

LISTEN TO THE VOICE OF NURSING



Royal College
of Nursing
Northern Ireland

2022 Manifesto

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Foreword

Northern Ireland enters this Assembly election in the midst of yet another political crisis. More than ever, we need strong, committed and accountable political leadership for our health and social care services. However, the collapse of the Executive in February means that, once again, this over-riding priority is not being given the full attention it deserves by those who have been elected to serve the people of Northern Ireland. This is unforgiveable. No political priority is more important than ensuring that we are able to meet the health and social care needs of our citizens and our communities.

This election, therefore, gives the people of Northern Ireland the chance to send a clear message to politicians about the importance of focusing on health and social care. As the largest workforce group within this system, nursing has a leading role to play in rebuilding services and targeting the deep health inequalities that exist here. In order to enable nurses to fulfil this role, politicians and policy-makers must stop viewing nursing as a cost to be controlled and reduced and must, instead, see it as an asset to be valued and supported. This manifesto sets out some important ways in which this can be done.

The crisis in our health and social care system has many underlying causes but is rooted more than anything in the fact that there are not enough nurses and other health care staff to provide the right level of care for the people of Northern Ireland. Building an effective nursing workforce is not something that will happen by chance. It requires planning, monitoring and delivery, and sustainable funding. Above all, it needs strong and accountable political leadership.

The greatest challenge for the next Assembly and Executive is to deliver a nursing workforce capable of meeting the health needs of the people of Northern Ireland. If we don't act now, the consequences will be unimaginable.

To our members, we implore you to use your voice in this election. Nurses' votes will be crucial in determining the outcome, so please make sure that you have your say. To our politicians, we ask you to reflect on the issues set out in this manifesto, listen to the voice of nursing, and make sure that you deliver for nursing staff and the people of Northern Ireland. In that way, we can all work together to build a health and social care service of which we - and the people we are all here to serve - can be proud.



