

Response to Austrian Nursing Journal survey on 'Professional policy in Europe'

With a membership of half a million registered nurses, midwives, health visitors, nursing students, health care assistants and nurse cadets, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is the voice of nursing across the United Kingdom and the largest professional union of nursing staff in the world. RCN members work in a variety of hospital and community settings in the NHS and the independent sector.

The RCN promotes priorities for nursing and patient safety, works closely with wider professional bodies and trade unions, and lobbies governments and other bodies across the UK to develop, influence and implement policy that improves the quality of patient care.

1. Which topics is your professional association currently working on?

For the first time in history, thousands of nursing staff have taken part in strike action to demand fair pay and government action to address the staffing crisis and protect patient safety. Across all sectors, pay for nursing staff must reflect their unique and highly-skilled contribution, as well as address the years of underfunding nursing staff have experienced whilst remaining committed to their profession in the face of unprecedented challenges – particularly throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Across the UK, health and care services are under acute pressure, with unprecedented levels of demand, and growing waiting-times and backlog for treatment. In some cases, this is leading to further deterioration in health and wellbeing, exacerbating existing health inequalities as evidence shows that people living in more deprived areas are waiting longer for planned treatment.ⁱ

Nursing pay in publicly funded health and care services is the only lever available to government that would have an immediate impact on retention. Nursing staff are already long overdue a pay rise that recognises their value, skills and expertise. Analysis by London Economics showed that the salaries of experienced nurses have declined by 20% in real terms over the last ten years.ⁱⁱ This means nurses are effectively working unpaid one day a week, and many are facing extreme financial hardship.ⁱⁱⁱ

The below reflects current priorities for the RCN in relation to public policy making across the UK:

1. Enough nursing staff when and where they're needed, with ministers legally accountable for ensuring this
2. Nurse numbers set by real need now and into the future, not short-sighted political decisions
3. Governments plan for the long-term staffing needs and support UK nursing students
4. Welcome professionals from around the world, but all employers must do it ethically
5. Strong regulation to protect professionals and public, with RCN leading standard setting

6. Keep nursing staff working with regular above inflation pay rises
7. Ensure professionals can work free from discrimination, violence, bullying or harassment
8. Protect professional safety and wellbeing with everything from breaks to PPE
9. Nurse leaders at the heart of governments to lead for the profession
10. Nursing innovation is a core component in tackling global health challenges

2. How is the public perception of the nursing profession in your country?

The first ever strike by NHS nurses has the highest level of support among the public, according to a new YouGov poll¹. Two-thirds of the British public (66%) say they support the nurses' strike, with 45% of people saying they "strongly" support it. Industrial action from ambulance staff is the next most likely to have a high level of support among Britons (63%), while strikes involving firefighters and teachers also have considerable public support (58% and 50% respectively).

There is some indication that public support for the strikes may be dwindling, according to results from another polling organisation²: Ipsos' latest poll shows 45% support the upcoming strike action by nurses in England, which is lower than the 50% who supported similar nurse strikes across the UK in December and 59% in November. However, still only 3 in 10 (30%) oppose the strikes. Support is significantly higher among 2019 Labour voters, 65% are in favour of the strikes while 2019 Conservative voters are half as likely to say the same (32%).

3. Which political changes regarding nursing took place in your country recently?

In the UK, the RCN has played a prominent role in influencing legislative changes to safe staffing legislation. In 2020, the RCN joined 16 other health organisations in Wales to campaign for change to the Health and Social Care (Quality and Engagement) (Wales) Act 2020. The change means that the annual quality reports of NHS Health Boards must now explain how they have improved the quality of care in terms of workforce numbers, skills and planning according to the Health Care Standards. In 2021 the RCN secured the Welsh Government's commitment to extend section 25B of the Nurse Staffing Levels (Wales) Act 2016 to children's inpatient wards and is now calling for this legislation to be extended to cover all areas where nursing takes place.

In Scotland, The Health and Care (Staffing) Act received Royal Assent in June 2019, however, work towards implementation of the Act was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The legislation is the first in the UK to set out requirements for safe staffing across both health and care services. The Scottish Government has now published a timetable for implementation, which sets out a 21-month programme of work which will

¹ <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/12/20/nurses-and-ambulance-workers-have-most-public-supp>

² <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/support-nurses-strikes-lower-last-months-blame-placed-mainly-government>

see the Act come into force from April 2024. There is still no legal framework for staffing levels or workforce provision in England or Northern Ireland.

In England, the Health and Social Care Act became law in 2022. The Act has changed the way in which health and care is commissioned and delivered in England. We campaigned for additional mandates in this legislation as the Bill did not address a number of key RCN member priorities, including the fact that Government is not legally accountable for workforce planning, or legally responsible for tackling the nursing workforce crisis. During the passage of the Bill through Parliament, RCN members supported and engaged in a range of campaigning activities.

Understanding the size and skills of the current workforce, as well as demand for health and care services, is an important part of what the RCN believes will bring about staffing for safe and effective care. However, long term projections must lead to concrete action. Which is why the RCN has called for the Secretary of State for Health and Care to have legal accountability for delivering staffing for safe and effective care.

Without this accountability for the workforce, nursing staff will continue to be overworked and overstretched, unable to give patients the level of care they desperately need, and that patients deserve.

4. Which changes took place regarding nursing during the covid pandemic in your country?

The RCN captured information from members about their experiences during the pandemic. We have published these findings in the following reports:

- Personal protective equipment: Use and availability during the COVID-19 pandemic [LINK](#)
- Second Personal Protective Equipment Survey of UK Nursing Staff Report: Use and availability of PPE during the COVID-19 pandemic [LINK](#)
- RCN COVID-19 Vaccine Survey Report [LINK](#)
- RCN COVID-19 Staff Testing Survey Findings [LINK](#)

International nurses were exempt from paying the immigration health surcharge – this was an issue which the RCN had been campaigning for.

The abatement rules within the NHS pension scheme are currently suspended. The rules were initially suspended until April 2022 as a means of increasing the available workforce during the pandemic. However, following pressure from the RCN and others, the government has agreed to a further extension to 31 March 2025.

During the pandemic the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) (the UK's professional regulator for nursing) opened a temporary register for nursing staff.

ⁱ Kings Fund (2021) *Tackling the elective backlog – exploring the relationship between deprivation and waiting times*. Available at: [Tackling the elective backlog – exploring the relationship between deprivation and waiting times | The King's Fund \(kingsfund.org.uk\)](https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/tackling-the-elective-backlog)

ⁱⁱ London Economics (2022) *A decade of pay erosion: The destructive effect on UK nursing staff earnings and retention*. Available at: <https://london-economics.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/LE-RCN-Pay-campaigning-comms-FINAL-report-SENT2CLIENT-27-10-2022.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ London Economics (2022) *A decade of pay erosion: The destructive effect on UK nursing staff earnings and retention*. Available at: <https://london-economics.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/LE-RCN-Pay-campaigning-comms-FINAL-report-SENT2CLIENT-27-10-2022.pdf>