

RCN Briefing: Valuing Nursing – why Scotland urgently needs a Nursing Retention Strategy

In the context of unprecedented demand for nursing services, the nursing workforce is in crisis with high and rising numbers of vacant posts, not enough new staff entering the profession and a long lead-in time for domestic recruitment, and too many nursing staff leaving the profession. Retaining more of the existing workforce is vital to provide greater stability for health and care services and to begin to address Scotland's nursing staffing crisis.

We are calling on the Scottish Government to urgently develop and implement a Nursing Retention Strategy to tackle the exodus of nursing staff from health and care services.

Why is a retention strategy urgently needed in Scotland?

High numbers of nursing staff are leaving the profession every year, and too few are joining to replace them. At the same time, the demand for health care continues to increase. It is therefore vital that the Scottish Government deploy a range of interventions to improve nursing workforce retention, alongside action to boost domestic nursing supply.

- In Scotland there was a 13% increase in the number of nurses who left the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) register in the 12 months to September 2022. 2,690 nurses left the profession in this time, 314 more than the previous 12 months. Scotland saw a significantly higher increase in nurses leaving in this period, followed by Wales with a 6.4% rise, England (4%) and Northern Ireland (3%).ⁱ
- In the same period, the total number of nurses on the NMC register in Scotland increased by 195. While this is an overall small gain for the profession, there are currently over 4,600 registered nurse vacancies in Scotland's NHS.ⁱⁱ
- Each year the NMC conducts a survey of those who have left the permanent register. Of those surveyed in Scotland, less than half (48%) cited retirement as a top 3 reason for leaving. Changing personal circumstances, too much pressure and the negative impact of workplace culture were other top reasons given for leaving.ⁱⁱⁱ
- NMC data shows that 11% of those leaving the register in Scotland in the 12 months to September 2022 had been on the register for less than 10 years. A further 14% of leavers in the same period left after being on the register between 10 to 20 years.
- To fill the gaps in the nursing workforce, agency nursing use has increased dramatically, rising to the equivalent of 1,018 WTE staff in 2021-22 (up from 450 WTE in 2020-21). The cost in 2021-22 was £88.8m, more than double the cost the previous year.^{iv}
- Use of NHS bank staff has also increased and when combined with agency nursing use, the equivalent of 6,587 WTE bank and agency staff were used in NHS Scotland in 2021-22, at a cost of £321m.^v While there will always be times when some supplementary staffing is required, evidence clearly shows that an over-reliance on bank and agency staffing adds to clinical risk.
- There is a worrying lack of workforce data in social care but we do know that since 2014, there are over 1,300 fewer registered nurses in care homes for adults, a 25.7% decrease.

It takes three years to educate a newly registered nurse and, on top of this, for every nurse who leaves the profession valuable experience and expertise are lost. Many of those leaving will also have additional qualifications and experience of working in specialist roles. Data from UCAS show the number of acceptances onto nursing courses in 2022 fell by 8% compared to the previous year, with the total number of applicants also falling by 8%, adding to the workforce crisis of the future.

The reasons that nursing staff are leaving

A recent comprehensive review of the evidence on supporting nurses and midwives to deliver high quality care^{vi} found the key drivers of nursing attrition to be: staff shortages resulting in pressures, workload and work schedules, pay, support during education and on entry into the nursing workforce, bullying, harassment and discrimination experienced in the workplace. The consequences of these experiences are early retirement, reduced ability, and intention to quit.

In response to the 2021 RCN Employment Survey^{vii}, RCN Scotland members told us that:

- 73% work over their contracted hours at least once a week, with almost 40% doing so most shifts. Over half said these additional hours were unpaid.
- 72% are under too much pressure at work.
- Less than half (48%) are happy with their working hours and only a third (34%) feel able to balance their work and home lives.
- 6 in 10 stated they are actively planning on leaving or thinking about leaving their job (this compares to 38% who reported in 2020 that they were thinking of leaving nursing). Feeling undervalued (75%), concerns about low staffing levels (65%) and feeling under too much pressure (64%) are the most common reasons for wanting to leave their current job.
- Less than half stated they would recommend nursing as a career.
- 70% had experienced verbal abuse by patients/service users or relatives and 36% had experienced physical abuse. 37% experienced bullying by colleagues.
- Over half felt there were not sufficient opportunities to progress in their current role.

What needs to be covered in a Scottish Nursing Retention Strategy?

