

PROTECT THE FUTURE OF NURSING

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Scottish Government debate: Programme for Government

The Scottish Government is proposing significant changes to the way in which health and care services are delivered in Scotland at a time when services are seeking to recover and remobilise after the Covid-19 pandemic.

For any health and social care reforms announced in the Programme for Government to be effective, the Scottish Government must first deliver a sustainable plan to address workforce pressures. This requires the implementation of the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act 2019 and delivery of fair pay for nursing staff working in all settings.

Nursing staff have been at the forefront of tackling the COVID-19 pandemic and the past 17 months have highlighted the unique value of nursing as a safety critical profession like never before. RCN Scotland members are telling us that the pressure they are under at the moment is unprecedented. As we head in to what will be an incredibly challenging winter period, it is of concern that staffing levels are already reaching crisis point in both health and care services.

RCN Members' Experience

The pandemic has greatly increased the level of pressure on a nursing workforce already at risk of stress and burnout and over 50% of respondents to a [2020 RCN survey](#) said they were worried about their mental health. With over 3,100 NHS Scotland nursing and midwifery vacancies rates and 40% of care home services for older people reporting nursing vacancies, recruitment and retention of nursing staff must be a priority if plans for remobilisation are to be achieved.

RCN members tell us that staff are exhausted and worn down after the challenges of the last year. We are receiving increasingly concerning reports from members about wards, including acute and high dependency wards being staffed by only one registered nurse, staff having to take on back-to-back shifts and a significant rise in numbers off work due to stress and other mental health concerns.

Some of the typical experiences of RCN Scotland members are copied in an Appendix to this briefing. They highlight why urgent action is needed now to address staffing pressures.

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Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act 2019

As a matter of priority and before major new legislation is enacted, the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act 2019 must be implemented. This important piece of legislation, passed unanimously by the previous Parliament, must not be left to gather dust.

It is regrettable that the 2019 Act was not in force during the pandemic. The Act requires health and care providers to take steps to ensure staffing levels are sufficient to provide safe and high-quality care and introduces new mechanisms to allow staff and patients to raise concerns about staffing levels. Safe and effective staffing is an important element of remobilising the NHS safely, and additionally ensuring that Scotland's care homes can safely deliver care to residents with increasingly complex health needs.

RCN Scotland continues to call for implementation of Scotland's safe staffing legislation by the end of 2021. Proposals in this Programme for Government must not delay the implementation of legislation already passed by the Scottish Parliament.

NHS Remobilisation and Fair Pay

Recent cancellations of elective procedures in a number of Health Boards are a direct result of workforce pressures. Scotland needs a sustainable plan to address these backlogs and carry out the necessary restoration work, as well as to deliver care to individuals with long term clinical and rehabilitation needs as a result of the virus.

To date, the Scottish Government's workforce planning has been woefully poor. The NHS Recovery Plan does not provide the detail needed to ensure Scotland has the nursing workforce it needs to address backlogs in the NHS and deliver care to individuals with long term clinical and rehabilitation needs caused by COVID-19.

As well as implementation of the safe staffing legislation, fair pay for nursing is needed to address these workforce pressures. In Scotland 38% of [RCN Scotland members report](#) that they are thinking of leaving the nursing profession. When we asked nursing staff what would make them feel more valued, 73% of respondents said: "improved pay".

RCN Scotland members have strongly rejected the Scottish Government's pay offer for 2021/22 for Agenda for Change staff because they feel it does not go far enough to ensure Scotland can retain and recruit the nursing workforce it needs. In June 2020 RCN Scotland formally entered in to a trade dispute with the Scottish Government over this offer. To date, this dispute remains unresolved.

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National Care Service Legislation

The proposals from the Scottish Government around the National Care Service represent the most significant reforms to both community health and social care for decades and will have a significant impact beyond these services, including on the wider NHS.

Those accessing social care services have increasingly complex clinical needs and it is therefore imperative that system reform takes the nursing contribution in social care into account. The proposal to bring community health services into a National Care Service will need to be sufficiently thought through and sufficiently resourced.

RCN Scotland is clear that the opportunity must be taken to improve terms and conditions for nursing staff working in adult social care in order to improve recruitment and retention. We welcome the recognition that better workforce planning is needed but it is only by ensuring that we have sufficient numbers of nursing staff entering the workforce that this we will be able to achieve sustainable staffing levels.

There is also a need to develop clearer proposals about the relationship between the NHS and the National Care Service, this must include clarity about what mental health services the National Care Service should be responsible for and how this will improve patient outcomes.

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 voluntary sectors. RCN Scotland promotes patient and nursing interests by campaigning on issues that affect our members, shaping national health policies, representing members on practice and employment issues and providing members with learning and development opportunities. With over 40,000 members in Scotland, we are the voice of nursing.

If you would like any further information please contact Ross Sanderson, Senior Public Affairs Officer, via ross.sanderson@rcn.org.uk or 0131 662 6197.

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Appendix – Case Studies

RCN Scotland has a data collection methodology (called Sensemaker) that captures the lived experiences of nurses and Health Care Support Workers across Health & Social Care. Some of the experiences being shared from July and August are highlighted below. The clear message from our members is that across Scotland and across health and social care, staff are under significant pressure.

- A nurse working in an adult acute ward said: “Being instructed by senior staff not to put in Datix [the system used by staff to report risks] to report unsafe staffing levels... quote ‘they are not unsafe, they are just uncomfortable’”
- A public health nurse described a “stressful week knowing that I am unable to support my patients the way I should and want to because we are working at 50-58% staffing.”
- A community nurse working in a rural community hospital said: “I do not provide the standard of nursing I did when I qualified and this frustrates me” before saying “I am at the point of leaving nursing after being in it for 30 years.” The title of their contribution was “I am done with nursing.”
- A registered nurse in an acute hospital outlines “the worst staffing levels I have seen in 31 years of my career” before going on to say “Two experienced nurses with long service behind them who work in the same ward are leaving this month...I can see more nurses leaving to do other things, who would never have considered it before as they do genuinely love their jobs, but the stress and pressure are now just too much.”
- A nurse working in an adult acute ward entitled their contribution “Short staffing getting worse rather than better” and said “Staffing just isn't sufficient to give the kind of care I want to give and used to be able to.”
- A nurse in acute ward described “Dangerous staffing levels that compromise patient care. Guilt that some other ward is worse off and it's rude to complain.”

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