

RCN Scotland briefing – Scottish Government Debate on the Covid Strategic Framework Update

The Scottish government's *Covid Strategic Framework Update* seeks to outline how we can move towards living with covid, while also remobilising services. Neither of these aims will be possible without solutions for the current workforce crisis in our NHS and social care. Staff absences due to Covid are rising again, we are hearing concerning reports of sickness absences rising due to the pressures of the past two years and services are also struggling with record high levels of nursing vacancies.

The workforce crisis not only hinders our ability to move towards a period of being able to manage Covid-19, it means we continue to be at high risk of new variants or future pandemics requiring restrictions having to be reimposed in order to protect services.

Staff absences

- Covid cases are at record high levels and hospitalisations numbers are rising too. The Scottish Government's current assessment appears to be that while cases are high, it is reassuring that intensive care admissions and deaths from Covid remain low. We hope that this remains cause for continued optimism, but high case numbers in the community and in hospital mean that staff absences are once again putting significant pressure on services.
- For the week ending 8th March, NHS nursing and midwifery absences due to COVID have increased to 2111 compared with 1853 the previous week. This is the highest level for the last 7 weeks. As at 8th March, 1,476 staff in adult care homes (including adult and older people care homes) were reported as absent due to COVID-19, based on returns received from 67% adult care homes. Staff absent due to COVID-19 represents 4.1% of all adult care home staff, an increase from 3.3% the previous week.
- Many health and social care staff received their booster several months ago, meaning immunity amongst frontline staff is likely to be waning and there is a risk of further rises in staff absences.
- RCN Scotland members, like all health and care staff across the country, are exhausted. Many are experiencing the toll of months of unrelenting pressure through mental and physical ill health and burnout. We are hearing the worrying suggestion that sickness absences due to stress are rising, particularly in social care.

Need for enhanced PPE

- In order to reduce infections at work, the RCN has been calling for stronger PPE for front line staff and robust risk assessments.
- Current guidance across the UK is that FFP3 masks are only needed for when carrying out aerosol generating procedures and that beyond that risk assessments should be offered to staff who have concerns.

- Given the known transmissibility of Omicron and the record high level of cases, RCN Scotland is calling for FFP3 to be default in any care of covid or suspected covid patients.
- We are also concerned that risk assessments are not being offered to staff and that awareness of the importance of carrying out risk assessments amongst staff and employers is low.

Staff vacancies

- On top of rising staff absences, services in the NHS and social care are being delivered with significant nursing vacancies.
- In the NHS, nearly 1 in 10 (9.3%) of nursing and midwifery posts are lying vacant, including more than 4,500 Registered Nurse vacancies.
- Figures from Scottish members who responded to our Employment Survey also show that 6 in 10 nursing staff in Scotland are thinking of leaving their roles. If only a small fraction of these staff leave, this will put even greater pressure on services and put recovery at risk.

Workforce

- In the context of vacancies and absences, RCN Scotland is also disappointed by the lack of consideration on workforce in the Strategic Framework Update.
- For example, there remains insufficient consideration about the workforce required for vaccinations. Given the expansion of the vaccination programme to 5 to 11 year olds, the booster programme for over 75s and care home residents and the likelihood of further boosters needed for the wider population, there is a real need to ensure we have a long term, sustainable workforce plan for the vaccination programme.
- To date, this programme has been a huge success, but it has only been possible by the redeployment of significant numbers of staff who are now needed for remobilising services.
- Similarly, from the end of the month, patients with Covid-19 symptoms are being asked to contact their GP. Again there is insufficient consideration in the Strategic Framework Update around the workforce implications within primary care of this, particularly as we are now entering a phase of record high levels of covid cases in the community.
- The Scottish government's workforce strategy recognises the importance of getting the workforce right across health and social care services but their commitment to one per cent growth per year is inadequate and the document provides little insight into where the required registered nurses and nursing support workers will come from.

Treatment

- Improved treatments for covid are rightly identified and welcomed by the Framework Update. However, improved treatments are still dependent on a suitably trained workforce. Workforce pressures, both in acute services and in primary care run the risk of undermining the effectiveness of improved treatments.

Testing

- Working with some of the most vulnerable people, health and social care staff must continue to have access to free LFD testing and supported to self-isolate when positive to keep their patients and colleagues safe. It would also be counterproductive to pass the buck to nursing staff and employers to decide whether to go to work with Covid. With staffing levels so challenging, employees will inevitably feel obliged or pressurised to come to work in the absence of clear rules saying they should stay at home.

Support for staff off work with Covid.

- NHS Scotland require to ensure that there is adequate ongoing support for staff with long covid, this includes enhanced Occupational health provision going forward.
- NHS staff absent from work with long Covid are currently receiving full pay and allowances. RCN Scotland believes that these arrangements should remain in place for as long as possible on the basis that many of these staff are likely to have developed covid at work.
- If normal sickness absence processes were to be phased in, staff should have access to the NHS injury benefit scheme, which is a non-liability scheme and as such should be accepted by employers.

Care homes

- Care homes were at the centre of this pandemic and a clear recovery strategy is needed to protect residents and staff. The role of the registered nurse staff in Scotland's care homes is critical in responding to increasing clinical complexities of residents.
- As testing is extended, care home staff who are required to self-isolate or shield should be paid as if at work in the same way that NHS staff are. There remains inconsistency in the sector around terms and conditions.

Further information

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 third sectors. RCN Scotland promotes patient and nursing interests by campaigning on issues that affect members, shaping national health policies, representing members on practice and employment issues and development opportunities. With over 40,000 members in Scotland, the RCN is the voice of nursing.

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