

A sustainable future for health: Workforce, system and environment

Our manifesto for the 2026 Scottish Parliament election



ROYAL COLLEGE OF
PHYSICIANS AND
SURGEONS OF GLASGOW

Contents

- 2 Our vision
- 3 Our three asks
- 4 Foreword from the President
- 5 Actively support a sustainable workforce to deliver quality assured patient care
- 8 Deliver a sustainable system which supports efficiency and prevention
- 11 Build a healthy environment for people and the planet
- 13 About the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow

Our vision

A sustainable, safe and high-quality health service for every person in Scotland – powered by a valued workforce, efficient and preventative care, and a healthy environment for people and the planet.



Our three asks

1. Actively support a sustainable workforce to deliver quality assured patient care
2. Deliver a health system that drives efficiency and prevention
3. Build a healthy environment for people and planet



Foreword from the President



As the UK's only multidisciplinary royal college, we see first-hand the pressures on our healthcare workforce, training and service. Wellbeing is eroded, leading to burnout, low morale, and a sense that the system no longer gives clinicians the time or tools to deliver the best standard of care for their patients. When the workforce is exhausted, the entire system becomes fragile.

A system in crisis is coupled by deep-rooted health inequalities which continue to grow across Scotland. People in our most deprived communities are experiencing poorer health outcomes, shorter healthy life expectancy and greater barriers to accessing the care they need.

We must not forget that our NHS is built on its people, who continue to come to work everyday with the same dedication and passion to serve their communities. It is vital we hear and learn from their experiences to ensure the health service is sustainable and fit for the future.

However, implementing meaningful reform cannot hinge on the profession alone. To bring forward the urgent change needed, we must embrace whole-system challenges together and work in collaboration.

Professor Hany Eteiba
President

Ask one: **Actively support a sustainable workforce to deliver quality assured patient care**

Solution one:

Strengthen career progression by increasing the number of specialty training posts

In our 2025 Focus on Physicians survey, 35% of consultants in Scotland reported weekly gaps in resident doctors' rotas over the past year. This significantly affects their ability to provide safe, quality patient care.

Our resident doctors told us increasing competition for training places or “bottlenecking” is directly impacting their progression to consultant level. With many struggling to train in their chosen specialty owing to a lack of availability of places, resident doctors are seeking training outside of the UK or leaving the profession altogether. The current training model does not meet the need for specialist care in Scotland and as a result, will reduce NHS Scotland's ability to provide timely specialist care in the coming decade. Pressure will grow particularly in remote and deprived areas where shortages are most acute. It is critical that we focus on training to ensure capacity throughout the whole career pathway. Without proper training today we will not have consultants tomorrow.

In Scotland, we also have an ageing consultant workforce without enough resident doctors progressing through training to replace them. Consultants in Scotland are already overstretched, working with limited resources to respond to a high demand for care. Under pressure and undervalued, 23.9% of consultants surveyed said they intend to retire earlier than planned. We risk losing experienced clinicians due to early retirement, leaving gaps in the workforce without newly trained consultants to replace them.



This pressure is also felt by the surgical workforce. In 2025, 56% of core and 40% of higher surgical trainees considered leaving training in the past 12 months (Royal College of Surgeons, 2025).

Around 1 in 9 people in Scotland (595,591) are estimated to be on at least one new outpatient, inpatient or day case waiting list (Public Health Scotland, 2026). Sustaining efforts to reduce waiting lists are at risk, as gaps in the medical and surgical workforce inhibit the health service's ability to meet demand for safe, timely and effective patient care across the system.

Ask one:

Actively support a sustainable workforce to deliver quality assured patient care

Solution two:

Creating a working environment that prioritises wellbeing and recognises value



The NHS is one of Scotland's anchor institutions and one of the largest public sector employers in the country. To ensure we can keep attracting people to the workforce, the NHS must deliver on promises made to staff at all levels.

Doctors across the UK are increasingly required to deliver more complex care. Alongside widespread vacancies, low morale in the existing workforce is clear as almost half of consultants in our 2025 Focus on Physicians survey reported their enjoyment of work has declined.

When asked how to address this, doctors overwhelmingly reported that basic improvements such as better IT equipment and lighter workloads would boost their wellbeing.

Similar experiences were reported by consultant surgeons in 2025, with 61% of respondents citing burnout and stress as result of excessive workloads to be the main challenge in surgery (Royal College of Surgeons, 2025).

For resident doctors and surgeons in training, a key reason for considering leaving a training programme was that they "did not feel valued as a trainee" alongside the negative impact that the training programme had on their mental health (Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow's Resident Doctors' Committee, 2026).

Improved active travel options and car parking, dedicated rest areas and nutritious food available on shift are among the simple steps that can improve morale.

The needs of dentists in hospital settings mirror those in medicine and surgery.