Fiona Devlin
RCN Northern Ireland
Board Chair



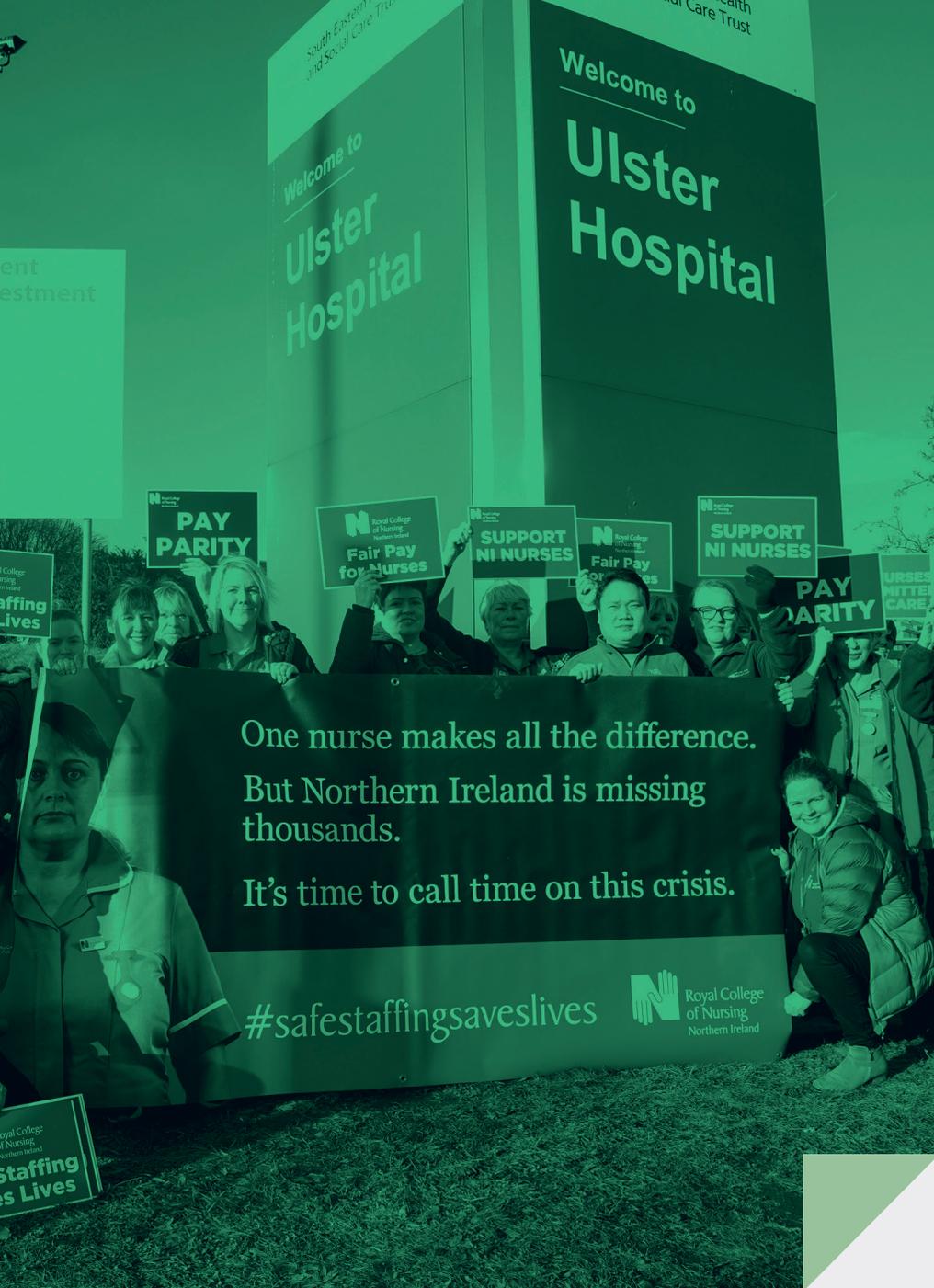
Rita Devlin
Director, RCN
Northern Ireland

Staffing for safe and effective care

There are, quite simply, not enough nurses to provide the care that the people of Northern Ireland require and that they should be able to expect. Nursing shortages affect our hospitals, community health services and nursing homes. They are one of the main reasons why Northern Ireland has such completely unacceptable waiting lists and other poor health outcomes. This viewpoint is shared by medical organisations, such as the Royal College of Surgeons in its recent ten step plan to rebuild services.

Official figures state that there are almost 2,700 vacant nursing posts in our Health and Social Care service, with around one in 10 nursing posts unfilled. This only tells part of the story. Many more posts are not being recruited to, or sit vacant for other reasons such as ill health and redeployment. There are also too many unfilled posts in our nursing homes.





Research shows that there is a direct link between staff having the time to care and positive patient outcomes. Members of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) tell us again and again about the negative impact that poor staffing levels are having on patients and their own well-being. Long-term solutions to workforce shortages are needed to ensure that all health and care services have the right numbers of nursing staff with the right skills in the right place.

Some steps have already been taken to try to address the shortages of nursing staff in Northern Ireland. The number of student nurses has grown over the last two years and is set to increase again later this year. However, we also now

According to a recent
RCN survey,

35.4%

of Northern Ireland nurses say they are thinking of leaving, whilst one in five (20.5%) say they are planning to leave, the highest percentage across the four UK countries.

72.7%

of nursing staff in Northern Ireland say that they feel undervalued, whilst almost two-thirds (64.3%) say that they feel under too much pressure at work.



Expenditure on agency staff to fill gaps in the nursing and midwifery workforce has effectively doubled over the last two years from around £52 million in 2018-2019 to just over

£110m

in 2020-2021

need to focus on retaining nurses as well as trying to recruit more. A nursing workforce retention strategy has been initiated but its findings about why nurses are leaving makes grim reading. The strategy needs to be prioritised if we are to stop losing valuable nursing staff. The Department of Health has also started work on a new law to ensure safe staffing across the health and social care service but this has not so far been given the priority it should have received. Northern Ireland also needs a workforce plan that tells us how many nurses, and what types of nurses, we need to tackle health inequalities and meet the needs of patients in hospitals, communities and nursing homes over the next five years.

