

# THE GLOVES ARE OFF

**It's time to value  
nursing properly**

Because Scotland's  
health depends on it.

**BRIEFING:**  
Care homes



## Introduction

Successive Scottish governments have aspired to a policy of shifting the balance of care from hospital services into community settings, which include social care. A number of significant attempts have been made to implement a shift towards community based preventative services over the past 15 years, including the Christie Commission, the integration of health and social care, and the National Care Service.

The integration of health and social care was implemented in Scotland in 2014 with a key aim to shift the balance of care into community settings. However, in a 2024 performance report, Audit Scotland concluded: “We have not seen significant evidence of the shift in the balance of care ...intended by the creation of IJBs.”

In 2025 the Scottish government published both the Health and Social Care Service Renewal Framework 2025-2035<sup>2</sup> and the Population Health Framework<sup>3</sup> which aim to promote prevention and early intervention, with a shift to community care.

**RCN Scotland firmly supports this ambition, recognising it as essential to meeting population needs and ensuring long-term sustainability. But this shift cannot be realised without strengthening the nursing workforce in social care.**



## The case for change



### Rising clinical need in care homes

Understanding the clinical need being managed in care homes is necessary for planning current and future staffing requirements.

Evidence shows that clinical complexity among care home residents is rising sharply. Scotland's population is ageing, and by 2047 there will be around 340,000 more people aged 75 and over who may require support<sup>4</sup>. Care homes increasingly care for people with multiple long-term and complex conditions which can include frailty, COPD, diabetes, dementia, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's as well as palliative and end of life care needs. Additionally, growing issues such as polypharmacy, multiple mental health conditions, and complex wound care demand high-level clinical skills.

Across the UK, the British Geriatrics Society reports that the 'average' care home resident is 85 years old, has six medical diagnoses and takes eight medications<sup>5</sup>. In Scotland<sup>6</sup>:

- **63%** of long-stay residents in care homes for older people live with dementia (up from **56%** in 2014).
- Alzheimer Scotland estimates that **35%** of care home residents with dementia have advanced dementia, requiring intensive, skilled nursing care.
- And **65%** of all adult care home residents require nursing care, up from **60%** in 2014.

The reality is that care homes are providing complex clinical care (both physical and psychological) at the level found in hospital, whilst ensuring this is delivered in a homely environment.

## The vital role of registered nurses

As residents' complexity of clinical need increases, the skills, competencies and availability of the registered nursing workforce employed within care homes becomes ever more important.

Registered nurses:

- provide and co-ordinate safe, evidence-based, person-centred care
- promote mental health and wellbeing
- support and lead wider care home teams.

As autonomous practitioners, registered nurses use their clinical knowledge and skills to undertake ongoing care assessment, make decisions around the management of long-term conditions and complex medication regimes and therapies, and deliver clinical interventions within the care home. Registered nurses often serve as the only autonomous clinical decision-makers onsite, managing emergencies, complex medication regimens, and leading advanced care planning.

**Around 10% of long stay residents in care homes in Scotland have an emergency admission to hospital, amounting to around 5,000 admissions every quarter.**



Studies have shown that registered nurse input can spot deterioration in residents early and reduce the need for an avoidable emergency response<sup>7</sup>. The use of Advanced Nurse Practitioners embedded in care homes in Scotland has also been shown to reduce demand on GP services<sup>8</sup> and international evidence demonstrates substantial benefits in quality of care and residents' outcomes<sup>9</sup>.

## The case for change

### Registered nurse numbers in care homes are falling

Despite the Scottish government's ambition to shift care into community settings, and despite growing clinical needs of residents, the number of registered nurses working in care homes has fallen dramatically.

Over the last decade, the number of adult care home places has fallen slightly (5%), however, registered nurse numbers have **fallen** by 1,260 - a 24.1% reduction.

Skill mix has also **worsened**, with registered nurses dropping from 13% of the workforce in 2014 to 10.3% in 2024.