In a 2025 survey carried out by Dental Protection, almost half of respondents (49%) said they felt they should keep working even when their mental health was suffering, and a similar number (47%) said there was nobody else to cover for them if they did not attend. A further 33% said pressure to meet demand for NHS appointments and a target driven culture contributed to feeling as though they should continue to work (Dental Protection, 2025).

To relieve this pressure, it is vital to address access to NHS dental care across Scotland in a way which supports the dental team to deliver optimised patient care.

Ask one:

Actively support a sustainable workforce to deliver quality assured patient care

Solution three:

Commit to support time for training and continued professional development

Education underpins the health profession, yet doctors are too often forced to push out time for training. Resident doctors are increasingly being used as a service provision without being given adequate time to develop in their chosen specialty. Likewise, senior doctors report that busy workloads affect their ability to train and supervise other doctors.

Though surgery remains a popular career choice, 44% of all surgical residents reported a lack of adequate time for training (Royal College of Surgeons, 2025). Similar pressures on dental clinical trainers and trainees exist. Building in the proper time for training and professional development will require a whole system approach.

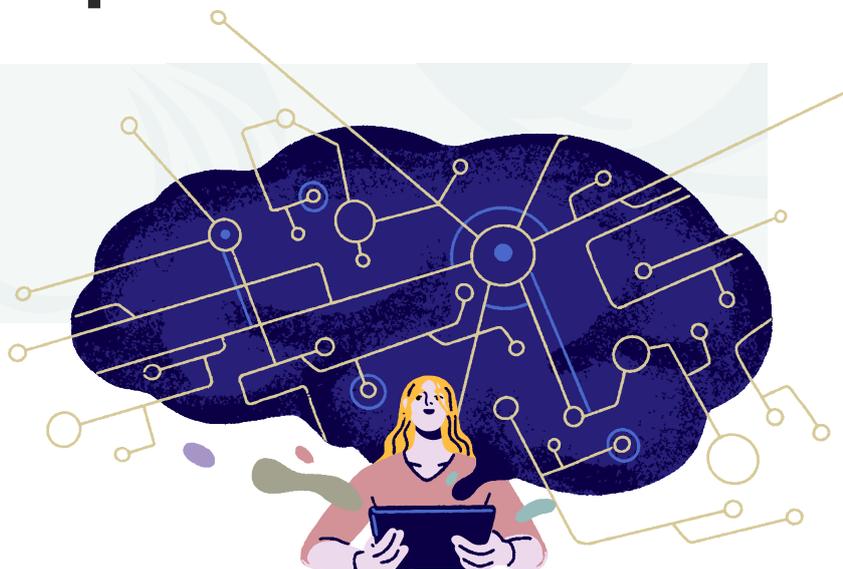


Ask two: **Deliver a sustainable system which supports efficiency and prevention**

Solution one: Accelerate digital transformation which is accessible and intuitive to streamline delivery

Artificial intelligence is a growing influence in our lives, and the health service is already looking to the benefits of this new technology. With responsible implementation, this has the potential to revolutionise care.

However, a deeper shift from analogue to fully digital systems is still needed, and that transition will make a real difference. Current digital systems are complex. Instead of streamlining the delivery of care, they are too often difficult to navigate and create more work for clinicians. Inefficiencies increase the likelihood for administrative error while reducing the time clinicians are able to spend with patients. Reforming IT systems to facilitate efficient interoperability between health boards and remove use barriers will be essential.



Ask two: **Deliver a sustainable system which supports efficiency and prevention**

Solution two: Optimise the use of existing NHS facilities to deliver timely care

Long waiting lists across specialty care in Scotland mean patients experience delays and last-minute cancellations, with their conditions often deteriorating as they wait for treatment. There is a need to look at where work is taking place and identify barriers to accessing care. Audit Scotland's 2025 report highlighted a need to meet increased staffing with efforts to increase NHS productivity, which is still falling behind pre-pandemic levels due to system challenges. Optimising existing NHS facilities is an important step to help the service meet high demand for care.

However, outside of official figures, a lot of waiting lists are hidden within the NHS in Scotland. The movement of patients through the system from one waiting list to another distorts figures, and clinicians are calling for greater transparency to highlight stopgaps and make meaningful improvements.

At the same time, too many staff are trying to navigate a system that often frustrates the delivery of surgical care, rather than enabling all members of the team to deliver services to patients in the most timely and efficient way.

In the 2025 UK Surgical Workforce Survey, 53% of consultants reported that theatre access is a critical barrier to deliver care.



Increasing the surgical workforce is only part of the solution. Changing work practices so that theatre and other care facilities are available 24/7 will help to reduce waiting lists by allowing elective care to run more smoothly alongside emergency cases.

