

THE GLOVES ARE OFF

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

Because Scotland's
health depends on it.

BRIEFING:
Investing in
community
nursing



Introduction

Against a backdrop of increasing patient need, there is widespread agreement about the urgent need to shift the balance of care into the community to better serve individuals and achieve more sustainable services.

But this has been talked about for years. It is vital that progress is delivered in the next parliamentary session.



It's not possible to tackle corridor care and the overcrowding in Scotland's hospitals, without increasing capacity in community and care home settings.

Scottish government must recognise that community nursing is central to achieving this ambitious agenda. From prevention to end-of-life care, community nurses have a vital role in shaping the future of health and care services as the Scottish government shifts care from hospitals to community. The diverse nature of community nursing extends across children, adults, mental health and learning disability, in a variety of settings.


Given the pressure hospitals are under, this shift cannot be achieved by simply moving resources from the hospital sector in the short term.

For meaningful progress, capacity first needs to be increased in the right places, and this will require additional funding.

It's therefore concerning that an analysis of the Scottish Budget by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, states that the Scottish Government is planning a huge relative shift in funding out of hospitals to the community over 2027–28 and 2028–29. The IFS warns that this shift may not be achievable without declines in hospital and ambulance performance as health boards will struggle with their small funding increases unless they can deliver large efficiency gains¹.

The case for change

Community services already do an excellent job every day in caring for people out of hospital either in or close to their home. However, we know that community nursing is under immense pressure and lacks capacity to lead this shift without significant investment in the workforce.



There is a growing gap between capacity and patient demand within district nursing services, creating pressure which can impact the quality of care, and the number of registered nurses within the health visiting and school nursing workforces has decreased since 2022.

It is imperative that governments back their ambitions with fully funded plans to grow the registered nurse workforce for community roles and secure a pipeline of qualified nurses to work in the community. Investing in the learning and development of the existing community nursing workforce is also vital to improving retention as well as enabling the workforce to grow, lead and innovate to meet challenges.

It is important that there are flexible routes into community nursing and those in training and education are exposed to the different areas of the profession – and that it is seen as an attractive ‘first destination’ for newly qualified nurses where they will gain valuable experiences.

We also need to see funding for infrastructure to create more joined up systems. It is investment in these systems as well as digital tools that will support care delivery and enhance greater efficiency in the provision of care.

Trends in community nursing and primary care

RCN Scotland submitted an FOI request to all NHS boards to determine the level of investment in the community nursing workforce, including district nursing, health visiting and school nursing. The data shows significant variation in education activity, workforce distribution, and leadership across NHS boards. The findings indicate the need for robust workforce planning, stronger leadership roles, and investment in NMC accredited qualification pathways to stabilise and future proof Scotland's community nursing workforce.

District nursing

District nurses are fundamental to the Scottish government's plans to shift the balance of care from hospital to the community, caring for patients with complex health needs in their own home as well as delivering preventative care and supporting long-term conditions and palliative patients.

Our analysis of workforce data shows that while there has been growth in the overall district nursing workforce since 2010, an increasing proportion of the workforce is made up of nursing support workers.

In 2025 registered nurses accounted for 77.8% of district nursing staff, compared to 93.3% in 2010.




District nurses require advanced knowledge and skills to manage increasingly complex care, high-risk situations and independent caseloads in the community. Ensuring that district nurses are supported to gain the Specialist Practitioner Qualification (SPQ) in District Nursing is vital for safely moving more care from hospital to home and for providing effective leadership within interdisciplinary teams.

Yet there has been a decline in the number of registered nurses being supported to complete the SPQ since 2020. NHS Board data indicates that only 24% of registered nurses within district nursing teams hold the SPQ qualification designed to equip them with the additional knowledge and skills to manage complex caseloads.

The case for change

Health visiting and school nursing

The Scottish government published a new health visiting action plan in 2025, which acknowledged the vital role of health visitors, their specialist skills and pivotal role across services. The plan also noted that there is additional strain on health visitor capacity, with the proportion of eligible children receiving health visitor contacts decreasing annually since 2020-21. Meanwhile there has been an increase in early identification of developmental concerns which require additional support, and the gap between the prevalence of concerns within the most and least deprived communities is widening.



