

BREXIT: RCN PRIORITY

European nurses in the UK

What are the issues?

Nurses and midwives from the European Union (EU) form a critical part of the UK's workforce. Between September 2014 and September 2016 the number of EU registrants on the Nursing & Midwifery Council (NMC) register grew by 65% from 23,673 to over 38,992¹. Nurses must register with the NMC in order to practise in the UK.

By contrast, numbers of UK-trained nurses have declined. In 2014 there were 589,773 UK-trained nurses on the register. By 2018 this had fallen to 589,253².

Since the 2016 Brexit vote far fewer EU nurses and midwives are joining the NMC register. The latest statistics from the NMC shows that since 2016 there was a 91% fall in new EU registrations to the NMC.

Even more alarming is the growing numbers of established EU nurses leaving the UK altogether. In the two years since the referendum, over 7,000 established EU nurses have left the register, compared to just over 4,000 who left in the three years preceding the referendum.

What does this mean?

International recruitment from the EU has played a vital role in keeping UK nursing numbers steady for many years. In 2013 EU nationals comprised 2.4% of the NMC's register. As of September 2018 they account for nearly 5%.

A collapse of the EU workforce presents a huge challenge for the sustainability of the UK's health and social care sector. This is not just about numbers, it is also about

demographics. The age-profile of UK respondents to the latest NMC survey showed that only 8.2% were aged between 21 and 40. By contrast, 77.6% of those from the EU were in this younger age group³. We need this younger group of nurses to stay if the service is to remain stable.

The UK Government's decision to cut investment in domestic nursing workforce in England has made England increasingly dependent on EU recruitment. The decision to abolish the English student bursary for example and restrictions on nurse education funding between 2010 and 2018 have made domestic recruitment more and more difficult, leaving employers increasingly dependent on the EU supply⁴.

In addition, continuing workforce shortages in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has meant that the reliance on EU nurses is UK-wide. In Northern Ireland for example, many Irish nurses travel across the border daily to provide vital services and this needs to continue, because without them, patient care would be at risk.

Brexit Scorecard

The RCN has rated progress on its five priorities by RED, AMBER and GREEN.

Red indicates that there has been no firm commitment made by the UK Government on this issue and how to resolve it.

Amber indicates some UK Government commitment or statement but no agreement on practical application with the EU.

Green indicates a firm commitment from the UK Government and the EU including on practical implementation.

1 NMC, 'The NMC Register 2018', available at: <https://www.nmc.org.uk/globalassets/sitedocuments/other-publications/the-nmc-register-2018.pdf> Published 2018

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 RCN, *Scrap the cap*. Available at: <https://www.rcn.org.uk/nursingcounts/scrap-the-cap>, published 2017



AMBER WARNING

The RCN does not have absolute clarity on the critical issue of nurses' right to remain. While the announcement of a 'settled status' route for EU nationals wanting to stay in the UK is welcome,

there remain serious concerns about how this system will work and its cost. We remain concerned that the cost of £65 for an application is high, and we are not convinced that the Home Office is adequately resourced to process a sudden wave of applications.

Nurses from the EU not only care for their patients, they are active members of their local communities, paying taxes and are subject to all of the same regulatory requirements as other nurses. We need them to stay to support our domestic workforce, given the shortage, and they deserve assurance of their rights, and that they are valued.

What needs to happen?

The UK Government must keep its commitment that the settled status scheme will be honoured even in the event of a no-deal Brexit. In June 2018 the Home Office announced its settled status scheme for EU nationals looking to remain in the UK after Brexit. We welcomed this announcement despite its lateness. However, this programme is predicated on there being a deal agreed between the UK and the EU with a transition period beginning in March 2019. This is when settled status will formally begin. We have repeatedly called on the Home Office to guarantee that this scheme will be honoured even in the event of a no-deal Brexit. In November we finally received this assurance but we feel this has also been very late in coming.

The UK needs a clear, well-funded plan to grow its domestic workforce. This needs to happen both at UK and devolved Government level and focus on creating a workforce which is fairly remunerated, safely staffed and highly educated in order to meet future patient need.

As the RCN we are:

Working constructively with the UK Government and Parliament, the Welsh Government and National Assembly for Wales, the Scottish Government and Parliament and stakeholders in Northern Ireland to shape and influence this issue, so that our members working across the devolved countries are heard.

Collaborating with other organisations in the sector to lobby the UK Government to guarantee the rights of EU nurses and midwives in the UK to remain, and to develop a clear domestic workforce strategy⁵.

Showcasing the positive contribution which EU nurses and midwives make to the UK's health and care system. Please do take a look and add your story: <https://www.rcn.org.uk/employment-and-pay/nursing-staff-from-the-european-union/share-your-story>

How can you help?

Support EU nurses in their place of work and encourage them to join the RCN so that they have as much support as they need.

Lobby your locally elected MP to retain the UK's valued EU nursing workforce. This is the most effective way of holding the UK Government to account. You can contact the RCN to receive one of our 'How to lobby' toolkits, and you can speak to your country/regional office for support. You can find details of who your local MP is here: <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/contact-your-mp/>

Want to provide feedback on this position? Email us at: papa.ukintl.dept@rcn.org.uk

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⁵ NHS Employers, *The Cavendish Coalition*. Published July 2016