In quarter ending March 2025, around one in four patients were waiting over a year to receive their dental treatment under a general anaesthetic (GA), often experiencing pain and dental infections whilst waiting. The longest waiting times exceeded three years (British Dental Association Scotland, 2025).

Dentists are often competing for surgery space to carry out procedures. Committed investment is needed to increase availability and capacity to address growing dental GA waiting lists.

Ask two: **Deliver a sustainable system which supports efficiency and prevention**

Solution three: Investing in care in the community

Population health has been on a steady decline across Scotland. An investment in community driven care, with a focus on prevention, will relieve pressure on acute care and keep people well while they wait for treatment.

Research by the King's Fund shows that though far reaching, community health services can be misunderstood and therefore poorly funded compared to need (King's Fund, 2024). From digitally enabled and self-directed care to treatment delivered in the home and community clinics, these services are a vital to addressing poor health and bringing down waiting lists.

Expanding community health centres and population health initiatives will help people stay out of hospital. Making sure patients are fit for treatment will also help to reduce last minute cancellations. Following treatment, we must ensure the system allows for appropriate discharge by investing in social care services. However, this must be met with a commitment to address inequalities that drive poor health outcomes.



Ask three:

Build a healthy environment for people and the planet

Solution one:

Develop green infrastructure for a carbon neutral NHS

As a member of the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change, we are calling on the next Scottish Government to adopt green initiatives that will push forward sustainable development and a resilient health service.

To achieve a carbon neutral health service, we call for the next government to provide sufficient capital investment across health boards and funding to decarbonise NHS infrastructure, estates, and services. This will include accelerating the transition to electrification of the NHS fleet and deliver public transport and active travel routes to NHS sites for staff, patients and visitors combined with actions to deliver resilience in health and care services.

This must also be met by establishing clear public targets for green skills creation within the NHS.

Specialty initiatives such as the Intercollegiate Green Theatre Checklist and Green Renal provide a clear practical guide to implement sustainable practices into NHS services. We encourage the next Scottish Government to work with professional bodies, including royal colleges, to identify challenges and expand similar initiatives across more specialties.



Ask three:

Build a healthy environment for people and the planet

Solution two:

Structure a healthy environment to support population health

Rising obesity rates are one of our biggest challenges in health, which has an impact in almost every area of the NHS.

In 2024, national statistics report over a third of adults in Scotland were obese and overweight. Evidence from Obesity Action Scotland reveals that at least half of Scottish children will experience overweight and obesity by the age of 14 (Obesity Action Scotland, 2024).

Among the risk factors for experiencing obesity over a lifetime, poverty, economic and social deprivation lead, alongside access to nutritious food.

Securing a sustainable and healthy food environment is vital if we are to curb obesity in the population, while also addressing the climate impact of ultra-processed food.

The disposable vape ban was a significant step to reduce harm to the health of the population and the environment. We are calling on the next Scottish Government to uphold a commitment to tackle vaping in younger groups and protect the next generation from the marketing of tobacco products aimed at children.

We recognise that vaping has a positive impact on smoking cessation and plays a key role in treatment for existing smokers. However, we urge the next government to continue to invest in research into potential harms, particularly for those who have never smoked.



About the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow



The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow is a global community of healthcare professionals committed to improving patient care. For more than 425 years, we have been delivering excellence in education and training, and elevating standards through our gold-standard assessments. Today, we remain the UK's only multidisciplinary royal college, giving us a distinctive voice in healthcare.

More at rcpsg.ac.uk

Get in touch

Dr Morven McElroy, Honorary Secretary and a consultant geriatrician, is our College's clinical lead on policy and external engagement

Hannah Parker, PR and Public Affairs Manager

media@rcpsg.ac.uk

References

Audit Scotland, 2025, NHS in Scotland 2025: Finance and Performance

British Dental Association Scotland, 2025, Behind the Wait: Exploring Dental General Anaesthetic Waiting Times in Scotland

Dental Protection, 2025, Dental Professionals Feel They Have no Choice But to Work When Their Mental Health is Suffering

King's Fund, 2024, Making Care Closer to Home a Reality

Obesity Action Scotland, 2024, Understanding Childhood Weight in Scotland: What can Longitudinal Data Tell Us?

Public Health Scotland, 2026, NHS Waiting Times – Stage of Treatment: Inpatients, Day Cases and New Outpatients

Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow's Resident Doctors' Committee, 2026, Resident Doctors' Workforce Survey [unpublished]

Royal College of Physicians, Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, 2025, 2025 Focus on Physicians survey

Royal College of Surgeons, 2025, UK Surgical Workforce Survey



ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS OF GLASGOW

Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow

232-242 St Vincent Street, Glasgow, G2 5RJ

+44 (0)141 221 6072

media@rcpsg.ac.uk

rcpsg.ac.uk