

Nursery Nurses in Scotland 2005

a report for
UNISONScotland

by **Dr Patricia Findlay, Jeanette Findlay and Robert Stewart**



Introduction

UNISON Scotland commissioned this research in order to specify the key issues affecting the work, status and pay of nursery nurses¹. The National Review of the Early Years and Childcare Workforce, to which UNISON had a significant input, will soon be released for consultation. It is important that we ensure that the evidence that our members tell us, is quantified.

The authors have identified clearly the significant educational and professional input that nursery nurses make to early years work. They have also identified the problems of low pay, unequal pay and the difficult working conditions that members face. They have our thanks.

This report will be important as we deal with the outcome of the Executive's Early Years Review and its implementation.

Carol Ball
Nursery Nurse Working Group

Carol Judge
Scottish Organiser (Local Government)

Executive Summary

- Significant changes in nursery school provision, standards and regulation in recent years have impacted upon the job content and skills of nursery nurses, as well as on their perceptions of their work, effort, reward, status and future prospects. This report provides data on the work experiences of Scottish local authority nursery nurses.
- Specifically, the report provides information on the pay and grading position of nursery nurses following the 2003-04 dispute; on recent changes in the job content, work processes, qualifications and core service standards associated with nursery nursing; the views of nursery nurses on their work, pay, career prospects and status; and a comparison of nursery nurse pay with that of other occupations in local authorities.
- The research had five components: documentary research; collation and analysis of the post-2004 Scottish local authority settlements for nursery nurses; a postal survey of 2093 nursery nurses across Scotland (31% response rate); six focus groups with nursery nurses; and collection and comparison of pay data for other occupations. The survey respondents were largely mature and experienced nursery nurses who were well placed to comment on issues and recent changes in the sector and in their work.

Context

- The Scottish Executive has frequently espoused the importance of the early education sector. The sector is subject to legislative requirements and national care standards as well as internal review within each local authority. Taken together, these external and internal regulatory and review processes mean that the sector, and its workforce, are extensively scrutinised on at least an annual basis.
- The early education workforce is predominately female, part-time and poorly paid. Local authority nursery nurses are better qualified and rewarded in comparison with nursery nurses in the private sector. The minimum qualification for entry to local authority nursery nursing is HNC/SVQ3, which combines theory, practice and practical placements over a two-year period.

¹ Notwithstanding recent changes in nomenclature in some authorities, throughout this report, we have used the generic term 'nursery nurses'.

Pay

- Comparing the top scale point for basic grade nursery nurses as a 52-week equivalent, salaries range from £17,436 to £20,168. Notional hourly rates range from £9.58 to £11.08 with an average of £10.52 and with the most common hourly rates being £10.42 and £10.74 (for 10 and 9 authorities respectively).
- There appears to be no systematic explanation of the positioning of individual local authorities in the salary range, either in terms of the size of the authority, the numbers of nursery nurses employed or whether authorities were largely urban or rural.

Job Content, Skills and Qualifications

- While job descriptions exist for nursery nurses in all local authorities, these do not reveal either the extent to which all of their designated activities are actually undertaken or the frequency with which they are undertaken. The survey data illustrated the specific and diverse activities of nursery nurses at the current time.
 - There is a heavy emphasis on child development, learning and recording systems: almost all report that they promote children's linguistic, social, intellectual and sensory development all of the time.
 - Nursery nurses make a positive contribution to strategic and operational planning, and curriculum planning and implementation all of the time.
 - These are key skill areas that reflect their involvement in delivering a national curriculum and strongly counter the view that they are simply engaged in childcare. Most see education as the most important part of their job.
 - Most are involved frequently or all of the time in communicating with parents and involving them in decisions; working with wider agencies; undertaking individual child assessment; reporting; and in managing the transition between nurseries and formal primary schooling.
 - Many are also involved in specialised tasks included case conferences, team leading duties, HMI/Care Commission task groups, admissions panels and standards monitoring groups.
 - The activities undertaken are largely similar across all types of nursery.
- Respondents rate the following as the key knowledge, skills and attribute requirements of their role. In order of frequency - an interest in children; understanding theories of child development and child care; empathy, a caring nature and patience; good teamworking skills; flexibility and initiative.
- While most hold common entry qualifications, a significant minority had achieved additional qualifications since entry, while nearly a fifth were also working towards an additional qualification. However, respondents raise concerns over the incentive to undertake additional qualifications as this was not likely to result in higher pay or career advancement.
- While there is no strong view that nursery nursing should be degree-led, respondents want increased 'professionalism' in order to be recognised by other groups/professionals and to deter unsuitable candidates from entering the sector. There is also a desire to be able to develop degree-level qualifications in post.
- While almost all respondents are provided with training or Continuous Professional Development(CPD), an appreciable minority felt that this is insufficient to support them in their job. More than half report that they had undertaken training and/or CPD in their own time.
- Most respondents report that their job requires higher levels of skill and has more emphasis on cognitive aspects than in the past. This stems from increases in administration; knowledge and skills requirements in relation to information and communication technologies; greater accountability and responsibility; and dealing with children (and families) with behavioural problems and special needs.

