RCN Scotland Briefing – Scottish Budget 2027-28

As the Scottish Government prepares its Budget for 2027-28, RCN Scotland is urging Ministers to use this opportunity to make sustained investment in Scotland's nursing workforce and health and care services.

As the largest professional workforce across health and care, the Scottish Government must recognise the nursing workforce as central to its ambitious aims for Scotland's health and care services. Nursing staff provide the continuous, person-centred care that improves population health, prevents illness, supports people to remain in work for longer, enhances productivity and safeguards patient safety across every part of the health and care system.

Yet for too long, nursing has been treated as a cost to be managed rather than a strategic investment that delivers substantial economic and social returns.

The forthcoming Budget provides a critical opportunity for targeted investment that supports nursing recruitment and retention, delivers fair reward for nursing staff, and strengthens the capacity of services to meet the increasing needs of Scotland's population.

This briefing sets out RCN Scotland's key budget priorities and the actions we believe are necessary to support nursing staff, improve outcomes for those they care for, and secure the long-term sustainability of Scotland's health and care system.

1. **Implement an annual cost-of-living increase to the nursing student bursary and make progress towards restoring the lost value of the bursary**

The issue: We welcome the SNP's manifesto commitment to provide a cost-of-living increase to the nursing bursary, by at least inflation in each remaining year of the parliament, and expect to see the first increase outlined in the forthcoming budget.

While the Scottish government's ongoing commitment to the nursing bursary has been welcome, it has failed to keep pace with significant increases in the cost-of-living. The last increase in the bursary, up to £10,000, was in 2020-21. Taking into account RPI inflation since 2020-21, the bursary has decreased in value and the buying power of £10,000 in 2025-26 was the equivalent of £6,940.

The vast majority of nursing students who responded to a 2025 RCN 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 financial concerns.

RCN asks:

- We are calling for annual cost of living increases, and restorative increases over the course of the parliament to restore the lost value of the bursary, to reflect the significant, and continuing, increases in the cost of living.
- It is important that we see quick progress on this, to help reverse the trend of unfilled places on nursing courses we have seen in Scotland for the last four years. Over the last four years over 3,500 fewer nursing students have started university than planned in the targets set by Scottish government. This is equivalent to a full year's cohort, comparable to the actual intake in 2025 (which was 3,535), and means that the gap between the number of registered nurses that are needed, and the number entering the workforce, is set to widen even further.
- In addition to an urgent increase in the bursary, the Scottish government should also complete the wider review of financial support for nursing students, that is promised in the Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce, so that potential students are not put off by the cost of studying nursing and nursing students aren't forced to leave their course due to financial hardship.

2. **Investment to increase the number of community nurses undertaking the NMC accredited qualifications that are needed to ensure appropriately qualified and skilled district nursing, health visiting and school nursing workforces across all health boards**

The issue: Current workforce trends within district nursing, health visiting and school nursing are at odds with the policy direction of shifting the balance of care into the community and prioritising prevention.

District nurses are fundamental to the Scottish government's plans to shift the balance of care, caring for patients with complex health needs in their own home as well as delivering preventative care and supporting long-term conditions and palliative patients. However, there has been a decline in the number of registered nurses being supported to complete the specialist qualification in district nursing since 2020. NHS Board data indicates that only 24% of registered nurses within district nursing teams hold the SPQ qualification designed to equip them with the additional knowledge and skills to manage complex caseloads.

Since 2020 the registered nursing workforce in health visiting teams has fallen by 7% and, despite a Scottish government commitment to maintain or annually increase numbers of registered nurses undertaking the specialist qualification in health visiting, data provided by NHS boards highlights that the numbers have been in decline since 2022. 12 boards provided data showing that 115 nurses were supported to undertake this specialist qualification in 2022, compared to 55 in 2025.

There is a similar trend in school nursing with the numbers declining since 2022 and reduced investment in supporting nurses to complete the specialist school nursing qualification. From a high of 82 nurses accessing the qualification in 2022, this fell to 16 in 2024 and just 13 in 2025.

RCN asks:

- We're calling for the Scottish Government to provide ring-fenced investment for specialist SPQ and SCPHN qualifications for district nursing, health visiting and school nursing.
- More complex care is being delivered outside hospitals, increasing numbers of people are living with multiple, complex conditions, and there are greater mental health needs as well as increased child protection activity. The Scottish government and health boards must recognise this increasing acuity and ensure workforce plans reflect increasing levels of population need and complexity.
- Investing in increasing the number of community nurses that hold these specialist qualifications is vital for safely increasing the amount of care provided in the community. Strengthening Scotland's community nursing workforce is one of the best investments the government could make.

