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NURSING**

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Staffing for safe and effective care



Royal College
of Nursing
Scotland

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Any vacant post, in any setting, is likely to threaten the quality of care patients receive and compromise safety. Over 5% of NHS Scotland nursing and midwifery posts are vacant and 40% of care home services for older people report nursing vacancies. Pre-existing and ongoing staff shortages have impacted on the system's ability to cope with the pandemic as well as ongoing service demands.

Nursing is a safety critical profession and there is a direct link between staff having the time to care and positive patient outcomes. Research shows that every 1 patient added to a registered nurse's workload is associated with 7% increase in patient mortality¹. Meanwhile our members tell us time and again about the negative impact that poor staffing levels are having on their work, their patients and their wellbeing.

Early in 2020 the RCN surveyed members and asked them about staffing levels on their most recent shift. It should be noted that these results relate to the period before the pandemic was declared. Over 2,600 members responded in Scotland and the results include:

- 53% of nursing staff said their last shift was not appropriately staffed and 59% said this compromised care.
- 25% felt unable to raise concerns about unsafe staffing levels. Only 27% of those who did raise concerns reported that these were dealt with.
- 63% of members reported they worked unplanned additional time during their last shift – for 25% this was more than an hour extra.
- 61% disagreed with the statement “I had enough time to provide the level of care I would like”.

When we surveyed our members last summer about their experience of working during the pandemic, 34% of respondents in Scotland said staffing levels had worsened during the COVID-19 crisis².

In October RCN Scotland launched a tool to capture the lived experience of nursing staff and below are examples of the experiences shared between October and December 2020:

“I felt anxious and concerned. I feel I could not give enough to my patients. I worried for their safety. I had so much to do and so little time. I stayed beyond my time (like I do most days) and still I feel like I failed a little. Although I did my very best.”



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"The ward is running short staffed every day and the patients are more unwell this time around. We are unable to deliver the high standard of care that should be giving to the individual patients. This is getting to everyone and they are now feeling drained and worthless."



RCN Scotland remains clear that we need action now to tackle unsafe staffing levels which compromise patient care and safety. Sustainable solutions are needed to ensure that all health and care services have the right staff, with the right skills, in the right place. Tackling staffing shortages is also vital for staff wellbeing and retaining experienced nursing staff. In Scotland 38% of members have reported that they are thinking of leaving nursing. When we asked members what would make them feel more valued, half identified better staffing levels³.

The Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act 2019

The Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act is the first legislation in the UK to set out requirements for safe staffing across both health and care services.

The Act places a duty on NHS and social care providers to make sure that, at all times, there are suitably qualified and competent staff working in the right numbers to ensure safe and effective care. Working in an environment where they are supported, have time for learning and have safe staffing levels will give health and care staff the time to provide the best care for patients. The Act requires NHS boards to seek clinical advice when making staffing decisions and to establish a clear process for concerns about unsafe staffing levels to be reported and escalated. If implemented well, this will ensure nursing staff can raise concerns without fear of repercussions and have these concerns heard and responded to.

The Act also provides the tools to facilitate safe staffing levels in adult social care. As well as setting out a legal requirement on all care providers to ensure suitably qualified staff in sufficient numbers are in place to ensure good outcomes for service users, it also requires the Scottish Government to report on the steps they are taking to support staffing levels in care services to meet this legal requirement. The legislation also provides the Care Inspectorate with the power to develop, in conjunction with the sector and stakeholders, a staffing methodology to determine the number and skill mix of staff that are required to ensure the best outcomes for recipients.

The reasons for passing this Act nearly two years ago have been made even clearer by the COVID-19 crisis. Safe and effective staffing is a key element of remobilising the NHS safely and ensuring that Scotland's care homes can safely deliver care to residents with increasingly complex health needs.

Scrutiny of health and care staffing

The Act contains some robust reporting requirements. For example, all health boards will need to report on how they are meeting their safe staffing duties and the challenges and risks they have faced in relation to this.