The RCN is calling for:

- ▶ a commitment to maintain and build upon the recent increases in the numbers of nursing students in line with the predicted health care needs of the people of Northern Ireland
- ▶ immediate implementation of a funded strategy to help retain nurses
- ▶ safe staffing legislation to be prioritised by the Assembly as soon as the election is over
- ▶ the urgent development of a comprehensive workforce plan for nursing that embraces all settings where nurses deliver patient care.

Valuing the nursing workforce

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the unique value of nursing staff. However, working under such sustained pressure is having a devastating impact on their physical and mental well-being. RCN members told us that they already felt undervalued before the pandemic. Worrying numbers are now considering leaving nursing.

All nurses deserve to be recognised for the skill and expertise they demonstrate every day and they must be fairly rewarded for the job they do. The RCN's *Fair Pay for Nursing* campaign is calling for a significant pay award in 2022-2023 to help address the fall in the value of nurses' pay over the last decade and to retain the nursing staff that we desperately need here in Northern Ireland. Looking to the longer term, it is vital that the unique contribution of all nursing staff, whatever their grade or place of work, is recognised and reflected in future conversations about pay, terms and conditions.

Excessive workloads, high stress levels, a blame culture, bullying, and violence and aggression towards nurses are all problems that existed before the pandemic. However, reports from RCN members indicate that these concerns have grown over the last two years. Employers have a duty to provide and promote a safe working environment. This means that nurses need to be confident that doing the right thing - reporting incidents, raising concerns, being open about challenges - are all welcomed and encouraged.



75.7%

of nurses in Northern Ireland have gone to work over the last twelve months despite feeling that they should have taken sick leave.

Nurses need to know that their employer will focus on learning and improving, not individual blame. The consequences of failing to ensure nurses' safety and well-being are profound - for individual nurses themselves, their employing organisations, and the people and communities they serve. Ensuring a healthy and vibrant nursing workforce is essential for delivering high quality patient care.

Above all, we need to listen to nurses when it comes to rebuilding and modernising our health and social care services. Nursing staff know what works and what doesn't but, all too often, their views are ignored. Nurses are desperate to make our health service work; politicians and policy-makers must learn from and implement what they have to say.

The RCN is calling for:

- ▶ fair pay, good employment terms and safe working conditions for all nursing staff, wherever they work

- ▶ nurses must be able to take their breaks, with paid overtime if they are unable to do so, and access appropriate facilities, healthy food and water in workplaces
- ▶ an end to nurses being distracted from patient care through domestic or portering duties, for example, and paperwork that could be done by other staff
- ▶ access to occupational health services, including mental health support and counselling, wherever nurses work
- ▶ a clear commitment by all employers to greater flexible working opportunities to help improve recruitment and retention in a mainly female workforce
- ▶ an absolute determination to take strong measures in order to help prevent violence and aggression towards nursing staff, to deal with offenders, and recognise the right to withdraw care in the most extreme circumstances.

63.5%

of nurses say that too much of their time is taken up with non-nursing duties, by far the highest proportion across the UK.

Over
56.1%

of nursing staff in Northern Ireland work additional hours at least once each week and just under half (44.8%) of those nurses do so unpaid.

More than half (58.3%) of nursing staff in Northern Ireland say that they feel exhausted, whilst a similar percentage

56.3%

state that staffing levels are too low.



Tackling health inequalities and building a sustainable future

The people of Northern Ireland are entitled to expect to receive nursing care that is high quality, and safe and appropriate for their needs, regardless of whether this is in hospitals, health centres, community services, nursing homes or their own home. The roles of nursing staff working in all community settings, including our nursing homes, must be valued and supported to the same extent as in our hospitals.

