

RCN BRIEFING: Queen's Speech debate, Health and Social Care

The NHS, nursing and social care was top of mind for voters this election, and in the Queens Speech in 2019, the Government's commitment to these issues were reiterated.

This year, the World Health Organisation celebrates the 200th anniversary of Florence Nightingale's birth with the first ever *Year of the Nurse and Midwife*. While the world focusses on the nursing profession, it is a crucial opportunity for the UK to be a leader in how we fully fund, resource, value and support the nursing staff we all rely on.

In order to build a health and care service fit for the future, the first 100 days of the new UK Government and Parliament is critical. Our members urge decision makers to focus on:

- **Addressing the workforce shortages:** publish a framework for roles and responsibilities for workforce planning and supply in the forthcoming NHS Long Term Plan Bill.
- **Investing in health and care services:** restore the public health grant and find a long-term solution for social care in England.
- **Investing in nursing education and professional development:** ensure that maintenance grants announced cover students' actual living costs and extend this financial support to cover tuition fees.
- **Introducing a fair immigration system:** on that is fit for purpose and easy to navigate, where nursing skill is prioritised over salary and nursing staff are exempt from the Immigration Health Surcharge
- **Improving working conditions and pay:** meaningful pay rises for all nursing staff working across the system – the NHS and NHS commissioned and funded care – is critical.

Addressing the workforce shortages: Staffing for Safe and Effective Care in England

For our members, the pressures they face and witness across health and care are striking and campaigning for safe and effective care is their top priority across the UK.

There are nearly 44,000 empty nursing posts in the NHS in England alone. RCN research has shown that throughout 2019, for every extra NHS nurse employed there was an extra 217 admissions¹. There are more patients than ever before, and people are living longer but with more complex conditions requiring bespoke care. The RCN staffing survey which garnered over 30,000 responses in 2017, more than half (53%) said care was compromised on their last shift and 44% said no action was taken when they raised concerns about staffing levels.

The current gap between patient demand and the staff needed to provide safe care has come about in part because of the ambiguity about who is responsible for policy and funding interventions for workforce planning and supply, at national level and throughout the health and care system in England.

In the Queens Speech, the NHS Long Term Plan Bill was announced which will set out changes to ways of working across the system which are needed in law to enable the NHS Long Term Plan to succeed.

We call for the NHS Long Term Plan Bill to set out explicit accountabilities for workforce supply and planning, for Government and decision makers in the health and care system. Each level of decision-making needs to have a clearly defined role, suitable for the level and complexity of their responsibilities.

In September 2019, NHS England and NHS Improvement agreed there is a need for action and recommended that the UK Government review "whether national responsibilities and duties in relation to workforce functions are sufficiently clear". The public also agree that this issue needs clarifying, and when polled, 80% of respondents in England agreed with the statement that "the Government should have a legal responsibility to ensure there are enough nursing staff to meet

¹ Royal College of Nursing modelling based on NHS Hospital & Community Health Service (HCHS) monthly workforce statistics, NHS Digital, and NHS Digital data as quoted in House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, Number 7281 31 May 2019. NHS Key Statistics: England, May 2019 and NHS Digital data on cancelled operations <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/cancelledelective-operations/cancelled-ops-data/>

the country's needs"². Further polling conducted by Policy Exchange highlighted that the public view the Government as accountable for the NHS³. It is vital the forthcoming Bill creates the framework necessary to ensure the supply of staff we need to give patients safe and effective care.

Legislation to address the accountability gap is an opportunity to take sustainable action – supported by other Royal Colleges and health organisations - to begin to fix the workforce crisis and to be able to future-proof decisions and control on workforce supply. Achieving accountability in law will leave a legacy, closing the door on boom and bust approaches of the past.

Building a health and care service fit for the future

Alongside law, nursing needs wider investment and to be supported by an immigration system which promotes diversity and the cross-continent sharing of knowledge and skills which makes our health service world class. Benefits announced in the Queen's Speech including car parking reductions for some staff, and fast-tracked NHS Visas will help, but these steps must be taken as part of a fully planned, and costed recruitment, retention, and remuneration workforce strategy for the whole health and social care system.

The NHS People Plan

The forthcoming NHS People Plan must include a system-wide workforce strategy with meaningful short- and long-term interventions and associated costings. Its recommendations must be met with the funding needed to ensure their success. Following the December 2019 investment for nursing bursaries – maintenance grants only – the UK Government must also look to extend the financial support needed for tuition fee costs in the next Budget. This is a vital step in order to attract more people to study nursing as we know that debt levels are a disincentive to prospective students, especially mature students who already have an undergraduate degree in another subject. By doing this will the Government be able to remove as many financial barriers as possible to people choosing a career in nursing.

The future immigration system

We are anticipating the Migration Advisory Committee response to their consultation on the points-based immigration system. We are clear that a future immigration system must be easy to navigate and remove unnecessary barriers to overseas recruitment for the NHS and social care sector. Our members must be exempt from the Immigration Health Surcharge – a fee set to increase to more than £600 per family member, per year of the nurses' working visa – which is unjustified and can add up to thousands of pounds for a nurse bringing skills to the UK. Overseas nursing staff already contribute to the health service through their taxes. Any plans to extend or raise the fee for any members of the nursing community is unjust and an exemption must be granted.

Funding for devolved nations

Across the devolved nations, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund – a grant from the EU – is important for the delivery and funding of their health and care services. We will be responding to the White Paper on this matter and ensuring that Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are not detrimentally impacted by the removal of this crucial funding following our departure from the European Union.

There are many moving parts contributing to the unprecedented pressures the NHS and social care system has found itself facing and this year will be crucial for the future of our health and care services across the UK. It is testament to the current staff working above and beyond, 365 days a year, that the health and care system continues to survive. However, a fully funded, fully staffed NHS, social care, and public health system would enable transformation and innovation to thrive, benefit the health of our diverse population, as well as contribute more widely to society and the economy.

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² YouGov findings [September 2019], Commissioned by the Royal College of Nursing. YouGov/Royal College of Nursing Survey Results: All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1,692 UK adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 6th - 8th September 2019. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

³ Polling commissioned for Policy Exchange [December 2019]. Full results available here. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/the-peoples-nhs/>