

Claire Haughey
Convener
Health, Social Care & Sport Committee
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

6 February 2025

Dear Clare

Following the debate in Chamber on 12 December 2024 on the Committee's Remote and Rural Health Inquiry where Parliament noted the conclusions and recommendations contained within your 13th Report, I would like to take this opportunity to provide a more detailed outline of the work to progress development of a Rural and Island Workforce Recruitment Strategy and evidence gathered by officials which is informing our new approach.

As you are aware, in the National Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care ([Health and social care: national workforce strategy - gov.scot](#)), published in March of 2022, Scottish Government committed to develop a Remote and Rural Workforce Recruitment Strategy for Health and Social Care.

As part of the initial work to scope the best approach to a Rural and Island Workforce Recruitment Strategy, extensive engagement across Scottish Government has taken place. One of the first outcomes from this engagement was the realisation that failing to include social work and children's services including early learning and childcare, would risk failure of the strategy to maximise impact and realise success. It also came to the fore that the available workforce pool for those sectors was equally important in the delivery of rural and island health and care services.

Early engagement with NHS Employers also highlighted core issues in recruiting and retaining staff in rural and island areas, some of which are out with the control of employers. Among the challenges identified as impacting the ability to recruit and retain staff were a lack of local training opportunities, access to education, challenges with accommodation, transport, and childcare provision.

A review of reports relating to the population and demographics of rural and island areas was also conducted. This review concluded the following:

Scottish Ministers, special advisers and the Permanent Secretary are covered by the terms of the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016. See www.lobbying.scot

- The vast majority of Scotland’s geographical landscape comprises of smaller communities.
- Rural areas with settlements of less than 3000 people make up 98 per cent of Scotland’s landmass and 17 per cent of its population.
- Scotland has a total of 790 islands, with 73 of these currently inhabited¹. The proportion of people aged 65 and over on our islands rose from 18% in 2001 to 26% in 2020, whilst the proportion of the island population under the age of 25 fell from 28% to 24%².

In August 2023, Scotland’s Rural College (SRUC) launched its rural and islands report³. This report, the first in a series funded by Scottish Government to support work on developing a Rural Delivery Plan found that rural and island economies and communities are incredibly diverse. Issues faced in one locality are not always the same in the next. Furthermore, SRUC found on average that very remote mainland areas, as well as islands, are faced with some of the most significant demographic challenges: – slow population growth; ageing populations; fewer young children that lead to a long-term shrinking of the economic base; high levels of vacant and second home ownership; affordable housing concerns from locals; higher fuel prices; etc.

A review of historical publications⁴ relating to the recruitment of health and care staff to rural and island communities was also conducted. Many of these such as the *Making it Work* framework - an international collaboration including representatives from NHS Scotland health boards - whilst providing employers with a framework to support rural recruitment, have not resulted in significant improvements to long term successful recruitment. It must be noted, however, that these historical publications also recognised that no two rural communities are the same and with that in mind, developed recommendations that were not prescriptive but rather employers could select actions which would support their unique communities.

In collaboration with the National Centre for Remote and Rural Health and Care (NCRRH), hosted within NHS Education for Scotland (NES), the Scottish Government has also hosted a series of thematic engagement sessions with a broad range of employers and stakeholders across health, social care, social work and children’s services alongside representatives from Trades Unions. These themed sessions focussed on challenges and barriers to recruitment; good practise, marketing of jobs, community engagement, communities of practise, and pastoral care and provided an opportunity for a two-way knowledge exchange, enabling stakeholders to not only discuss challenges to rural and island recruitment, but to also share best practice.

¹ [Report offers nuanced view of island and very remote regions | SRUC](#)

² <https://spice-spotlight.scot/2022/03/24/population-growth-and-decline-on-scotlands-islands-2001-to-2020/>

³ [NISRIE | Rural Exchange | SRUC](#)

- ⁴ [The Dewar Report 1912](#)
- [Kerr Report 2005](#)
- [The National Framework for Service Change in Scotland 2005](#)
- [Delivering for Remote and Rural Healthcare: The Final Report of the Remote and Rural Workstream 2007](#)
- [NHS Education for Scotland: Supporting Remote and Rural Healthcare 2013](#)
- [Being Rural: exploring sustainable solutions for remote and rural healthcare 2014](#)
- [Making it Work: A Framework for Remote Rural Workforce Stability 2018](#)
- [Being Here final report 2018](#)
- [Remote and Rural General Practice in Scotland 2018](#)
- [Shaping the Future Together: Remote and Rural General Practice Working Group report 2020](#)

Scottish Ministers, special advisers and the Permanent Secretary are covered by the terms of the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016. See www.lobbying.scot

External factors such as the availability of affordable housing, access to education, access to regular and reliable public transport, lack of development opportunities, availability of childcare options and digital infrastructure access, were consistently highlighted as barriers to recruitment, with stakeholders citing repeatedly that a strategy for recruitment does not go far enough to overcome the challenges faced in attracting and retaining staff. Also echoed by stakeholders throughout the sessions was the fact that not only is each rural or island community unique, but oftentimes the same job role has differing functions dependent upon which rural or island area an individual is being employed in.

