Health, Social Care and Sport Committee Debate:
Remote and Rural Healthcare Inquiry

RCN Scotland provided evidence to the Committee's inquiry, including the issues that need to be addressed in the Scottish Government's forthcoming remote and rural workforce strategy.

Workforce challenges in remote and rural areas :

- While severe nursing shortages and high vacancy rates are a challenge across Scotland, these can have a serious impact on access to healthcare and social care in remote and rural areas, where even a small number of vacancies or staff absences can cause huge challenges in terms of running services safely.

- Recruitment and retention challenges across community nursing, general practice and in social care are having a real impact in remote and rural communities.

- The reasons for such recruitment and retention issues are varied and complex. For some it may be related to unattractive pay and conditions or, if staff don't live within the community, meeting the costs of travel to and from work could make it an unattractive job choice. For others it can be the perception that a role in a remote and rural setting will present difficulties in keeping skills up to date, developing new skills and facilitating career progression.

- Greater distances to specialist and emergency services can also contribute to feelings of professional isolation, increased clinical responsibility and a broader work profile, while distance and remoteness can also serve as barriers to accessing training and development opportunities.

- Lack of adequate or affordable housing, childcare, schooling, transport options and digital infrastructure are all challenges that need concerted action to achieve a sustainable nursing workforce across Scotland's remote and rural communities. This is why a whole system approach is needed to address recruitment and retention challenges.

Nursing student challenges :

- Last year RCN Scotland surveyed our student members and published '*Nursing Student Finance, the true cost of becoming a nurse.*' This report found that nursing students across Scotland are facing serious financial pressures; 66% have considered dropping out of their course due to financial concerns and 57% of these students who considered dropping out reported this was due to the cost of getting to placements.

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- While this is an issue across Scotland, in rural areas students can be expected to travel considerable distances, and therefore incur considerable costs, to get to their clinical placements. Depending on the distance, some may be required to find suitable accommodation for the duration of their placement and travel home intermittently.

- Some of the students studying in rural and remote areas highlighted the high transport and accommodation costs they face to attend their clinical placement. For example, at a roundtable we held following publication of the report, one of our student committee members described how she'd been forced to pull out of a clinical placement on Skye, which she feels would have been very valuable to her development, due to prohibitively high accommodation costs.

- It is welcome that our report and roundtable prompted action from the Scottish Government, Student Awards Agency Scotland, and universities to improve the clinical placement expenses process. The Scottish Government is also committed to undertake a review of nursing and midwifery student financial support. This must ensure that students are financially supported to undertake placements in remote and rural settings.

- We are calling on the Scottish government to ensure the financial support package for nursing students allows them to prioritise their education, cope with the rising cost of living, and finish their studies without falling into financial hardship, including implementation of a cost-of-living increase to the nursing student bursary.

Action needed to address workforce challenges :

- The Scottish Government's continued ambition to bring care closer to people's homes and focus on prevention is positive, but in the remote and rural context it means that chronic workforce shortages need to be addressed.

- The forthcoming Remote and Rural Workforce strategy must take a whole system approach and cover the health and care workforce across the NHS, primary care and social care.

- The forthcoming strategy must also link with the work of the Scottish government's Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce, established to tackle the workforce crisis in nursing and midwifery. The Taskforce is exploring how to attract more people into the profession and we are calling for an expansion of the routes into nursing to grow the domestic workforce. Diversifying the delivery of nursing degree education could benefit remote and rural areas by enabling people to train in their local area while continuing to work.

- We are clear that the Taskforce must deliver funded, meaningful and sustainable actions that make a positive difference for the nursing profession, including a nursing retention strategy. This will require investment, and it is disappointing that the Scottish budget has not prioritised delivering this vital work.

- The Remote and Rural Workforce strategy should also cover:

  - *Investment and resources to allow health and care employers to meet their safe staffing duties*. In particular, there needs to be further recognition of, and investment in, the registered nurse role across community, social care and primary models of care and the needs of local populations.

  - *Long term workforce planning and improved data* - Workforce planning should be undertaken alongside, and integrated with, service planning. This integrated planning should be based on a detailed understanding of the needs of local populations, rather than financial considerations. There needs to be a commitment to creating and sustaining a skill and staff mix that reflects the needs of the community. The specific recruitment, retention and staff development challenges facing rural areas must be considered when planning, budgeting and designing services in rural areas.

  - *Improved access to training and development* - There needs to be an understanding that nursing staff may feel professionally isolated and there needs to be a focus on their continuous learning and development. It should also be recognised that many services provided within remote and rural areas are nurse led which results in a need for increased clinical responsibility. However, this is often not supported by sufficient professional development or training opportunities and the strategy should seek to improve this.

  - *Development of the Advanced Nurse Practitioner (ANP) role* - ANPs play a key role in delivering high quality services, both in and out of hours, in remote and rural communities, ensuring that timely clinical decisions are taken closer to home and when patients need it. Increasing the number of ANPs, and deploying them effectively to improve access to care, needs to be at the heart of a long-term workforce strategy in remote and rural areas. A key part of this will be ensuring that nurses have the time and support to undergo the significant training process required to become an ANP.

  - *Steps to grow the domestic nursing workforce* - Scottish government must take steps to grow the domestic nursing workforce by continuing to increase the number of nursing student places based on geography and demand in the four fields of nursing.

  - *Improved support for student nurses* – Studying to become a nurse should not involve financial hardship and students should be financially supported to undertake placements in remote and rural settings.

- *Increased access to technology* - The strategy must recognise that mobile technologies are increasingly important tools for community nursing teams, including district nurses and health visitors. Progress has clearly been made in harnessing the power of technology to deliver more accessible care in remote and rural areas, but there is still a long way to go. Backfill, training and support needs to be properly planned for community nurses in remote and rural areas to be able to develop the skills necessary to use technology and promote telehealth and telecare in the community. In addition to ensuring digital resources and training for NHS staff, the strategy should also consider how access to these tools can be increased for staff working in independent health and social care services.

- *Support for independent and active lives* - Supporting wellbeing, as well as addressing loneliness and isolation, can prevent the development of more complex conditions. To achieve this, there must be proper recognition of the role community nurses play in this and safe staffing to ensure community nursing teams are properly resourced. Nurses must have the time to learn and develop strong collaborative relationships and engage fully with the local community.