



Edinburgh

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2022;376:o674<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o674>

Published: 14 March 2022

Scotland's new staffing plan is criticised for failing to tackle retention problems

Bryan Christie

Plans to plug critical gaps in the health and social care workforce in Scotland through a series of new measures could be undone because of a serious omission, doctors' leaders have warned.

A new workforce strategy announced by the Scottish government focuses on recruitment and training to deliver sustainable staffing levels but devotes little attention to policies that can help to retain existing staff.¹ Bernie Scott, deputy chair of BMA Scotland said, "It takes a long time to train doctors—yet at the moment we face the pressing risk of losing more and more of those we currently have. We need much more coordinated, urgent action now to guard against the possibility of losing many doctors before new recruitment has any chance of making an impact."

The strategy sets out plans to increase the NHS workforce by an additional 1800 full time posts—equivalent to a 1% increase—over the next four years and an additional 800 general practitioners by 2028. Figures will be published later this year for required workforce growth across health and social care, which will be reviewed annually. Initiatives aimed at achieving the targets will include spending £11m launching international recruitment campaigns and establishing a Centre for Workforce Supply, increasing medical school places by 500, and investing £230m a year in nursing and midwifery training.

The report acknowledges the importance of properly rewarding and nurturing staff and says that further improvements will be made to staff wellbeing. But with consultant vacancies now running at over 15% of all posts in Scotland² and a nursing vacancy rate of 8.2%, which equates to 5761 unfilled posts,³ there is disappointment that more is not being done to help existing staff.

Scott welcomed some of the measures in the strategy but described it as a mixed bag. He said that action was needed on fairer rewards, fixing pension tax changes, creating a better work-life balance, "and just making NHS Scotland a more attractive place to work, with an improved culture and less of a focus on targets and blame."

The same point was made by Colin Poolman, interim director of the Royal College of Nursing in Scotland: "There is an emphasis on recruiting into the nursing profession but scant detail on how this will be achieved to tackle the record high levels of vacancies or how to retain existing experienced staff—many have told us that low pay and poor staffing levels are driving them out of the profession."

There has been no shortage of reviews and reports on workforce planning in Scotland over the past 20 years,^{4,5} but problems in securing sustainable staffing

levels have persisted. A report from Audit Scotland in 2017⁶ said that responsibility for workforce planning was confused and that the Scottish government and NHS boards "have not planned their NHS workforce effectively for the long term."

- 1 Scottish Government. Health and social care: national workforce strategy. Mar 2022. www.gov.scot/publications/national-workforce-strategy-health-social-care
- 2 BMA. Consultant retention in Scotland in 2021. <https://www.bma.org.uk/media/3840/bma-scotland-consultants-retention-report-feb-2021.pdf>
- 3 Howarth G. NHS Scotland releases 'worrying' nursing and midwifery vacancy numbers. *Nurs Times* 2021. <https://www.nursingtimes.net/news/workforce/nhs-scotland-releases-worrying-nursing-and-midwifery-vacancy-numbers-08-12-2021>
- 4 Christie B. Reports recommend shorter training for hospital doctors and longer training for GPs in Scotland. *BMJ* 2004;328:1456. doi: 10.1136/bmj.328.7454.1456-b.
- 5 Scottish Government. Health workforce. <https://www.gov.scot/policies/health-workforce/workforce-planning-and-projections>
- 6 Audit Scotland. NHS workforce planning. The clinical workforce in secondary care. https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/uploads/docs/report/2017/nr_170727_nhs_workforce.pdf