Analysis of the workforce data shows that, between March 2010 and March 2020, the number of registered nurses and staff in the health visiting workforce grew significantly. But the level has not been sustained - since 2020 the registered nursing workforce in health visiting teams has **fallen by 6.7% and is now at its **lowest point** since September 2017.**

Despite a Scottish government commitment to maintain or annually increase numbers of active health visiting students (registered nurses undertaking the specialist community public health nurse qualification (SCPHN) in health visiting), the FOI information we received from NHS boards highlights that the numbers have been in decline since 2022. Urgent action is required to stabilise the health visiting workforce, invest in education to ensure a qualified health visiting workforce across all NHS boards and reverse the decline in numbers, which is at risk of accelerating given a quarter of the current workforce are 55 years old or older.

Between 2010 and 2022 there was growth in the number of nursing staff within school nursing teams, however, just as with health visiting, this growth has not been sustained, and the number has fallen again in the last few years. As with district nursing and health visiting, NHS board data highlights reduced investment in supporting nurses to complete the SCPHN school nursing qualification. Given the key role of school nurses in supporting the health and wellbeing of school age children and the rising demand for mental health care, for example, urgent action is required to invest in school nurse education to maintain a skilled workforce across all NHS boards.

The case for change

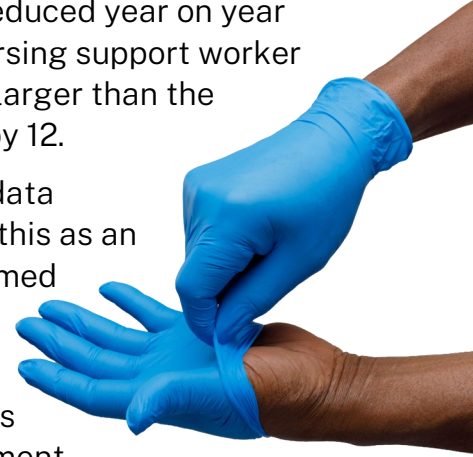
General practice nursing

In general practice nursing, the available workforce – combining the whole time equivalent (WTE) number of registered nurses and nursing support workers - reduced year on year between 2019 and 2024. This was driven by a downward trend in nursing support worker employment. In 2025, a marginal increase in registered nurses was larger than the decrease in nursing support workers, and so the overall WTE grew by 12.

However general practice nursing in primary care is an area where data continues to need improvement. Audit Scotland has acknowledged this as an area requiring attention if the Scottish government is to make informed decisions on general practice planning and investment.

When it comes to pay and valuing general practice nursing staff, there continues to be an issue with some general practice employers failing to pass on pay increases that are funded by Scottish government.

Our view is that the Scottish General Medical Services contract should include a mechanism to ensure that funding allocations for primary care staff pay are delivered to those staff as intended.



Digital technology

We also need to see funding to strengthen digital infrastructure and create more joined up systems. Investing in these systems – alongside digital tools and the necessary staff training – will enable more coordinated care delivery and improve efficiency across services.

A survey of around 500 RCN Scotland members last year found that:

- **44%** are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the digital systems and technology they use in their daily practice
- **54%** feel that the digital technology they use for patient care is not integrated well with other hospital or clinical systems
- **42%** report that lack of access to laptops, tablets or smart phones is a challenge, and **54%** report that slow or unreliable internet connection is as a barrier to using digital technology in patient care
- **44%** feel that the training provided for using digital systems and technology in their workplace is either inadequate or very inadequate
- **62%** feel they would benefit from additional training or support in using digital systems and tools.



Our manifesto calls for:

- Investment in growing the essential role of the registered nurse in community services - including district nursing, health visiting, school nursing and general practice - to realise the ambition of shifting the balance of care into the community.
- Investment in digital technology and training to ensure nursing staff working in the community have the information and equipment they need and the introduction of a Digital Nursing Lead within Scottish Government to help drive improvements for the profession.

Community nursing is an incredible area of the profession. To achieve its ambitions for the future, the Scottish government needs to capitalise on the opportunity to reshape community nursing into a more visible, valued and integral part of the health care system with a central role in reducing inequalities, preventing ill-health, and maximising independence.

Please note that we are producing separate briefings on our asks in relation to nursing in care homes and palliative care.

References:

- i The IFS Scottish Budget Report 2026–27 | Institute for Fiscal Studies
<https://ifs.org.uk/publications/ifs-scottish-budget-report-2026-27>



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For more information about our priorities for the next Scottish government, as well as information on how you can support our campaign, please visit:

rcn.org.uk/glovesoff

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