

THE GLOVES ARE OFF

It's time to value
nursing properly



**It's time to value nursing properly
because Scotland's health depends on it**

Foreword



Julie Lamberth
Chair, RCN Scotland Board

In our 2021 Scottish election manifesto - published when the COVID-19 pandemic was having a devastating impact on individuals, families and health and care services – I wrote that the previous year had been the toughest and most challenging of my 25 years in nursing. Five years on, for many of us, the days and months of the pandemic feel like a surreal and terrible memory. But while I continue to love my job as a Senior Charge Nurse, health and care services haven't recovered, and things have yet to improve for our profession.

Instead, longstanding pressures have compounded, workforce shortages and long waiting times continue, and our members are working harder than ever while feeling less valued.

Corridor care is another symptom of a health and care system that has failed to respond to the growing and changing needs of the population. What was once an emergency measure for exceptional circumstances has now become normalised. It's unsafe and undignified for patients, and health and care leaders still lack a complete picture of the scale of the problem.

The impact this all has on nursing staff is huge. We didn't join the nursing profession to spend every shift feeling like we're unable to provide the best possible care to our patients. Scotland cannot build the sustainable nursing workforce it urgently needs by asking staff to continue to work under relentless pressure while feeling demoralised and undervalued. We've reached our limit, things cannot continue as they are.

So ahead of the 2026 Scottish Parliament election our message is simple. The gloves are off; nursing is ready to be heard.

As the largest part of the workforce, it's just not possible to turn things around and deliver sustainable health and care services, without investing in registered nurses and nursing support workers. This is a moment for bold government action on health and care, built around a strong nursing workforce. Otherwise, the future is truly bleak.

We are the solution to so many of the current problems. With the right recognition, support and investment, the profession will embrace innovation and drive change. Nursing delivers expert care that helps people live healthier lives in their communities and prevents costly hospital admissions. When hospital care is needed, the evidence is clear: safe nurse staffing levels deliver better patient outcomes, shorter stays, and lower risk of readmission. This isn't just good for Scotland's health - it's good for public finances too.

Thank you to all our members who have shared their views, experiences and stories over the last year. To find out how you can support the campaign, please visit: rcn.org.uk/glovesoff

Let's all get involved and ensure politicians from all parties recognise that it's time to value nursing properly – because Scotland's health depends on it.

Valuing the nursing profession

Despite being a safety-critical profession, nursing continues to be undervalued with pay, terms and conditions that fail to recognise the level of knowledge, skills and autonomy asked of nursing staff every day. This is a real barrier to recruitment and retention.

The RCN has also highlighted disparities in career progression opportunities for nursing staff compared to other graduate professions. Other professions, including midwives and paramedics, can progress to Agenda for Change band 6 upon completion of a preceptorship period, whereas many nursing staff remain at band 5 for all their career. Over half of registered nurses are employed at band 5, compared to one in ten midwives. It's clear that despite their increasing specialist clinical knowledge and skills, many registered nurses remain stuck at an entry level band. Wherever they work, nursing staff deserve a career structure that supports progression and recognises the skills, expertise and greater responsibilities that individuals take on.

High vacancy levels, poor working conditions and excessive pressures are driving stress and sickness, with worrying numbers thinking of quitting the profession. Meanwhile, there simply are not enough new nurses coming through nursing education to close the gap.

We've said time and again that services rely too heavily on the goodwill of nursing staff. Two-thirds of respondents to our recent employment survey told us they work beyond their contracted hours every week because of workload pressures, and in many cases, that extra work is unpaid.

Abuse, violence and racism continue to be common experiences for many nursing staff. There should be zero tolerance of discrimination and violence in any form; all staff deserve safe and supportive workplaces. Exploitation that targets internationally educated nursing staff and their colleagues must also be stamped out. These practices have no place within Scotland's health and care system.

NURSING IS WORTH THE INVESTMENT

When we talk about these challenges, it's easy to lose sight of what makes nursing so valuable and unique. Nurses are highly skilled professionals, providing 24/7 care and working with more responsibility than ever before.

Expanding community and social care, prioritising prevention, and helping people live well with long-term conditions - nursing is central to all of this. Yet too often, nursing is seen as a cost rather than the investment it truly is.

The Scottish government responded to RCN campaigning and established the Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce in 2023. Key stakeholders spent over two years listening to frontline staff and developing a comprehensive set of recommendations to improve retention, culture and staff wellbeing and attract new nurses. But implementation has barely got underway, and our calls for investment to deliver have gone unanswered. We cannot afford to lose momentum on this vital work and miss this opportunity to make real improvements for the profession.

Care can't continue to come at the cost of those who provide it. It's time for the Scottish government to stop relying on our goodwill.