Based on this initial scoping work and engagement with stakeholders it is clear that recruitment and retention of healthcare workers in rural and island areas is often, as you are aware, compounded with by geographical and demographic factors which make it challenging to attract and retain staff.

We know that employers are familiar with successful recruitment practices which work in larger urban areas but in order to achieve success in rural areas, the other external impacting factors must therefore be addressed in parallel. Cross-government work to address these factors is already underway via the Rural Delivery Plan (RDP) and the National Islands Plan, and the development of a framework and sustainable operating model to deliver care to remote, rural and island communities.

The Scottish Government is committed to developing a sustainable health and social care system that ensures people get the right care, at the right time, in the right place and recognise the significant and unique recruitment challenges and barriers faced by our rural and island health and social care employers.

As stated above, the unique aspects of life and work in each community means that what may be successful recruitment practice in one, may not work in another and interventions often need to be tailored to specific communities if they are to have an impact. The approach to recruiting in rural areas needs to be more dynamic and engage communities directly in order to be successful and have the greatest impact.

The previous recommendations of the Committee are very much reflected in the sustained proactive approach that the Scottish Government is taking to rural and island recruitment, rather than publishing a static one-size-fits-all strategy which is unlikely to be impactful across our rural and island communities and be limited in its success. We are listening to the committee and stakeholders and developing in partnership, a strategic direct support model. This model takes a sustained whole-system approach to provide rural and island health and social care employers with the help they need to overcome recruitment challenges.

To help us collectively deliver the model, we will put in place each of the following:

- A Rural and Island Recruitment Network,
- A Support Toolkit, and
- A Living Library

(see Annex A for full details)

The implementation and impact of this strategic model will be regularly monitored in partnership with the Centre for Workforce Supply, NCRRH and the Rural & Island Recruitment Network. Both qualitative and quantitative data will be analysed on an annual basis to assess the success of this model.

Scottish Ministers, special advisers and the Permanent Secretary are covered by the terms of the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016. See www.lobbying.scot



I hope this update provides committee members with assurance that Scottish government continues to seek the view of stakeholders to inform development and policy which will support successful island and rural recruitment for health and social care services, ensuring sustainable services and workforce now and into the future to meet the needs of the people of Scotland.

Yours sincerely



NEIL GRAY

Scottish Ministers, special advisers and the Permanent Secretary are covered by the terms of the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016. See www.lobbying.scot

St Andrew's House, Regent Road, Edinburgh EH1 3DG
www.gov.scot

INVESTORS IN PEOPLE™
We invest in people Silver



ANNEX A

Rural and Island Recruitment Network

Membership of the network will be open to employers and relevant partners across health, social care, social work, and children's services and will provide a forum with partners able to discuss recruitment challenges and seek solutions via knowledge exchange, best practice models, and case studies.

The network will also provide employers with a mechanism through which known issues can be directly escalated to the Scottish Government alongside an opportunity for employers to be updated on other cross-cutting wider Scottish Government work which impacts rural and island communities.

Living Library

Comprising of an evidence-based menu of successful rural and island recruitment strategies, initiatives, and case-studies, which are freely available for reference, use, and discussion at the network, this will be a continuously revised invaluable resource for employers to draw from when considering recruitment and retention in their areas.

There are already pockets of innovative and successful work happening across Scotland in terms of recruitment and retention in rural areas. The living library will pull this together and showcase it in one easy to access library, enabling stakeholders to browse through a range of options and decide what is practical and possible to implement within their own contexts.

The library will continue to grow the volume of evidence within this field by encouraging colleagues through the network and wider to provide their own feedback and submit additional initiatives, case studies and other learning materials.

Outputs from wider cross-cutting Scottish Government work which impacts rural and island communities will also be included where appropriate within the library as that work progresses.

Toolkit

This will provide a resource to support employers plan their approach to recruitment activity or to review the quality and efficiency of their existing practices.

This toolkit, along with the network and library will support employers in designing roles that fit their organisations' needs and ensure that job adverts speak to the right audience. It will also support employers in welcoming new recruits and providing effective pastoral support.

The toolkit will take into consideration wider government work such as the National Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care and other cross-cutting workstreams to ensure that employers processes for recruitment are effective and ethical, and where possible, that employers work with partners either across the integrated care system or regional footprint.

Scottish Ministers, special advisers and the Permanent Secretary are covered by the terms of the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016. See www.lobbying.scot



The toolkit will prompt employers to think about how they can make a collaborative approach effective, as well as signposting them to sources of advice and guidance on the practicalities of conducting successful recruitment, referencing the Living Library and network.

The toolkit will be delivered on a readily accessible platform to support utilisation from a wide range of employers, with the toolkit being reviewed by the Rural & Island Recruitment Network and updated quarterly to ensure the most up to date guidance and links are included.

Scottish Ministers, special advisers and the Permanent Secretary are covered by the terms of the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016. See www.lobbying.scot

St Andrew's House, Regent Road, Edinburgh EH1 3DG
www.gov.scot

INVESTORS IN PEOPLE™
We invest in people Silver

