

## RCN Scotland Briefing – Scottish Budget 2025-26

In May 2024, RCN Scotland published its third Nursing Workforce in Scotland [report](#). The report outlined the extent and urgency of the nursing staffing crisis facing Scotland’s health and social care sectors and made 10 recommendations for tackling the crisis.

This week, we have published a [six-month update](#) in which we have reviewed progress and concluded that Scotland’s nursing workforce crisis shows ‘little sign of improvement.’

While NHS nursing vacancies have reduced in the past six months, the reality is that the fall in vacancies only masks the fact that employers are simply cutting the number of posts they say they need to provide care. This approach is unsafe and unsustainable. The actual numbers of nursing staff in post are relatively unchanged and NHS Scotland still requires more than 3,000 nursing staff than it currently has. Meanwhile social care providers continue to struggle to find nursing staff at a time when people living in care homes are living with increasingly complex healthcare needs.

At the same time, the number of nurses leaving the NMC register within the first ten years is increasing, and the number of students applying to study for a nursing degree is falling.

Nursing is a safety critical profession and the evidence clearly shows that lower numbers of registered nurses harms patient outcomes. Investment is badly needed to retain and recruit the workforce that Scotland requires, and to create a safe, compassionate and rewarding working environment.

Funding our health and social care services is a political decision and the costs of not investing in nursing are significant, both in terms of the long-term impact on service delivery and the very real risk of harm to patients and residents being cared for today. Safe nurse staffing levels should be non-negotiable.

This budget must prioritise health and care services and we are calling on the Scottish Government to make the following commitments:

- 1. Provide the financial resources to deliver the recommendations that emerge from the Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce.**

**The issue:** Thousands of registered nursing staff are missing from health and care services, the number of nurses leaving the NMC register within the first ten years is increasing and the number of students applying to study for a nursing degree is falling.

**RCN asks:**

- It's more important than ever that the Scottish Government's Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce, led by the Cabinet Secretary, delivers positive change. The Taskforce was established last year, in response to RCN campaigning on safe staffing and fair pay, and is looking at ways to: improve retention of experienced staff; attract new nurses and expand routes into nursing; improve workplace culture and environments; increase staff wellbeing; and improve access to education and development.
- The Taskforce is currently finalising its report and we're expecting this to be published early in 2025. While the Taskforce has the potential to address Scotland's nursing workforce challenges, publishing the report is only the first step in the process and the Scottish Government must ensure it delivers.
- 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 time and investment and we expect to see funding allocated in the Scottish budget for its delivery.

**2. Deliver fair pay for nursing staff across health and social care.**

**The issue:** Nursing pay has failed to keep up with the rising cost of living and feeling undervalued is a key reason for nurses deciding to leave the profession. While it is a step on the journey to fair pay, the recent NHS pay award does not make up for the years of under valuing Scotland's nursing staff.

**RCN asks:**

- Despite making it clear to the Scottish government that we expect Agenda for Change pay negotiations for 2025-26 to commence in a timely fashion, there has been little movement and the joint trade unions have expressed their frustration and concern about the delay. We will continue to push for future pay awards to be restorative and commensurate with the demands of the nursing role and the level of education required.
- The Scottish government must also prioritise improvements to the pay, terms and conditions for nursing staff employed within the social care sector. We support the establishment of a sectoral bargaining system and for nursing staff to have pay, terms and conditions at least equal to equivalent roles in the NHS.

**3. Take urgent action now to tackle the major challenges facing the social care sector, rather than wait until the creation of a National Care Service.**

**The issue:** We remain concerned that the NCS Bill is being taken forward without a clear understanding of how to fix the current problems facing the social care sector. In our view this remains a real risk and we are concerned that the focus on the NCS will do nothing to address the current crisis in service capacity or tackle workforce shortages and recruitment and retention challenges.

