

Scottish Government criticised for physiotherapy workforce ‘failure’

A cross-party coalition of MSPs told The Scottish Government to “get to grips” with addressing a critical workforce shortage in the physiotherapy sector.

Speaking in Scottish Parliament on Thursday Labour MSP Alex Rowley, who represents Mid Scotland and Fife and brought this issue to the chamber, said that the government’s failure in workforce planning results in more issues building up across numerous areas for the NHS.

But The Scottish Government said that it has played a hand in strengthening the physiotherapy sector over the last ten years.

Mr Rowley said: “People know the challenges and difficulties they’re having in accessing GP services. Scotland’s ageing society creates a growing population of frail elderly and those with multiple long-term conditions that require physiotherapy in acute and community settings. And I suggest we must look to how we can take some of the pressure from GP practices.”

The MSP referred to an email he received from a chartered physiotherapist in his constituency, who says that it has been “extremely difficult” to fill their team of community respiratory specialists due to Scotland not meeting the demand

via education and training.

The physiotherapist said: “With hospitals at maximum capacity and vulnerable people lying on trolleys and corridors, sometimes for the whole admission. The shortage of physiotherapy staff impacts across our teams. Staff morale is suffering as we work as we work with increasing levels of stress and work pressures and we are prevented from delivering the care that we would wish to provide.

“The shortage of physiotherapists, impacts on their local communities, their services and staff physiotherapy is essentially reduced to hospital admissions, speed up discharge from hospital and reduce resilience on social care, which are all critical.”

Mr. Rowley’s push to address this workforce shortage has attracted cross-party support, including from the Scottish Conservatives and Scottish Liberal Democrats.



Sue Webber MSP for Lothian at Holyrood ©The Edinburgh Reporter

Conservative MSP Sue Webber said: “Patients desperately need more physiotherapists. The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy said patients’ recoveries are being put in jeopardy by a worsening workforce crisis; with Scotland now lagging behind other parts of the UK on physiotherapy training.

“This shortage in Scotland’s physiotherapy workforce creates further challenges across the healthcare system and that ultimately impacts patient care.”

Following the debate, Scottish Liberal Democrat leader Alex Cole-Hamilton said: “Physiotherapists are a vital part of health care in Scotland. Their work, alongside GPs and hospital staff, is a key part of ensuring that people get the treatment they need as quickly as possible.

“We support expanded primary care teams, including physiotherapists, to reduce the pressure on GPs and improve access. Ministers need to set out a plan for how training places can reflect this increased demand for physiotherapists.”

Jenni Minto, Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health, defended the government’s record on supporting and growing the physiotherapy sector in Scotland, noting that the number of physiotherapists working in NHS Scotland has increased by 29% over the last decade.

She said: “It’s important to note that there are currently over three and a half thousand people working in physiotherapy across NHS Scotland. This includes physiotherapy support workers who are an integral part of the workforce and also play a vital role in achieving the best outcomes for individuals. At the end of December 2023, physiotherapy had a vacancy rate of 6.7%, which compares a year previous to 9.3%.

“The Scottish Government is not complacent and I recognise the need to recruit and train greater numbers of physiotherapists for two reasons. Firstly, to support the workforce needs of

the future and to ensure the sustainability of this vital profession and secondly, if we're serious about reforming our NHS and delivering more preventative care, then physiotherapist will be a key component to this."