Work, Experience and Status

- Most respondents think that they have more responsibility, use their initiative more, and have to concentrate to a higher level and work harder than before. Most rate their job as stressful. Perceptions of stress are significantly related to the degree of urbanisation in the employing authority.
- A small majority are supportive of regulation and inspection, although many believe it has made their work harder. Only a minority believe that regulation does not enhance quality. While many feel that increased administration reduces their contact time with children, it also provides a positive opportunity to reflect on each child. Thus, less direct contact time is not necessarily associated with poorer services for children.
- Respondents perceive that their jobs are not valued and this is reflected in the lack of career pathways available to workers in the sector. Comparisons are made with the career structures in other professions with defined leadership and management pathways and recognition of expertise both in terms of pay and status.
- Specific issues arise in relation to senior nursery nurses. Senior nursery nurses appear to take on significantly more activities for less significantly enhanced earnings. This may explain some of the more negative perceptions held by senior nursery nurses on aspects of their work and value.
- More than 60% of respondents are at the top of their pay scale. Most of these had taken 5-10 years to reach the top of the scale, with a significant minority taking 10-15 years. Three quarters had remained there for more than ten years.
- Relatively few nursery nurses feel valued by their employers (38%), compared with those who feel valued by parents (95%), other agencies (85%), line managers (83%) and the public (57%). Only a minority of respondents rate their own morale and the morale of their colleagues as high. Most survey respondents had at some point seriously considered leaving local authority work.
- Consistent with previous research, nursery nurses report overwhelmingly that the most satisfying aspects of their job is working with children and seeing them develop and progress over time.
- While some see administrative demands as the most negative feature of the job, most respondents identify low pay and the low value attached to their work by their employers as the worst aspects. A significant minority feel negatively about how their pay compares with people doing the same job in other authorities.

Nursery Nursing in Comparison

- Nursery nurses' pay scales in Scottish local authorities are lower than for comparable occupations in terms of entry-level qualifications/requirements (e.g. administrative, housing and finance officers), despite the latter being subject to considerably less external regulation. Nursery nurses earn considerably below annual earnings for both males and females.
- Teachers and nursery nurses work to the same set of national regulations, including national curricula, and care standards. Yet teachers in nursery schools have very different pay rates and conditions of service, earning from £19059-£30399 in non-promoted posts. While teaching requires higher entry qualifications, teachers (unlike nursery nurses) receive little specific training in relation to pre-5 children. Without exception, nursery nurses report that there are no significant differences between their work activities and those of teachers. While few argue against for pay parity between the two groups, the majority feel that the pay differential is excessive.

■ Evaluating any job involves considering its demands in terms of knowledge and skills, effort, decision-making and responsibility and working conditions. Caring skills may often be overlooked in such evaluations. The following factors, reported by nursery nurses in our survey, are of considerable importance in any evaluation of their jobs.

■ **Nature of knowledge requirements.**

Nursery nursing requires specific occupational knowledge, much of which is conceptual, such as understanding theories of child development and care. To work effectively, nursery nurses require ongoing training and CPD. Good literacy and numeracy are important role requirements. Nursery nurses are involved, and have considerable discretion, in planning and prioritising work within the parameters of relevant national regulations/standards. They must be familiar with, and operationalise, a complex range of national and authority-specific regulations and standards. Nursery nurses often utilise their knowledge in complex contexts, particularly in terms of dealing with vulnerable children and/or families.

