

RCN Scotland briefing – Stage 1 Debate: Budget 2022-23

This budget comes at a time when our health and care services face unprecedented challenges. RCN Scotland members, like all health and care staff across the country, are exhausted. Many are experiencing the toll of months of unrelenting pressure through mental and physical ill health and burnout. Staff absences through Covid may be beginning to fall, but non-covid sickness rates and a record high nursing and midwifery vacancy rate in the NHS, means there are simply not enough staff to run the health and care services Scotland needs.

The result of this pressure has been starkly highlighted by figures published this week from the RCN Employment Survey. Over 6 in 10 nursing staff in Scotland are thinking about leaving their post¹, with many saying they feel undervalued, poorly paid and are working with low staffing levels.

This budget must seek to fix this workforce crisis as a priority.

RCN Scotland is therefore calling on the Scottish Government to make the following financial commitments:

1) Fair pay for nursing staff across health and social care.

- The majority of RCN Scotland members working in the NHS have rejected the Scottish Government's 4% pay award as inadequate and 90% are willing to take some form of industrial action. Nursing staff working outside the NHS also need fair pay that recognises their contribution to care.
- Among those thinking or planning on leaving their roles, 54% report low levels of pay as one of the main reasons.
- RCN Scotland expects the Scottish Government to begin negotiations for 2022-23 Agenda for Change pay very quickly after this budget has been agreed. We are disappointed by the lack of preparatory work and prior consultation from the Scottish Government to date. RCN Scotland members deserve better.

2) Implement the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland Act 2019 as soon as possible.

- The latest figures show that there are 5,761 nursing and midwifery vacancies in the NHS alone, a record vacancy rate of 8.2%. Around 40% of care home services for older people report nursing vacancies.
- RCN Scotland members across all parts of health and social care are reporting poor staffing levels. Worryingly, 65% of those thinking or planning on leaving their jobs cite staffing levels as one of the main reasons.
- Sustainable solutions to workforce shortages are needed to ensure that all health and care services have the right staff, with the right skills, in the right place. The Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act 2019, passed unanimously by the Scottish

¹ See RCN Scotland Employment Survey Results: <https://www.rcn.org.uk/-/media/royal-college-of-nursing/documents/countries-and-regions/scotland/2022/rcn-scotland-employment-survey-briefing.pdf?la=en>

Parliament, is a vital part of achieving this. The Act requires health and social care providers to ensure adequate staffing levels and would have required Scottish Ministers to report to Parliament on the steps they are taking to ensure adequate staffing levels.

- RCN Scotland is disappointed by the lack of progress around the implementation of the 2019 Act and believes that enshrining this legislation is a crucial part of the remobilisation of services.
- The 2022-23 budget cuts the amount of money set aside for implementation of the 2019 Act² and it also does not include and specific funding to address staff shortages.

3) Commit to fully funded, long term workforce planning

- Any funding for service improvements or for remobilisation which forms part of this budget will be ineffective without the workforce in place to deliver them.
- What is required is a focus on recruitment but also a strategy for retaining experienced staff and supporting them to continue to contribute.
- An increase in commissioned university places across adult, learning disability and mental health nursing is welcome, however, with over 4,130 Registered Nurse vacancies in the NHS, a single year increase in student numbers will not solve the staffing crisis.
- What is needed is sustained increases over a number of years, considerations of measures such as more than one cohort of nursing degrees a year, and fully funded long term workforce planning.
- To date, Scottish government workforce planning, including that contained in the NHS Recovery Plan, has been poor. This budget must enable a new approach of fully funded, sustainable workforce planning.

4) Acknowledge and address the impact of workforce pressures on staff and on services

- Nursing staff are exhausted and worn down. The pandemic has taken a toll on their physical and mental health. It is vital that employers do all they can to protect the mental health and wellbeing of nursing and other health and care staff and take account of the impact the sustained pressure will be having.
- The budget increases the staff wellbeing budget by only 1.5%.³ While the services available have been welcome, RCN Scotland would question whether this increase will meet the likely demand as a result of the pressure staff have been under.
- Low staffing levels mean that staff are simply not able to provide the level of care they would like. 72% of nursing staff who responded to the RCN Employment Survey said they are under too much pressure at work, while 67% are too busy to provide the level of care they would like.
- Low staffing levels and sickness absences combined with covid sickness has meant that services have had to be put on hold across Scotland. While this is a huge concern, which will be impacting patient care, the alternative is to spread existing staff even more thinly across services, to keep everything open. Cancelling services is the result of not having enough staff to cope with added pressures and that needs addressed.

² Level 4 budget line: Implementation of the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act 2019. This cut to the budget is partly due to some recurring funding transferred to Health Board budgets. RCN Scotland is concerned that a budget of just over £5m does not suggest the Scottish Government are prioritising the implementation of this important piece of legislation.

³ Level 4 Staff Wellbeing budget line: 1.5% increase on last year to take total to £9.150m

- The Scottish Government simply cannot afford not to address these workforce challenges. Failing to do so will mean services continue to be put on hold, we will be unable to retain staff and those who remain in post will be unable to provide high quality care.

Further information

If you would like any further information please contact Ross Sanderson, Senior Public Affairs Officer, by email at ross.sanderson@rcn.org.uk or by telephone 0131 662 6197.

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is the world's largest professional organisation and trade union for nursing staff, with members in the NHS, independent and third sectors. RCN Scotland promotes patient and nursing interests by campaigning on issues that affect members, shaping national health policies, representing members on practice and employment issues and development opportunities. With over 40,000 members in Scotland, the RCN is the voice of nursing.