# What are the solutions?

## Increase funding to employ more registered nurses in care homes

Investment must reflect clinical need. Workforce planning and data collection must improve so that staffing and skill mix can be matched to resident needs. Registered nurses should be employed directly by care homes, reducing the burden on overstretched district nurses and GP practices.

## Implement and strengthen safe staffing legislation

The Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act 2019 introduces a duty on all care providers to ensure they have appropriate staffing for high quality care. The Scottish government acknowledges that cannot be sure about the extent to which providers are meeting this duty, due to gaps in current workforce data.

An evidence-based staffing methodology should be developed across social care to better determine appropriate staffing levels and reverse the decline in registered nurse numbers.

Scottish Ministers need to be able to fully meet their duties around reporting and on workforce supply and this will require improvements in data collection.

## Tackle recruitment and retention challenges

This includes:

- establishing pay, terms and conditions in social care that are comparable to the NHS. Reports consistently show higher turnover and vacancies in care homes than in NHS settings, with pay and conditions as key factors.
- promoting care home nursing as a skilled, rewarding career and ensuring care home staff have equitable access to professional development and career progression
- addressing misconceptions that deter nurses from working in care homes
- ensuring staffing levels are appropriate and mean nursing staff are supported and able to provide high quality care to residents.





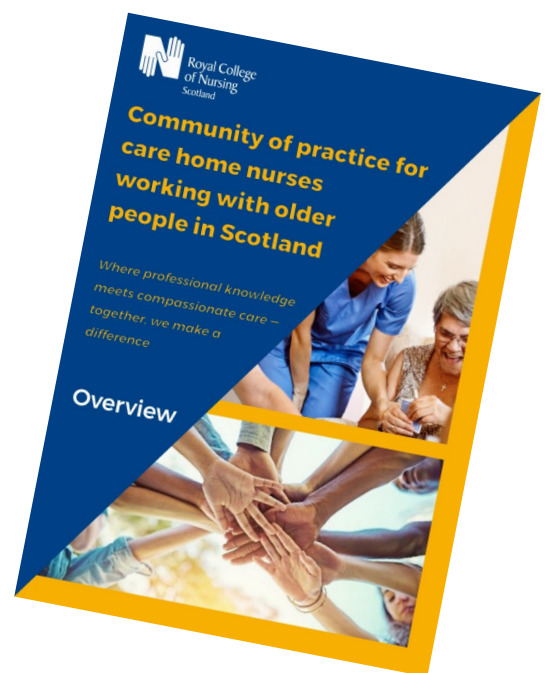
## Our manifesto calls for:

- Funding for the social care sector to significantly increase the number of registered nurses employed directly in care homes for adults.
- Nursing staff working in care homes should have comparable pay, terms and conditions to those working in the NHS. Achieving pay parity is vital for addressing the recruitment and retention challenges in these services.
- Registered nurses and nursing support workers in the NHS, independent sector and social care must have fair pay and good employment terms and conditions that reflect their safety-critical role. A sectoral pay bargaining system should be swiftly established to ensure fair pay in social care.

# Get involved with the RCN's work on care home nursing



RCN Scotland has launched a new community of practice to provide a supportive professional network for care home nurses working with older adults. It seeks to give members a place to share professional knowledge, learn in a collaborative environment, and reflect on their day-to-day roles with others working in a similar area. It is open to registered nurses working in care homes for older people in Scotland, who are members of the [RCN Care Home network](#). For more information, please contact [carol.dale@rcn.org.uk](mailto:carol.dale@rcn.org.uk)



During 2026, RCN Scotland will also be focusing on member engagement with care home nursing to help further develop our policy asks. If you would like to be involved and hear more about this work, please contact [policyscotland@rcn.org.uk](mailto:policyscotland@rcn.org.uk)

## References:

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8. Boyd, J., et alMaule, L. (2019)'Employing an Advanced Nurse Practitioner in a Care Home: NT'. Nursing Times, 115 45.
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