

# RCN Northern Ireland Annual Review 2020



Royal College  
of Nursing  
Northern Ireland



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# Introduction

Last year was a year to remember for all sorts of reasons. As we know only too well, nursing staff in Northern Ireland began the year on picket lines, and had only just suspended action, when members found themselves at the forefront of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The nursing profession has been at the centre of this crisis, which has been unprecedented during our lifetime. In order to support our members, we have transformed the way we work as an organisation to ensure that we can meet the increased demand for member support and services. Throughout the past year, we have sought to influence and represent your interests in the national debate on how to tackle COVID-19.

This short report outlines some of the work the RCN in Northern Ireland has been engaged in during 2020. With the stresses and strains of working through this pandemic, it is easy to forget where the year started. The industrial action which took place in the winter of 2019/2020 was a testament to many things. It showed the level of concern and anger that members felt; their determination to do what was right for their patients and the profession; the public support that nursing staff received and how RCN members in Northern Ireland were able to make a real difference.

Moving forward, we want to make sure that we harness this spirit and momentum. The RCN is campaigning for a decent pay award through our Fair Pay For Nursing campaign and we are still waiting for a meaningful timetable for when safe staffing legislation will be implemented in Northern Ireland. These two issues must be resolved to ensure that the nursing profession can have a secure and stable future. Our commitment to you is that the team in Northern Ireland will be working hard to deliver for members, who we know will face further uncertainty in the year ahead, as services hopefully return to normal.



**Pat Cullen**  
Director, RCN Northern Ireland



**Fiona Devlin**  
Board Chair, RCN Northern Ireland

# A year in the life of our members through SenseMaker

Nurses, nursing assistants and nursing students have been on the frontline of fighting this pandemic and have dealt with many challenges to ensure patients have received the best care possible under very difficult circumstances. There is no doubt that this has been at a huge cost.

The RCN in Northern Ireland has been collecting your stories as an historical record of working through a modern pandemic and to enable us to amplify your voice when dealing with the Department of Health, employers and politicians. We have read some harrowing and heartbreaking stories, but also some very uplifting stories of how you have been able to make a huge difference to the patients you cared for and their relatives when they couldn't be with them.

There is no doubt we are in a difficult place now. Stress and exhaustion are taking their toll. Through SenseMaker we have identified the themes of nurse shortages; the stress of redeployment; the uncertainty of plans to rebuild; frustration with management communication and behaviours, and the emotional labour involved in supporting each other, patients and relatives.

The RCN is using these stories in our engagement with employers, professional leaders and politicians. We use your stories to identify implications for policy, the profession, practice and personal wellbeing. This pandemic has been a catalyst for change and has both highlighted and exacerbated inequalities to a much greater depth. It has exposed years of underfunding and a non-existent workforce policy which has resulted in shortages of nursing staff right across the health service and independent sector. It has highlighted a lack of career progression and recruitment and retention strategy.

Your voices have given us the evidence we need to demand change. Over the next year your stories will be of equal importance as we strive to play our part in rebuilding services to adequately deal with the needs of the population of Northern Ireland. So please - keep telling your stories and ensure your voices get heard.

<https://collector.sensemakersuite.com/?projectID=2020Nurses&language=en#Collector>





*“Short-staffed, two nurses doing an extra 60 hours a week between them to try and see patients in the community due to staff shortages from Covid. I personally broke down due to pressure and stress.”*

**Staff nurse/practitioner, 46-55 years old, community service**

*Life of a care home manager: Work is highly stressful at present. All the pressures of managing a care home continue to exist with the added pressures of managing a pandemic and Covid testing, outbreak testing, changing guidance.*

**Service manager, 30-45**

*Overwhelmed, lonely, disaster awaits... Sent to a ward I have never worked on, never been ward based, staffing crisis - no one from that ward there, working mainly on my own. No one to ask for advice and felt overwhelmed which gradually worsened until by lunchtime I was in tears, sobbing, unable to think, work or make a sensible balanced decision. Had to go home by 3pm. This was my 6th or 7th place of work since March.*

**Specialist nurse, 45-55, acute setting**

*“Trying to describe my last week at work is quite the challenge! I would say it has been stressful to say the least with huge staffing issues at the forefront. Patient needs are always the priority and that often means that staff go above and beyond to ensure that patients receive the best care possible, resulting in staff feeling overwhelmed, exhausted and burnt out, physically and emotionally. The way in which we are currently working is unsustainable. Staff working together is essential and we have been relying on each other throughout this whole pandemic, but I feel that we are definitely at breaking point. Before a shift recently, a colleague mentioned that she was heading back to the ‘war zone’ and that sums it up perfectly.”*