**RCN asks:**

- The delivery of fair work is vital for tackling the workforce crisis within social care and cannot wait until the creation of an NCS. We believe significant progress can be made on progressing the fair work agenda out with the Bill and we would like to see the Scottish government move much more swiftly to establish a sectoral pay bargaining system for social care.
- Nursing staff working within social care services should have comparable pay, terms and conditions (including sick pay) to those working in the NHS. Achieving parity is vital for tackling the workforce crisis within the sector.
- Scottish government must commit further investment in the registered nurse role within social care settings and appropriately staffed community nursing teams. There is a need for more registered nurses working in care homes, rather than relying on overstretched district nursing teams going into care homes. However, we have seen little evidence of an increased recognition of the role of the registered nurses in community services or care homes.

**4. Eradicate the unacceptable provision of care in inappropriate places.**

**The issue:** Demand for health care services is far outstripping nursing supply and the workforce is under intense pressure. The increasing normalisation of unsafe and ineffective care being delivered in inappropriate settings is a symptom of this state of crisis and a change of course is vital.

This summer we published our *Corridor Care: unsafe, undignified, unacceptable* report which was based on responses to a UK-wide RCN survey of frontline nursing staff, including 1,400 from Scotland. When asked about their most recent shift, almost 40% of respondents working in typical hospital settings in Scotland reported delivering care in an inappropriate setting, such as a corridor. Of these, over 70% said that the care they delivered in public compromised patient privacy and dignity and almost 60% said it left patients without access to life-saving equipment such as oxygen and suction.

**RCN asks:**

- We know that health care staff at all levels are doing their best under extreme pressures, and it is important that this is recognised and acknowledged. However, it is vital that care in inappropriate places is not normalised; we are clear that these measures are not acceptable, and the focus should be on eradicating them.
- The government must provide funding to create additional clinical spaces, and the staff needed to work in them. Investment in social care and district nursing is vital too – allowing patients to receive care in the community, and leave hospital sooner.
- We would also expect the extent to which these practices are taking place, and details of the additional staffing required to maintain safe care during times of overcrowding, to be reported.

## **5. Improve support for student nurses**

**The issue:** There have been significant shortfalls in the number of students beginning nursing degrees over the last two years, and this year the target has been softened by the Scottish Government and reduced from 4,536 down to 3,656. UCAS statistics show that by the June deadline, applicants to nursing courses in Scotland were at the lowest level for six years.

Over the last two years over 1,600 fewer nursing students have started university than planned. This trend means the gap between the number of registered nurses that are needed, and the number entering the workforce, is set to widen even further.

### **RCN asks:**

- Tackling workplace pressures and fair pay are vital to make nursing more attractive but we're also calling on Scottish government to improve the financial support for student nurses. We surveyed our student members last year and found that nursing students across Scotland are facing serious financial pressures that are having a significant impact on their education and physical and mental wellbeing. 66% have considered dropping out of their course due to financial concerns.
- We're therefore calling on Scottish government to implement a cost-of-living increase to the bursary and establish a regular review to make sure it rises in line with the cost of living.

## **6. Ensure that efforts to make financial savings do not risk patient safety**

**The issue:** We're very concerned that current efforts to make financial savings risk patient safety and impact service delivery. For example, the recent Accounts Commission report on Integrated Joint Boards (IJBs) finance found that the majority of IJBs have only been able to find financial savings by not filling vacancies and that this weakens their ability to meet the rising demand for their services and maintain service quality.

We are hearing worrying reports about cuts to posts and services, including within Hospital at Home, health visiting and alcohol and drugs services. The staffing and service cuts being proposed by some of Scotland's IJBs and health boards, and the recruitment freeze announced by Ministers, are extremely worrying at a time when demand and health inequalities are increasing.

### **RCN asks:**

- We recognise that the Scottish government, NHS boards, local authorities and integration bodies are having to make tough financial decisions – these decisions need to be made while considering the whole health and care system and the big picture in terms of focusing on prevention and early intervention and boosting the sustainability of the workforce to meet patient need now and in the future.
- Scottish government also need to look at doing things differently and having a realistic conversation with the public about expectations, access to services and what is

achievable. Nursing staff are not afraid of innovation or reform, in fact they embrace and lead on this, but long-term investment is required.