap between the number of registered nurses that are needed, and the number entering the workforce, will continue to widen. Meanwhile Scotland's nursing workforce is ageing and so this problem will worsen quickly.

Urgent action is required to secure the future registered nurse workforce.

- There has been a steep decline in the number of students starting undergraduate nursing courses in Scotland, with the number of students accepted onto courses starting in autumn 2025 down 11% compared to the number starting courses in 2019.
- The figures also show a significant fall in the total number applying to undergraduate nursing courses, with over 1,000 fewer people applying in 2025 compared to 2019.
- Although there have been improvements in course completion rates for some degree programmes, not all nursing students complete their courses and progress into a career as a registered nurse. Of the nursing students due to complete their degree in 2024, 18.5% did not complete their course, with a further 13.3% still active but not yet graduated.

The Scottish government's ongoing commitment to the bursary is welcome. However, the last increase in the bursary, up to £10,000, was in 2020/21. The cost of living has increased significantly in the past five years resulting in a reduction in the value of the bursary. The vast majority of nursing students who responded to a 2025 survey reported that the bursary is not sufficient to cover their living expenses and of those who had considered leaving their course the most frequently reported reason was because of financial concerns.



The case for change

Attracting more people into nursing (cont.)

In response to lobbying from the RCN and our student members, the Scottish government committed in 2023 to a review of the current financial support package for nursing students. However, this review hasn't concluded, and recommendations to strengthen financial support have not been made or actions agreed.

The Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce considered how to attract more people into the nursing profession and in its report the Scottish government committed to a wide range of actions. These include a nationwide recruitment campaign and working with partners to develop alternative nursing degree models (including blended and distance learning) and to developing alternative entry routes in the profession (including part time, earn as you learn and apprenticeship models). Yet progress in delivering these changes has been far too slow.

Nursing is a rewarding and wonderful career, but the worrying decline in people choosing to study nursing makes it clear that wide ranging action is needed. This must include a clear pathway for career progression, safe staffing, and stronger financial support for students.

Safe staffing is particularly crucial to ensure students can learn effectively while on clinical placement.

Nursing students are meant to be supernumerary - they should not be counted within the staffing numbers. However, we continue to hear numerous reports of students being treated as part of the workforce. In one striking example, nurses described hiding their students to avoid one of their registered nurses being moved to cover another ward, highlighting just how pressured clinical environments have become.





Our manifesto calls for:

- The introduction of mandatory minimum registered nurse-to-patient ratios for all health and care settings, to protect patients and staff from harm caused by low registered nurse staffing levels.
- The eradication of the unacceptable provision of care in inappropriate places across Scotland's hospitals, with health boards required to report all instances as a first step.
- Action to attract more people into the nursing profession, including a nationwide recruitment campaign and an expansion of the routes into nursing, to help grow the workforce.
- A cost-of-living increase to the student nurse bursary and the protection of nursing courses at Scotland's universities, recognising that any cuts to nurse education risks the future of the workforce.
- Development of a long-term workforce plan, based on a robust assessment of increasing need and Scotland's ageing population.

References:

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publichealthscotland.scot/healthcare-system/urgent-and-unscheduled-care/accident-and-emergency/interactive-charts/number-of-attendances/



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For more information about our priorities for the next Scottish government, as well as information on how you can support our campaign, please visit:

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