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Health visitor vacancy rates in Scotland have increased by half in the space of a year as the SNP struggles to honour a pledge on increasing numbers.

Official statistics have revealed there are currently 144 vacancies across the country, the equivalent of nearly one in 10 posts.

That compares to a vacancy rate of 6.7 per cent 12 months before.

It comes as the SNP looks set to fall short on its promise to employ 500 extra health visitors by this year, a commitment made in 2014.

However, with just 1448 currently in place, the Scottish Government remains off-course to hit that target.

The 144 empty roles currently compares to 101 in September, and only 49 two years ago.

And of the current vacancies, 62 have been unfilled for longer than three months.

Scottish Conservative public health spokeswoman Annie Wells said more efforts were needed to recruit additional health visitors.

She said it was crucial not just to provide better care for patients across Scotland, but to take the strain off those already struggling with a hefty workload.

According to nursing publications, there were 1114 whole-time equivalent health visitors at the time of the SNP government's commitment in the summer of 2014.

Latest ISD data states there are now 1448, meaning the goal for an extra 500 workers is short by 166.

Scottish Conservative public health spokeswoman Annie Wells said:

“The SNP made a promise to secure 500 extra health visitors, a commitment we welcomed, but it looks like that is going to fall short.

“For any department to have a vacancy rate of nearly 10 per cent is alarming, and shows the strain workers must be under.

“It follows a pattern across health and other public services of not enough staffing and poor workforce planning.

“Health visitors are crucial for a range of needs in our society, it’s not something we can afford to scrimp on.

“The SNP should come clean about progress on this target, and explain how it’s going to secure the additional 500 health visitors it promised.”