WE CALL FOR:

- 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.
- The introduction of a clear career pathway that allows registered nurses to progress from band 5 to band 6 after completing a period of preceptorship. The expertise and experience of nurses working at band 6 and above must also be better recognised and valued, putting nursing on a more equitable footing with other graduate health professions.
- Implementation of the Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce recommendations, and the investment necessary to deliver this.
- The transformation of workplaces so that nursing staff can thrive and flourish, including the delivery of protected time for learning and development.
- Action to tackle violence and abuse, and an end to the exploitation of health and social care workers.

IN 2025 ALMOST

40%



**OF OUR MEMBERS REPORTED
THAT THEY ARE THINKING OF
LEAVING NURSING.**

Staffing for safe and effective care

At no point has NHS Scotland employed the number of nursing staff needed to deliver safe and effective care, and the number of nurses working in care homes is reducing at the same time as clinical need is increasing. Despite Scotland's safe staffing legislation coming into force in 2024, nursing shortages continue to have a damaging impact, with many nurses caring for unsafe numbers of patients, in turn causing overwhelming pressure and burnout.

The price of unsafe staffing is too high. Patient care – and outcomes – are put at unacceptable risk when there are too few registered nurses to deliver nursing care safely.

The evidence couldn't be clearer. When there are enough nursing staff, with the right skills, in any care setting – patients are safer. Every 10% increase in the number of degree educated registered nurses, is associated with a 7% drop in risk of death.

This isn't just about numbers. We often hear about nurses being redeployed to areas they're not familiar with, or nursing support staff being used as a substitute for registered nurses. Simply adding more staff is not enough if those staff are not registered nurses with the right education, skills and expertise.

We need the right number of nursing staff, in the right places, with the right skills and experience, to keep patients safe.

Nursing is critical to Scotland's health.
Without safe nurse-to-patient ratios, people are being put at risk.

WE CALL FOR:

- The introduction of mandatory minimum registered nurse-to-patient ratios for all health and care settings.
- Eradication of the unacceptable provision of care in inappropriate places across Scotland's hospitals, with health boards required to record and report all instances as a first step.
- Action to attract more people into the nursing profession, including a nationwide recruitment campaign and an expansion of the routes into nursing.
- A cost-of-living increase to the nursing student bursary as well as improved support for students in their academic setting and in practice placements to address worrying dropout rates.
- The protection of nursing courses at Scotland's universities, recognising that any cuts to nurse education risks the future of the workforce.
- Development of a long-term workforce plan, based on a robust assessment of increasing need and Scotland's ageing population.

Too often, staffing decisions are based on affordability rather than need. Yet it's a false economy to think you are saving money by having fewer nursing staff. International research shows that ensuring adequate levels of registered nurse staffing doesn't just improve patient safety; it can also reduce the length of hospital stays and the chances of hospital readmission, resulting in cost savings too. Safe staffing in community settings allows nurses to keep people well in their homes, reducing the chance of a hospital admission in the first place.

The RCN has raised the alarm over the corridor care crisis, demanding action and mandatory reporting. However, overcrowding and the provision of care in inappropriate places continued over the summer, and nursing staff are carrying the burden of being unable to provide safe and dignified care.

It's clear that Scotland needs more nurses. Yet over the last four years, thousands fewer students have begun nursing degrees than were originally planned in the targets set by Scottish government. This means the gap between the number of registered nurses that are needed, and the number entering the workforce, is set to widen even further. Scotland's nursing workforce is ageing and so this problem will worsen quickly without urgent action.

Scotland needs a sustainable nursing workforce and ahead of this election we're calling for nursing to be recognised as an asset, rather than viewed as a cost.

60% of members said they were too busy to provide the level of care they wanted to in our 2025 employment survey.



Investing in community services to deliver care closer to the individual

There is widespread agreement about the urgent need to shift the balance of care into the community in order to future-proof services against a background of increasing need and to better meet the needs of rural communities. However, given the pressure hospitals are under, this can't come at the cost of simply moving resources from the hospital sector in the short term. For meaningful progress, capacity needs to be increased in the right places, and this will require additional funding.

But this has been talked about for years. To deliver progress, Scottish government and service leaders 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 new models of community care have emerged, nursing roles have evolved and developed. The diverse nature of community nursing extends across different roles and settings; from school nurses supporting children and young people with mental health, to district nurses managing acute illness and long-term conditions, to care home nurses supporting older people with complex health conditions to thrive in a homely setting.

We know that community nursing is under immense pressure and lacks the capacity to lead the shift without significant investment in the workforce and infrastructure to support nursing staff. There is a growing gap between capacity and patient demand within district nursing services, creating pressures which can impact quality of care. In 2024, the health visiting and school nursing workforces decreased, and the general practice nursing workforce has been reducing since 2019.

28% fewer registered nurses are working in care homes compared to 2013 and over half of care homes report nursing vacancies.