These reports require to be published and submitted to Ministers who, in turn, are required to lay a report in parliament, including on how this information is being used to inform the government's national policies for staffing health and care services.

RCN Scotland has identified this as a safety critical opportunity to ensure ongoing scrutiny of how the duties introduced by the Act are being met and we are calling for an annual parliamentary debate on safe staffing underpinned by the submitted data and evidence.

The Role of Senior Charge Nurses

Senior Charge Nurses (SCNs) are clinical and professional leaders for nursing staff delivering care. The pivotal role of SCNs and Community Team Leaders - their equivalents in the community - in leading safe, effective, patient-centred care needs to be recognised, valued and protected. Yet too many are overloaded with competing demands.

SCNs should not be expected to hold an individual case load or cover staff absences and vacancies, except in exceptional circumstances, in addition to their primary responsibilities of ensuring safe and effective clinical practice, enhancing patient experience and managing and developing team performance. Recognising this and providing SCNs with the required capacity to be effective leaders and clinical experts, and to inspire their teams to deliver safe and effective care, will ultimately result in more effective service delivery and improved outcomes for patients.

The Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act places a duty on NHS Boards to ensure lead clinical professionals have the time to do their jobs properly. The guidance which accompanies the Act should ensure that SCNs and Community Team Leaders have time to lead by making clear that they should be regarded as being supernumerary.

Nursing students

The increased recognition and interest in nursing as a modern and attractive career choice is very welcome. However, for this increased interest to translate and then result in an increase in nurses, the number of nursing student places must continue to grow, and students need the appropriate financial, academic and clinical support to complete their education and enter the workforce.

RCN Scotland is therefore calling for an ongoing commitment to increase the number of student nurse places to future proof the workforce. The Scottish Government's recent announcement⁴ that the number of student nurses, midwives, and paramedics entering funded degree programmes will increase by 5.8% in 2021-22 was welcome and goes some way towards this. The focus on the mental health workforce (+13%) is particularly welcome but the lack of increase in places for learning disability nursing and children's nursing is disappointing.

The recent trend of successive increases to nursing student intake numbers must also be viewed in the context of the 20% reduction in student places that took place from 2010/11 to 2012/13. Only in the last three years have intake numbers reached and exceeded the number of student places in 2007/2008.

RCN Scotland is also supportive of a geographically targeted approach to increasing nursing student places at specific universities to help address challenges with recruitment in certain areas.

It must also be understood that tackling workforce shortages and achieving safe staffing is vitally important for ensuring that nursing students receive appropriate support when on clinical placement. During the second wave of the pandemic, the Scottish Government committed to students retaining their supernumerary status and their position in the clinical area as learners. However, many of our student members have raised concerns about the impact of staffing shortages during their clinical placements. One nursing student told us:

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“Every day we go into placement and hear the staffing numbers my heart drops knowing that today I will not learn from my mentor...I fear the day I qualify I will know nothing of the job I am meant to do.” (Jan 2021)



We call for:

- Implementation of the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act by the end of 2021, and continued work to develop workforce planning tools.
- Greater investment in health and care services to enable providers to employ more registered nurses, achieve and maintain safe staffing levels and ensure nursing teams have the correct skill mix.
- A commitment to increase the number of nursing student places, ensure a fair bursary and improve access to other financial support to widen access and increase student retention.
- The pivotal role of Senior Charge Nurses in leading safe, effective, patient-centred care to be properly recognised, valued and protected.
- An annual parliamentary debate on safe staffing to ensure ongoing scrutiny of how the duties introduced by the Act are being met.

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References:

1: Aiken LJ, Clarke SP, Sloane DM, et al. Hospital nurse staffing and patient mortality, nurse burnout, and job dissatisfaction. JAMA. 2002;288(16):1987-93

2 & 3: Building a better future| Royal College of Nursing (rcn.org.uk)

<https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/rcn-building-a-better-future-covid-pub-009366>

4: Nursing and midwifery student numbers to increase - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

<https://www.gov.scot/news/nursing-and-midwifery-student-numbers-to-increase/>



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