**Nursing assistant, 18-30 years old, acute setting**

*Go or be disciplined: Last week I didn't know if I would still be working within my department the following week. The rota was not released until Thursday for the following week. I have a family of four very young children who need childcare arrangements made at the very last minute. The staff in my department have been told they may be needed to staff ICU (we are nowhere near trained for ICU). We have been told we must go or face discipline. Even if we offer to work in other areas which may require staff we don't have that choice we must go. So we are waiting from week to week. Anxiety and sickness levels are of a scale I've not seen before.*

**Staff nurse, 30-45, acute setting**

# Influencing for you

Political influencing on behalf of nurses and nursing is a key priority for the RCN. This is how our members can make change happen and ensure that politicians and decision-makers take action on the issues of importance to nursing staff and patients. Politicians of all political parties greatly value direct engagement with nurses. We work to ensure that politicians listen to, and act upon, the voice of nursing.

There are many ways in which our members can influence. You can become an e-campaigner, helping to promote RCN campaigns on issues such as pay and safe staffing. Getting involved with your local branch or an RCN network also provides an opportunity to work with your colleagues to promote nursing issues and get things moving. Political influencing can also include promoting change by responding to consultations and policy developments, sharing your messages through the media and social media, or speaking out at a conference or event.

During 2020, meetings were held with four Executive Ministers, five members of the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Health and ten of our 18 MPs. These meetings covered a wide range of issues including the supply of PPE during the pandemic, safe nurse staffing, the mental health and well-being of nursing staff, and pay.

The RCN presented evidence on nursing workforce issues and the position of care homes during the pandemic to the Committee for Health and made several written submissions on a wide range of issues affecting members. Involving members in these activities means that politicians are listening directly to the issues that matter to nursing staff in all health care settings across Northern Ireland.



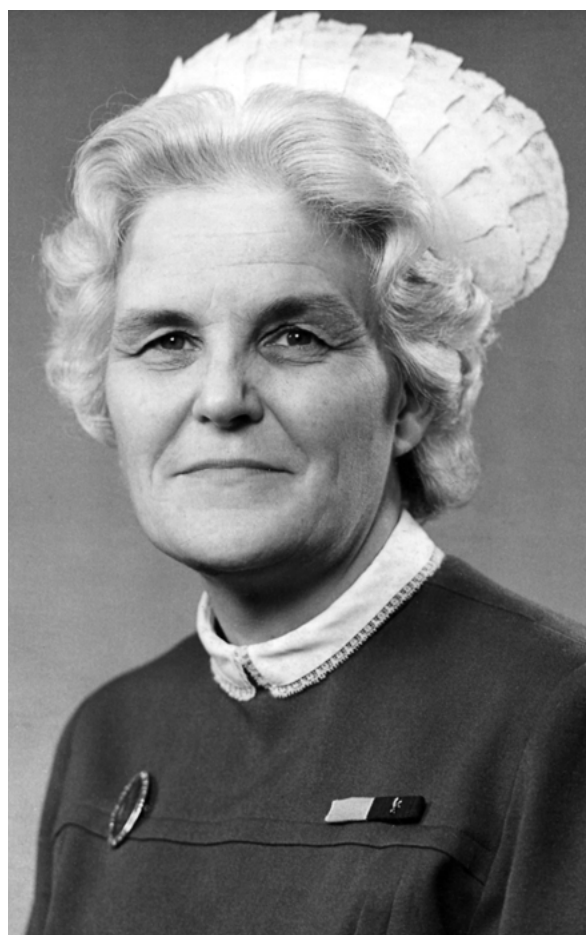
# International year of the nurse and midwife

Many plans had been put in place to celebrate the International Year of the Nurse and Midwife. As part of the celebrations, the RCN was one of many organisations involved in the development of an exhibition to be held at the Ulster Museum. Plans had been underway for over a year, and the exhibition was about to be launched, when a national lockdown was announced.

Undeterred, we assisted with ensuring the exhibition was able to be accessed online. When lockdown measures were eased during the summer, the exhibition was permitted to open for a short period of time. Included in the display were various nursing uniforms on loan from the RCN Northern Ireland History of Nursing Network, including a specially made replica of Florence Nightingale's outfit and an original 1950s sister's uniform from the Royal Victoria Hospital which belongs to RCN member Lorna Finlay.

