Royal College of Nursing

RCN MP Briefing:

Future of Nursing Lobby

England's nursing shortage is affecting patient care

Government has set out ambitious plans for the health and care system, but none of these ambitions can be delivered without the nursing workforce. Investing in students and nursing education will build a strong future for the NHS and social care.

Low registered nurse staffing levels are associated with higher mortality, missed care, complications and longer hospital stays.[i] Analysis of 185 adult acute units in England shows that eliminating nurse understaffing could have prevented 1 in 5 hospital deaths.[ii] In a 2026 survey of over 13,000 nurses nearly half of nursing staff reported insufficient staffing levels on their last shift.[iii]

If nursing numbers had grown at the same rate as doctors since 2009, England would have more than 77,000 additional nurses today.[iv] When there are enough nurses, patients are safer.

Addressing the nursing shortage is essential to improving patient safety, reducing pressure on services and delivering the Government's ambitions for health and care.

The future nursing workforce is under strain

England's ability to train and retain the next generation of nurses is under increasing pressure. Funding for nursing courses has been reduced, universities are reviewing or closing provision and nurse educator capacity is making training provision difficult to sustain. At the same time, nursing students face significant financial hardship, with support failing to keep pace as the cost of living has increased. Many students are balancing demanding clinical placements alongside paid work simply to cover basic living costs.

For those who do enter the profession, access to protected development time and high-quality preceptorship remains inconsistent.

England cannot address its nursing shortage without action to support the next generation of nurses. Yet there is currently no clear programme of reform, investment or workforce planning capable of reversing the challenges facing nursing students and nursing education.

Hear directly from students in their open letter here:

The route into nursing is under threat

Newly registered nurses are finding it increasingly difficult to secure their first registered nursing role, despite ongoing workforce pressures. The RCN has seen hundreds of examples of nursing vacancies that, while at NHS band 5 (which should be entry level), require experience which prevents newly registered nurses from applying.

National and local workforce plans must ensure that every nursing and midwifery graduate can enter an appropriate Band 5 (or equivalent) role. Investment in nursing education is undermined if newly registered nurses cannot secure suitable employment upon graduation.

The Government must implement oversight of how employers plan for and create Band 5 (or equivalent) vacancies based on the size of the current graduating cohort. Government should also commit to data collection and reporting on role availability and access.

Nursing should be a first-choice career

To make nursing a first-choice career and secure the future workforce, action is needed on nursing salaries, career progression and development opportunities. Early-career nurses should be able to progress more quickly, with a clear pathway from preceptorship into more senior roles.

On lower salaries, nursing graduates are more negatively impacted by the student loan model, paying back more, for longer. When the repayment threshold is frozen from April 2027, this will hugely increase the financial burden on nursing graduates.

It is time to introduce a loan forgiveness model for nursing staff. If this policy were implemented for ten consecutive cohorts starting with 2025-26, estimates show there would be an additional 12,015 nurses working in the NHS by the time the tenth cohort entered the workforce in 2037-38. This represents 42% of current nurse vacancies in the NHS in England and would provide a societal benefit of £1.07bn per cohort.[v]

Taken together, stronger financial support for students, protection of nursing education, guaranteed access to first jobs and better support for early-career nurses would strengthen the entire nursing pipeline and help secure the workforce that patients need.

Nursing is an economic driver of growth

Nurses are a fundamental lever for economic growth. A healthier population is more productive, more economically active and less reliant on public services.

Safe nurse staffing can build health and care capacity and generate savings through higher-quality care, fewer adverse outcomes and more efficient use of NHS resources.

Investing in nursing should therefore be seen not simply as a cost to the Exchequer, but as an investment in economic growth, public service productivity and healthier communities.

The Government must:

Support nursing students

- Provide additional financial support for nursing students, including at least £5,000 a year in additional non-repayable support.
- Introduce a student loan forgiveness model for nursing which recognises length of service working in health and social care. with 30% be forgiven after three years' service, 70% after seven years and 100% after ten years.

Protect nursing education

- Restore funding for nursing education and protect course capacity, including reversing reductions to the Strategic Priorities Grant and developing a funded nurse educator workforce strategy.

Guarantee routes into employment

- Ensure job availability for nursing graduates ensuring that suitable entry level Band 5 or equivalent jobs are available to newly registered nurses.
- Commit to regular data collection and reporting on role availability and access.
- Provide relocation packages to broaden access to early career opportunities and help to address geographic imbalances in workforce supply.

Support early career nurses

- Guarantee high-quality support for newly registered nurses, including protected preceptorship and structured career development.
- Raise the floor on career progression with nurses progressing automatically to Band 6 following successful completion of preceptorship, in line with comparable professions such as midwives and paramedics.

What MPs can do

- **Meet nursing students** and nursing staff in your constituency to understand the impact of workforce shortages and pressures on the profession.
- **Write to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care** calling for urgent measures to address the challenges facing nursing students and newly registered nurses.
- **Raise the challenges facing nursing students and newly registered nurses** through Parliamentary Questions, debates and correspondence with Ministers.
- **Raise the issue of jobs for newly registered nurses** with NHS and health and social care employers in your constituency.

If you would like any further information, please contact the RCN Public Affairs team at **publicaffairs@rcn.org.uk**

[i] See, for example Kane RL, Shamliyan TA, Mueller C, Duval S and Wilt TJ (2007) The association of registered nurse staffing levels and patient outcomes: systematic review and meta-analysis, *Medical Care*, 45(12), pp.1195-1204; Griffiths P, Recio Saucedo A, Dall'Ora C, Briggs J, Maruotti A, Meredith P, Smith GB, Ball J and Missed Care Study Group (2018) The association between nurse staffing and omissions in nursing care: A systematic review, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 74(7), pp.1474-1487.

[ii] Saville C, Jones J, Meredith P, Dall'Ora C and Griffiths P (2025) Cost-effectiveness of eliminating hospital understaffing by nursing staff: a retrospective longitudinal study and economic evaluation, *BMJ Quality & Safety*, Dec 15;35(1):8-17. Available at: **doi: 10.1136/bmjqs-2024-018138**

[iii] RCN (2026) *Briefing: Initial findings from the Royal College of Nursing 2026 Last Shift Survey* available at: **rcn.org.uk/About-us/Our-Influencing-work/Policy-briefings/br-0426**

[iv] RCN (2026) *In Short Supply: Estimating the Shortfall of Registered Nurses in the NHS in England* available at: **rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-in-short-supply-uk-pub-012-701**

[v] London Economics (2026) London Economics modelling obtained by the RCN.

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