WE CALL FOR:

- Investment in growing the essential role of the registered nurse in community services - including district nursing, health visiting, school nursing, mental health, learning disability, palliative care and general practice - to realise the ambition of shifting the balance of care into the community.
- Funding for the social care sector that recognises the need to significantly increase the number of registered nurses employed directly within care homes for adults.
- A sustainable funding model for hospice and end-of-life care to increase access to these vital services and help address the current high levels of unmet need.
- Nursing staff working in social care and the third sector should have comparable pay, terms and conditions to those working in the NHS. Achieving parity is vital for addressing the recruitment and retention challenges in these services.
- 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.
- Better data sharing and improved access to patient records with enhanced integration between NHS and non-NHS systems.

Meanwhile, despite Scotland's ageing population, and that older people in Scotland are increasingly likely to live with multiple, complex health conditions and frailty, the number of registered nurses working in care homes has been falling over the last decade.

These trends are all the reverse of what is needed to support people to live well, for longer, in the community. They also impact the whole health and care system. It's simply not possible to address corridor care and the overcrowding in Scotland's hospitals, without increasing capacity in community and care home settings.

It is vital that the Scottish government backs its ambitions with funded plans to grow the registered nurse workforce for community roles. It will be impossible to sustain these ambitions without 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.

Too often, innovative nursing services are piloted and then defunded, despite their success in supporting people in the community. Funding decisions on the ground need to reflect the ambition to shift the balance of care.

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



**INCREASING NUMBERS OF CARE
HOME RESIDENTS ARE LIVING WITH
DEMENTIA – AS OF 2025, THIS WAS
ESTIMATED TO STAND AT**

63%



Better health for everyone

Another area on which politicians all agree is the need to better support good health and wellbeing, and address health and care needs at an early stage. As well as leading to better outcomes for individuals, this reduces the need for more costly care and support later, and is important for reducing health inequalities.

After years of talk, we need action to deliver. Our health and care services are under immense strain. Too often, care is delivered in the wrong place because hospitals are overcrowded and demand is overwhelming. Shifting the focus to prevention and public health is needed now more than ever. With an ageing population, rising levels of disease, and more people living with complex conditions, the case for action is clear.

Nursing staff play a vital role in promoting health and preventing illness. Every nursing role, wherever it's based, offers opportunities to improve wellbeing and prevent illness. From homes and schools to GP practices, care homes and prisons, nurses have unique access to deliver preventative care in the places people spend their time. Yet initiatives to promote public health, to support people to manage their health and wellbeing and to address health inequalities, will continue to be severely limited by nursing workforce shortages.

It's also important to recognise that as much as 80% of what affects health happens outside the health and care system. That's why we're calling for good health to be prioritised across the whole of Scottish government.

The climate crisis is a threat to global health. We urgently need to see more sustainable practices embedded across health and care services to reduce carbon emissions and waste, as well as investment to ensure services are better able to deal with increased demand and disruption from climate related events.

Internationally educated nursing staff make an invaluable and welcome contribution to health and care services across Scotland, and their skills, compassion and dedication must be recognised. They deserve policies that reflect the value of their service, not ones that make their future here more uncertain. At the same time, the pandemic laid bare the fragility of health systems worldwide and deepened long-standing workforce shortages.

Nursing is demanding action, not more promises. Because a healthier Scotland starts with us.

WE CALL FOR:

- Prioritisation of action and investment to improve public health, with a particular focus on preventing illness, supporting mental health and tackling health inequalities.
- Recognition of the key role of nursing in prevention and health promotion, with investment to grow and expand these vital nursing roles.
- A 'health in all policies' approach to be embedded across all Scottish government departments to ensure that health is considered and prioritised in all policy development.
- Scottish government must ensure ethical international recruitment only, as well as sufficient support for internationally educated nursing staff who do choose to make Scotland their home.
- Sustainable practices in healthcare settings, focusing on reducing carbon footprints, waste, and promoting climate-resilient healthcare infrastructure.

Today, countries across the globe are facing a critical shortfall in nursing staff and so our efforts to secure a nursing workforce for the future must be both sustainable and ethical. While we must invest in growing our domestic pipeline of nurses and nursing support workers, we also have a duty to protect and support those who are already here – many of whom are now experiencing increasing discrimination, uncertainty, and harm as a result of recent immigration policy changes and increasing anti-migrant sentiment. All politicians have a duty to recognise the invaluable contribution of internationally educated nursing staff and a responsibility to avoid fuelling harmful and divisive narratives around migration. Nursing is a profoundly diverse profession, and the strength of our health and care services depends on the inclusion and wellbeing of all staff.

Non-communicable diseases like cancer, heart disease, and diabetes are leading causes of death.

These are expected to rise by 21% by 2043.

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