Also on display was the uniform of Miss Kathleen Robb OBE FRCN who was the last nurse to hold the title of Matron of the Royal Victoria Hospital. Sadly Miss Robb, who had a long association the College, passed away in November 2020 at the age of 97.

Plans are now underway to display the exhibition in different venues across Northern Ireland in 2021.





# Update on the independent sector

Following an agreement by RCN Council to the development of a UK-wide independent health and social care sector strategy, the organisation has been reviewing how it can better deliver for members working in the independent sector.

The reality is that despite 40% of the membership sitting outside the NHS, there is a recognition that the organisation tends to be NHS focused. The transformational plan of action for this work is the beginning of a journey to shape how the RCN will more effectively represent and support members working in this sector. It is crucial that all members, irrespective of where they work, receive an equitable service.

Senior staff from RCN Northern Ireland have been leading on the implementation of this UK work and a partnership board comprising members and staff has been established. The early focus of the work seeks to improve the experience of members employed in nursing homes through the following workstreams which will have member and staff representation:

- addressing the challenges presented by staffing provision through the development of a patient dependency tool to inform safe staffing
- challenging pay, terms and working conditions through the development of generic job descriptions, matched or evaluated to Agenda for Change pay structures
- creation of an RCN accreditation model for nursing homes.

Additional early focus will also include increasing the number of members from the independent health and social care sector who hold appointed or elected positions within RCN governance structures. This will include a review of the RCN election guidance and encouraging members from this sector to come forward for these positions.



## RCN Students

There are currently 25 Student Ambassadors (SAs) from all three universities in Northern Ireland. Throughout the pandemic we have held regular meetings, sometimes on a weekly basis, depending on the issues our students were facing.

The implementation of the NMC emergency standards caused a huge amount of anxiety. Meetings with students highlighted issues which were then taken to trade union trust meetings, or, if appropriate, the universities were consulted to get the advice and help needed to resolve the problem.

Other issues students were experiencing were in relation to mentorship and preceptorship, new ways of supervising and supporting students and the new NIPAD (Northern Ireland Practice Assessment Document), which replaced their portfolios, and loss of supernumerary status. Paid placements caused many issues: lack of clarity over the student role, over and under-payments, lack of access to parking, no access to trust email and systems and no link to the salaries department in order to resolve problems. We asked the trusts for a link person for HR problems and professional issues and these names were disseminated through the Student Ambassador group.

Events for students have include the delivery of the play *Regulating Rita* virtually and a student webinar on qualifying as a nurse during the pandemic. We currently have a student newsletter, a Newly Registered Nurse Network and a Student Ambassadors Facebook page.

Student recruitment took place during February and September, including a video for return to practice students. We have also delivered several virtual presentations at the different stages of the Open University nursing programme.





# Learning and development

While the pandemic and its restrictions resulted in many planned events being cancelled, the opportunities for online development and learning have proved vital and we have worked hard to ensure that members could access events virtually throughout the year. RCN Northern Ireland supported 86 sessions throughout 2020, most of them virtually. We have devised new ways of working and different platforms to engage with members.

The RCN Northern Ireland Library and Information Zone provided services remotely and continued to support members online while RCN Northern Ireland networks also continued to meet and hold events, including a very successful Safeguarding in a Digital World event held by the RCN Northern Sexual Health Network.

**Library** Europe's largest nursing-specific collection

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## Library and Information Zone

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**COVID-19 (Coronavirus) - the RCN Library and Archive Service is currently online only**  
 You can still contact us via email, phone and wechat although our library buildings in Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh and London are closed until further notice.  
 Keep up with the latest information on our [Library Services and COVID-19 pages](#).

**From borrowing a book to improving your information literacy, our library offers a wide range of resources and facilities to support your learning.**

**Opening Hours**

Monday to Friday:	9am - 5pm
Weekends:	Closed
Find us at:	RCN Northern Ireland Library and Information Zone 17 Windsor Avenue Belfast

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*"I've worked in oncology for the last 18 years in various roles, including as a chemotherapy nurse and in research, and I've recently transitioned into a new role as an oncology nurse practitioner. I've used the RCN's library in Belfast since I was a student and always found it to be a fabulous resource."*

**Jennifer Foreman**

## RCN representatives: working for you

2020 began with RCN representatives and staff supporting members on picket lines across Northern Ireland. RCN Learning Reps, Safety Reps and Stewards played a vital part in informing and engaging with RCN members during the campaign and industrial action. As well as coordinating picket lines, RCN reps advised and supported members to ensure the maintenance of safety derogations in clinical areas. They continued to play a vital role during the consultation with members on the Framework Agreement and Ministerial commitments being made to address the issues of pay disparity and safe staffing.

