

News release

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Growing the primary care workforce a significant challenge

The Scottish Government is facing a significant challenge to increase the number of people working in GP surgeries, says the public spending watchdog.

Expanding the GP-based workforce is a key to the government's aim of moving more care into the community. But an ageing clinical workforce and problems with recruitment and retention will make it difficult for the government to meet its target of 800 new GPs. Similar pressures mean integration authorities will find it challenging to significantly increase the wider healthcare workforce.

Government commitments to train additional GPs, nurses and midwives are on track - but it is not clear how many will go on to join the primary care workforce on the ground. There is also a lack of national data on current workforce numbers, costs, activity and demand.

This data gap makes it hard for the government to plan the workforce effectively. And it will make it difficult to assess whether the new GP contract is achieving its aims. Meanwhile, much more needs to be done to explain the changes in primary care to the public and how they affect the rest of the health system.

Caroline Gardner, the Auditor General for Scotland, said: "Scotland's primary care workforce is under pressure and operating in an uncertain climate. That makes detailed planning for the future even more important.

"To date, the Scottish Government has introduced major policy changes without a reliable basis for its plans. It now needs to get a much clearer picture of the workforce and set out detailed plans addressing how its initiatives will improve patient care and deal with future demand on services."

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Notes to Editor:

1. The audit looked at planning around the GP-based primary care workforce of GPs and the wider clinical multi-disciplinary team of nurses, allied health professionals (AHPs) and pharmacists, as they are central to the implementation of the new GMS contract. It did not include dentists, optometrists, community nursing or care home staff. However, many issues highlighted in the report are also relevant to this section of the primary care workforce.
2. Over 1 in 3 GPs are aged 50 and over, and over half of practice nurses are aged 50 and over.
3. The Scottish Government has reported that, between 2015/16 and 2017/18, an additional 39 GPs were recruited as a result of recruitment and retention funding. But based on the number of additional GPs recruited to date, and the scale of pressures on the workforce, it will be challenging for the Scottish Government to recruit an additional 800 GPs by 2027.
4. Collecting primary care data has been difficult because most practices are essentially small businesses run by self-employed GP partners, who were not obliged to submit data on practice staff

until this was included as part of the new GP contract. Data is only available as estimates from the primary care workforce survey. The survey is carried out every two years and was not mandatory, so it is not a reliable source of trend data.

5. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Auditor General for Scotland. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 are available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk

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