Nursing homes have been at the centre of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the incredible commitment of staff to try to keep patients and residents as safe as possible. The current Minister for Health has recognised that a major overhaul is needed of how and where we provide care to some of the most vulnerable people in our society. The RCN agrees with the need for this review. Nursing homes are affected by the wider nurse staffing crisis because they are trying to recruit and retain staff from the same pool as

other health care services. There is an urgent need for more nurses to deliver care to people who are generally living longer and often with increasingly complex health needs. The RCN believes that, whatever changes are made, people who require continuing health care must have these needs met alongside their personal care needs, with the essential role of nursing in delivering this being recognised and supported.

The transformation of health and social care in Northern Ireland began eleven years ago but very little progress has been made in enabling more people, when it is appropriate, to receive care in their homes and communities instead of in hospitals. The main reason for this is that there has been no workforce planning to provide the right numbers of district nurses, health visitors, community mental health nurses or school nurses, for example, that we need to bring about this change. The Department of Health estimates that demand for health and social care services increases by around 6% each year. However, in all of these specialist areas of nursing, staffing levels have not come close to keeping up with this growth in demand. In some areas, such as learning disability nursing, for example, staffing numbers have actually been drastically cut over the last decade.

If we are serious about building a 'wellness' service as well as one that focuses on treating ill health, workforce planning needs to be addressed urgently. Our members working in community nursing tell us that they are feeling under unsustainable pressure and are short on staffing capacity, yet they are being asked to take on more and more, including increased support for nursing homes, and a spiralling workload caused by the emphasis on quicker hospital discharges and poor access to hospital services.

With significant demand for services and high levels of vacancies in the nursing workforce, mental health services were under significant strain before the pandemic. Now there is growing evidence around the impact of the pandemic on mental health. Of particular concern are the adverse effects on children and young people, and on those who are economically disadvantaged. It is therefore vital that mental health services are prioritised as part of the recovery and rebuilding of health and social care services.

Digital technologies are being used to create new and more effective ways of working for health care teams, especially those in the community. Whilst technology can never replace person-centred care,

Mainly because of staffing pressures and low pay, four in ten (39.3%) Northern Ireland nursing staff would not recommend nursing as a career and almost one-quarter (23.4%) do not believe that nursing is a rewarding career. A similar percentage

23.8%

regret choosing nursing as a career.

Between March 2011 and March 2021, the mental health nursing workforce in Northern Ireland grew by 2% whilst estimated demand for services increased by around

60%

it can help nursing staff to deliver better and safer care. However, RCN members, and particularly those who work in remote and rural areas, are often frustrated with the limitations of IT systems and connectivity.

Others say they need additional training and equipment to do their jobs properly. To make the most of the available technologies, these challenges must be addressed. It is also important to ensure that the growing use of information technology in health care does not lead to digital exclusion and increasing health inequalities. Health and social care in Northern Ireland needs an over-arching information technology strategy that will drive service modernisation. This work began many years ago but has still not been implemented.

The RCN is calling for:

- ▶ a workforce plan for nursing that includes all care settings, alongside a fundamental review of how nursing homes are funded, staffed and supported
- ▶ fair pay, terms and conditions for nursing staff employed in nursing homes, as well as improved access to training, development and clear career pathways
- ▶ recognition of the role of community services within the health and social care system, reflected in making sure that we have the right numbers of the right nurses in the right places to care for people in their homes and communities
- ▶ better data sharing and improved digital technology to ensure that nursing staff working in the community have the resources they need to deliver safe and effective care.





The Royal College of Nursing is the world's largest professional organisation and trade union for nursing staff, with members in the Health and Social Care service, nursing and residential care homes and the voluntary sector.

The RCN promotes the interests of nurses and patients by campaigning on issues that affect our members, shaping health policy, representing members, and providing learning and development opportunities.

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