Whilst the remainder of the year was taken up heavily with the COVID-19 pandemic, placing significant demands on our members, reps and staff, there were a number of other issues that RCN reps and employment relations staff also worked on.

### Shining the light on community nursing

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic partnership working between RCN Safety Reps and Stewards has been fundamental in ensuring community nursing staff can work safely.

When the pandemic began, district nursing staff and school nurses were reporting many issues including unclear infection prevention and control (IPC) guidance, inadequate personal protective equipment (PPE) and a lack of support. As a result of joint working, safer systems were put in place with improved guidance and policies, and access to appropriate PPE.

RCN Safety Reps have important statutory powers and this example of collaboration shows how RCN reps are a powerful support for members in tackling issues in their workplaces to obtain the best outcomes.





## Looking after your health, safety and wellbeing

One example of reps improving health and safety for our members during 2020 was when concerns were raised by members working in a learning disability service that staff were frequently being physically assaulted by an inpatient. RCN reps and staff worked with members to identify the issues, and possible solutions, and referred members for legal advice and support with potential personal injury claims in relation to the employer's duty of care.

Concerns were raised about unsafe staffing levels and the lack of input/care being provided by other disciplines of the multidisciplinary team (MDT); ongoing violence; lack of any safe space for them to access when in danger and lack of consultation from management.

Members had already escalated their concerns in writing to their line manager, but these concerns had, for the most part, been unanswered. Following meetings, the Head of Service was contacted with a request for an urgent health and safety risk assessment. The focus was to be on how to address the violence at work, unsafe staffing levels and unsafe systems of work. We also raised the issues with senior management and assurances were given that actions would be taken to address the situation.

Despite our members suggesting various potential solutions to address the situation, follow up contact revealed that serious incidents were still occurring. We wrote to the Chief Executive seeking an urgent meeting and advising that we were considering formal escalation to the Health and Safety Executive. This resulted in an urgent action plan being agreed. Measures were taken to ensure a safe space for staff with immediate controlled access; increased involvement of other professionals from the MDT and additional recruitment activity to address shortages of staff.

We continue to support members with longer-term solutions and RCN solicitors are supporting members with potential compensation claims against the employer.

## Winning compensation for injured RCN members

No one goes to work expecting to be injured but where injury occurs we can help to review the situation and, through RCN Safety Reps, help improve health, safety and wellbeing at work. During 2020, through the support and actions of RCN-appointed solicitors, 14 RCN members were awarded a total of over £200,000 in compensation for their injuries.

RCN members who suffer an accident at work or personal injury can find out more on the RCN website or call our Customer Service Centre on 0345 772 6100 for advice or referral for support.

## RCN members facing allegations from an NMC referral

Being referred to the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) can be distressing and isolating. It can also lead to other issues with finances, relationships and maintaining professional registration. Unlike some unions, our members are supported and represented by a solicitor in NMC cases. For an insight into the RCN support and NMC process watch out for your local RCN branch organising an event called *Regulating Rita*. This play tells the story of a nurse who gets into difficulty in her clinical setting and eventually ends up in front of an NMC regulatory panel.

In 2020 RCN Northern Ireland opened 27 new cases in support of members with NMC referrals. During the year 17 existing cases were closed. At any one time there are, on average, approximately 70 RCN members with ongoing NMC cases.

Following RCN legal support and representation, in the 17 NMC cases closed during the year:

- 12 members were found to have ‘no case to answer’
- one resulted in the ending of an Interim Order
- two resulted in continued suspension from the register
- one found no impairment
- one resulted in an extension of conditions on practice.

The outcomes for our members represented at the NMC compare more favourably than for those with other representation, or those with no representation.

Any RCN member referred to the NMC, should contact our Customer Service Centre on **0345 772 6100**. You will receive advice and support and onward referral can be made to a range of RCN support services.





The RCN represents nurses and nursing, promotes  
excellence in practice and shapes health policies

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