

# RCPATH response to the Scottish parliament Health, Social Care and Sport Committee call for evidence on remote and rural healthcare

20 October 2023

*Responses agreed at the Scotland Regional Council meeting on 9 October 2023*

- **Are there any immediate issues unique to remote and rural communities which the National Centre will need to focus on to improve primary and community care in these areas?**

Access to diagnostics in remote and rural further contributes to the inequality in healthcare experienced across these areas. The North of Scotland typically has to send histopathology samples from Highland and the Islands to centres in Aberdeen and beyond. This can add many days onto the already extended turnaround time and further delay diagnoses. These areas also struggle to recruit key members of staff and the vacancy rates remain higher than elsewhere.

- **Are there any issues which the National Centre will be unable to address, which may require further policy action from the Government?**

Recruitment and retainment issues for staff may need specific action such as enhanced rates of pay or “golden handshakes” in order to secure key staff in these challenging landscaped for workforce. Reliance on locums when available is highly expensive and not a long term solution.

- **What would you like to see included in the Scottish Government’s forthcoming Remote and Rural Workforce Strategy?**

Enhanced to improve recruitment of key senior staff including enhanced pay and signing on fee etc, along with other incentives to attract and retain staff  
Developing digital pathology and facilitating cross board access to digital pathology slides/systems. This would allow faster and easier access to specialists for second opinions so could help improve equity of access to experts without compromising turnaround times.

- **What specific workforce related issues should the strategy look to resolve?**

Shortages across all diagnostic disciplines but notably Histopathology, paediatric and peri-natal pathology, and Immunology. This needs to be taken into context in light of national UK shortages and forecasts for significant increases in workload as the population ages. Training, recruitment and retention of IT/Software engineers is also going to become more important in the future as the digital and AI landscapes develop.

- **Are there any workforce-related issues which the creation of a Remote and Rural Workforce Strategy alone will not address. If so, what are these issues and what additional action may be required to address them?**

Differential pay scales and signing on fees may be necessary to recruit and retain important key members of staff, along with other incentives to attract and retain medics, clinical scientists and biomedical scientists

Laboratory services are vital in over 90% of clinical interactions and patient pathways. Failure of these services at local level due to inadequate staffing will have dire consequences for patient care and threaten the viability of acute services.

Existing remote and rural services are underfunded, understaffed and only operate day by day using existing staff, locums and goodwill.