

The UK's future immigration system

MEMBER BRIEFING



What's the issue?

Currently, nursing staff from the EU are free to come and live and work in the UK and their qualifications are recognised through an EU directive. However, when freedom of movement is ended post-Brexit, this will no longer be the case.

Though the post-Brexit immigration system is yet to be determined, Government's recent immigration white paper sets out immigration proposals to be applied to EU citizens and 'third country nationals.' This system proposes controls on the number of workers entering the UK through minimum skills and salary levels of £30,000.

Most nurses' and social care workers' average salaries do not meet the £30,000 threshold. We are concerned that the salary threshold could have a prohibitive impact on the supply of the international health and social care workforce if nurses and social care workers are not exempt.

Why is this important?

There are currently too few nurses and social care staff in the UK for the provision of staffing for safe and effective care.

International recruitment from the EU has played a vital role in maintaining UK nursing and social care numbers for many years. However, since the referendum in 2016:

- 90% fewer EU nurses and midwives are joining the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) register than in previous years
- more than 10,000 established EU nurses have left the UK altogether
- in May 2019, the NMC revealed that 51% of EU-trained nurses cited worries about Brexit as a key contributing factor for leaving the profession^{1,2}.

Therefore a collapse of the EU workforce presents a huge challenge for the sustainability of our health and social care services.

What needs to happen?

We are clear that the future immigration system should reflect the importance of our international nursing and care workforce and must make the UK an attractive place for nursing and social care staff to come and work. Importantly, the system:

- should not undermine the UK's commitment to recruit health and care professionals from overseas in an ethical and transparent manner and must complement investment in educating and training our domestic nursing workforce
- should focus on skills and the health and social care workforce that is genuinely needed in each of the four countries of the UK
- should be easy to understand and navigate, transparent, predictable, accessible, and affordable for nurses, health professionals and individuals.

- salary should not be the only determinant of skill or need for overseas recruitment. There should be a shift from using salary as the key measure of value/need in prioritising visas and for allowing working migrants to remain indefinitely in the UK
- Tier 2 visas must not impact on health and care services' ability to recruit overseas staff, especially in the short to medium term. The immigration health surcharge should be scrapped.

Importantly, whilst we recognise the vital role that the international workforce plays in our health care system, we are clear that international recruitment cannot be treated as a substitute for the growth of our domestic workforce. Overreliance on international recruitment is unsustainable: the future immigration system must therefore complement investment from UK governments to bolster the domestic nursing workforce.

The Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) have launched a public consultation seeking views on the Government's proposed future immigration system. In particular, this considers the salary threshold and possible 'Australian-style' points based system. We responded to this consultation which closed 5 November 2019³.

We took a neutral position during the referendum campaign and the subsequent vote on the UK's future membership of the UK. This followed consultation with our membership, who remain split on the leave/remain issue. At our 2018 annual Congress,

our membership voted for the RCN to campaign for a People's Vote on the final Brexit deal. This remains our position.

Following the 2016 referendum, we highlighted 5 key priorities to ensure that Brexit did not impact negatively on health and care services and patients in the UK. These priorities can be found online at our website⁴.

What is the RCN calling for?

We are lobbying the UK Government and Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, the Scottish Parliament and stakeholders in Northern Ireland to shape and influence the future immigration system.

As a member of the Cavendish Coalition – a group of 36 health organisations, we are working to ensure that the future immigration system is fit for purpose and continues to enable the health system to recruit the overseas staff needed to fill domestic gaps, especially in the short term.

The Cavendish Coalition has repeatedly highlighted the workforce shortages in these sectors. It also advocates the need to widen the skills level to be covered by the UK's visa system post Brexit, given the current reliance of the social care sector on EU staff.

What can RCN members do?

As an RCN member, you can:

- Support overseas nursing staff in their place of work and encourage them to join the RCN so that they have as much support as they need.
- Promote awareness of the EU settlement scheme and signpost EU nursing staff to advice and support for seeking EU pre-settled or settled status.
- Become an e-campaigner so that you can participate in our campaigns and influencing work www.rcn.org.uk/join-the-rcn/become-an-e-campaigner

Share your experience about these issues

Email us at: papa.ukintl.dept@rcn.org.uk

References

1 RCN, Brexit: Royal College of Nursing priorities overview, <https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-007898>

2 Nursing and Midwifery Council Registrant Data.

3 RCN, Consultation response: Salary Threshold and Points-Based System (PBS) commission <https://www.rcn.org.uk/about-us/policy-briefings/conr-8819>

4 RCN, Brexit: Royal College of Nursing priorities overview, <https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-007898>

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