In 2017, the Scottish government published a Vision for Nursing in Scotland^{viii} which includes a commitment to provide clear and exciting career opportunities and trajectories. Instead, nurses in Scotland are telling us that there are not sufficient opportunities to progress. The Vision acknowledges that nursing has taken on new responsibilities, yet nurses have seen their pay decline in real terms over the last decade. Further, the 2030 Vision recognises that when registered nurse staffing levels fall, patient safety and outcomes decrease, and patient mortality increases. Despite this, we are currently seeing alarming moves to substitute registered nurses with nursing support workers in response to high numbers of registered nurse vacancies.

What we need is a Retention Strategy that goes beyond rhetoric and prioritises action to retain the skilled and experienced nursing staff that Scotland desperately needs. Key to this is safe staffing levels and fair pay. Our members have told us clearly that feeling undervalued, concerns about low staffing levels and workplace pressures are key reasons for wanting to leave nursing.

The Scottish government must deliver fully funded government health and care workforce plans to ensure long-term nursing supply, retention and recruitment to meet the needs of the population. This must be based on demand and population need rather than financial constraints. Ministers must also implement fair pay for nursing staff across health and social care to value and retain our existing experienced nursing workforce and to attract the workforce of the future.

In addition to addressing the fundamental issues of safe staffing and fair pay, Scotland needs a Nursing Retention Strategy which must include action to:

- **Ensure that all nursing staff can develop and progress in their careers** - Far too many of our members struggle to access professional development opportunities at work and instead have to do it in their own time and at their own cost. We are calling for protected time for continuing professional development for nurses working in all health and care settings and sufficient funding to cover the cost of the education programmes as well as backfill for staff undertaking training.
- **Promote health at work** - with a focus on adequate facilities and time for breaks. We know that lack of access to breaks is a significant issue with many members regularly unable to take breaks due to staffing pressures. For many the situation has deteriorated so much over recent years that this has almost become the norm.
- **Enable and promote flexible working** – following lobbying by RCN members, improvements have been made to the NHS Scotland retire and return guidelines that will make it easier for experienced nursing staff to continue to work while drawing their pension. But action needs to go further to increase access to flexible working opportunities across an individual's career. Employers should enable and promote flexible working, offering a range of flexible employment policies and practice, and should undertake reporting on flexible working to enable monitoring by government.
- **Increase support for nurses in the early stages of their careers** – access to support and mentoring is vital for supporting nurses as they transition from students to qualified practitioners. Good quality opportunities for post registration learning lead to a more satisfied workforce able to provide good quality care. Instead, due to chronic workforce shortages, newly qualified nurses (NQNs) are being left unsupported which is having a huge impact on wellbeing and causing many to reconsider their career in nursing.
- **Improve culture and wellbeing** - Evidence shows that good working environments and culture are fundamental for staff wellbeing and the quality of care. High stress levels, blame culture, bullying and harassment are all problems that predate the pandemic and unless action is taken now, they will continue. The King's Fund *Courage of Compassion*^{ix} report examines how to transform nurses' and midwives' workplaces so that they can thrive and flourish and are better able to provide the compassionate, high-quality care that they wish to offer. A retention strategy should build on the recommendations within this report.

- **Improve staff engagement** - A mechanism is needed for staff engagement to capture the views and intentions of staff before they become disillusioned and disengaged. Improved staff communication is also needed, with open and honest conversations with staff about the challenges they face. This ties into the need to improve culture as staff must feel psychologically safe to raise concerns and be confident that the organization will focus on learning and improving, not blame.
- **Increase student retention** – Of the students due to complete their degree in 2021, 9% of students did not complete their course with a further 15% still active but not yet graduated. Action is needed to support student retention and this must include access to financial support as well as ensuring that, while on placement, students are not being used to fill gaps in the registered nursing workforce and receive support and mentoring. In clinical areas that are taking students on placement and where staff are taking responsibility for students learning, there should be dedicated time built into that establishment to fill that role.

References:

- [nmc-register-september-2022-scotland-data-tables.xls \(nmc.org.uk\)](#)
- [NHSScotland workforce | Turas Data Intelligence](#)
- [Leavers' survey 2022 \(nmc.org.uk\)](#)
- [NHSScotland workforce | Turas Data Intelligence](#)
- [NHSScotland workforce | Turas Data Intelligence](#)
- [The courage of compassion | The King's Fund \(kingsfund.org.uk\)](#)
- [Employment Survey 2021: Scotland | Publications | Royal College of Nursing \(rcn.org.uk\)](#)
- [Nursing 2030 Vision: Promoting Confident, Competent and Collaborative Nursing for Scotland's Future \(www.gov.scot\)](#)
- [The courage of compassion | The King's Fund \(kingsfund.org.uk\)](#)