■ **Skill requirements.**

Nursery nursing requires considerable personal, interpersonal and physical skills. These include communication skills to deal with specific demands of service users, notably children, but also parents. Children's linguistic (or lack of linguistic) skills mean that communication is a complex aspect of their work. Nursery nurses communicate factual information regularly in various forms. They use influencing skills in relation to children and parents. The nature of the communication they are engaged in will often be complex, personal and sensitive.

■ **Responsibility/accountability.**

Nursery nurses carry out both specific and general tasks involving the exercise of judgement within existing guidelines and procedures. Their actions are highly visible to others on a daily basis. The duty to act always in the interests of children exposes all nursery nurses to informal peer supervision. Their work is subject to regular and significant inspection. The impact of errors in their work can range from trivial to momentous. The nature of the resource for which nursery nurses are responsible is supremely valuable, both to individual parents and to society as a whole.

■ **Effort.**

Nursery nursing requires considerable mental effort, including visual concentration, aural concentration and managing emotion. The job involves maintaining concentration on several things simultaneously; maintaining concentration while shifting between tasks, and maintaining concentration in distracting circumstances. Nursery nurses require significant physical skills, both in terms of explosive physical effort (e.g. lifting or restraining children) and stamina.

■ **Working conditions.**

Nursery nurses are at some risk of minor physical injury (e.g. lifting; minor accidental/deliberate injuries from children). They are also exposed to certain unpleasant conditions (e.g. noise). The personal care of small children has minor unpleasant aspects. Nursery nurses must also confront the short-term emotional distress of children, and the longer-term emotional, behavioural and social distress of children and parents in vulnerable families.

Conclusions

- There is considerable variation in pay rates for local authority nursery nurses across Scotland. There appears to be no systematic explanation as to why individual authorities have placed themselves on particular positions in the salary range.
- The analysis of job descriptions across authorities fails to reveal any substantive differences in the activities of nursery nurses or in their qualifications and skills profile across Scotland. The job is defined by national standards with associated regulation and inspection requirements.
- Taken in combination, these are a powerful counter to the view that the jobs of nursery nurses are different enough to merit differential rates of pay based on local rather than national settlement. Many nursery nurses are concerned about the inequity of differing pay rates for what they believe to be the same job.
- The content and context of nursery nursing has changed in recent years. While many of these changes have impacted positively on the quality of service provided, they have also brought a need for higher skills and greater responsibility, effort and stress.
- Nursery nurses see themselves as playing a critical role in the education of children and not simply as providing childcare. There is evidence that they are engaged in significant reflection on the work, skills and the nature of the contribution they make. From the range of knowledge, skills and attitudes reported in this study there are strong indications that they are delivering a professional education and care service.
- There is convincing evidence that most nursery nurses are actually carrying out the roles and responsibilities envisioned in the Early Years Review Roles and Responsibilities framework. Most are knowledgeable of, and work to, existing procedures, guidelines and regulation. They plan for the individualised needs of children, including those with special needs. They observe, record and report on individual children's progress. They report their activities in working positively with children, families, colleagues and other agencies. They are engaged in updating their own skills and developing their own capacities.
- Nursery nurses appear less well rewarded than those in other non-degree posts in local authorities, despite appearing to carry out 'like' work similar to better paid degree level occupational groups. They earn considerably less than average national earnings.
- Nursery nurses do not see their job as a career which offers adequate opportunities for development. There are concerns over a lack of career pathways and adequate pay levels commensurate with higher levels of responsibility. Importantly, nursery nurses do not feel valued by their own employers.
- The skills, knowledge and range of tasks of nursery nurses have not previously been well understood on a national level. This may well have contributed to them being significantly undervalued. This report presents the only available current evidence of what nursery nurses in Scotland actually do. These findings should enable a closer consideration of the contribution of nursery nurses to be undertaken.

If you work in public early years education or childcare and want to join UNISON, contact UNISONDirect 0845 355 0845. For further information contact Carol Judge on c.a.judge@unison.co.uk Tel 0870 7777 006.

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