3. **Recurring funding for implementing the Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce recommendations, to enable them to deliver for nursing staff**

The issue: We called for the Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce which was established by the Scottish government in 2023 and led by the Cabinet Secretary. The Taskforce spent over two years listening to frontline staff and developing a comprehensive set of recommendations to improve retention, culture and staff wellbeing and to attract new nurses. The Taskforce did its job, yet almost two years later implementation has not progressed as quickly as we would have expected, and the recommendations are yet to make any meaningful difference to nursing staff.

RCN asks:

- The Scottish government has a comprehensive set of well-considered solutions at its fingertips and recurring funding is needed to support delivery of these.
- The Scottish government's NHS reform programme must tackle persistent culture problems within health and care and improve working environments for staff. Delivering what the Taskforce has already said is needed is key to achieving this. Without this, health and care reform will fail nursing staff.

4. **Investment in the social care nursing workforce, including funding to ensure social care sectoral bargaining is meaningful**

The issue: Fulfilling the Scottish government's objective of providing more care in the community also includes social care, and investment in social care nursing is vital for tackling the serious overcrowding in Scotland's hospitals which is resulting in dangerous and unacceptable corridor care.

Evidence shows that clinical complexity among care home residents is rising sharply. As residents' complexity of clinical need increases, the skills, competencies and availability of the registered nursing workforce employed within care homes becomes ever more important. However, registered nurse numbers in care homes have fallen by around 24% over the last 10 years.

RCN asks:

- Reforming the accountability and governance structures around social care will not improve services without investment in the workforce. We're calling for funding for social care that recognises the need to significantly increase the number of registered nurses employed directly within care homes for adults.
- Investment is also needed to ensure sectoral pay bargaining for social care is meaningful. Nursing staff working in social care should have comparable pay, terms and conditions to those working in the NHS, and achieving this parity is vital for addressing the recruitment and retention challenges in the sector.

5. **Enter Agenda for Change (AfC) pay negotiations without delay, deliver a significant and above inflation cost of living pay increase and introduce automatic progression from band 5 to band 6 for nurses**

The issue: Nursing pay has failed to keep up with the rising cost of living and feeling undervalued is a key reason for nurses deciding to leave the profession.

Nursing roles have grown and changed significantly since the introduction of AfC. Nurses now routinely deliver complex multi-condition care to an ageing population, lead clinical decision making in high-risk, time critical situations, manage patients with co-morbidities, frailty and mental health needs and coordinate multidisciplinary care. Despite this, nursing remains a predominantly Band 5 profession, in contrast to other healthcare professionals. NHS Scotland also faces alarming attrition among early-career nurses.

While band 5 is the point at which registered nurses join AfC upon qualification, the RCN's position is that nursing is a band 6 profession. This has been proved by the current review of band 5 nursing roles, under which all band 5 nurses can apply to have their role evaluated. Of the applications that have been assessed to date, 93% have been successfully rebanded to band 6. This proves the case for the establishment of a formal pathway for progression for band 5 nurses.

We therefore very much welcome the SNP manifesto commitment to improve pathways to progression from band 5 to band 6 for nurses.

RCN asks:

- AfC pay negotiations should begin quickly and be concluded in time for the increase to be paid in April 2027. Along with other trade unions, we are calling for an above inflation increase, backed by an inflation guarantee. With the Scottish government proposing radical reform of the NHS, we are also calling for AfC pay scales to be modernised, in line with the proposals agreed in 2024.
- We are calling for a negotiated solution to implement automatic progression from band 5 to band 6 following a period of consolidated learning/preceptorship. Clearing the significant backlog from the current review, by rebanding all applicants, would also be far more efficient than continuing with the current approach which is very resource intensive for health boards. This would ensure nursing is recognised for its clinical expertise, management of clinical risk and leadership of care and align nursing with other graduate healthcare professions.
- Whilst pay is only one element of the complex web which runs through the recruitment and retention crisis, we strongly believe that providing career progression, and parity with other healthcare professions (such as midwifery and paramedics), will attract more people into the nursing profession and retain experienced staff.
- More widely, nursing staff should receive fair pay no matter where they work. There continues to be an issue with some general practice employers failing to pass on pay increases that are funded by Scottish government. Our view is that the Scottish General Medical Services contract should include a mechanism to ensure that funding allocations for primary care staff pay are delivered to those staff as intended.

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