

NHS Pay Review Body – 2024/2025 pay round

Royal College of Nursing Wales (RCN Wales) evidence

1. Introduction

1.1 The Royal College of Nursing has provided evidence to the Pay Review Body (PRB) relating to the UK-wide position. This paper will provide supporting evidence relating specifically to Wales.

1.2 Nursing needs to be an attractive career to ensure a sustainable workforce. A substantial increase in nursing staff is needed to ensure the delivery of high-quality patient care in Wales. Put simply, it takes a higher number of nursing staff with a greater level of knowledge and skill to care for a person with a broken hip if they are also physically frail, living with dementia, diabetes, a heart condition, and respiratory illness; even more so if this person is being cared for at home, alone, or in poor or ill-suited housing conditions. To ensure nursing is seen as an attractive career, nursing pay needs to reflect the skills, educated knowledge and critical judgment deployed by the nursing workforce.

1.3 RCN Wales once again calls for immediate national nursing Recruitment and Retention Premia to address the chronic and increasing nursing workforce shortages faced in Wales and across the UK in all NHS areas and specialities.

1.4 In addition to the above, the RCN Wales calls on the PRB to make recommendations regarding career progression for nursing (such as automatic progression) and to confirm that Agenda for Change in 2024 does not accurately reflect the relative job weight of the realities, complexities, and development trajectories of nursing as a modern graduate profession, best to enable the recruitment, retention and motivation of nurses in the short and medium term.

1.5 In respect of 2024-25, RCN Wales again requests a substantial and an above inflation pay rise for nursing that delivers pay justice to one of the lowest paid professions in the public sector and is predominantly female. Only by awarding a substantial and an above inflation pay rise will this begin to restore nursing pay. As RCN UK's recent London Economics report identified, due to a decade of pay stagnation, RCN UK members are experiencing on average a real terms 29.4% reduction in salary, and this must be rectified. It is within the PRB's gift to make these recommendations; shying away from this historical context only serves to reinforce RCN's lack of faith in this system as a means of influencing nursing pay. Regrettably, if the PRB continues to ignore the past and makes no efforts to resolve the issues that blight nursing pay for future generations, the RCN will withdraw from the process entirely.

1.6 To understand the fragility of the nursing workforce, indicators such as vacancy rates, agency spend, and workload pressure must be considered. The current vacancy rate, agency spend, and overtime will be explored in more depth later in this document.

2. The NHS nursing workforce

2.1 NHS Wales is experiencing nursing shortages because of a failure to retain nurses, leading to a widespread view among RCN Wales members that NHS Wales is in crisis.

2.2 Nursing is a safety critical profession, yet nursing staff say that they cannot fulfil their role to the level they want to whilst facing such a considerable workforce shortage. In the 2023 RCN employment survey, 63.5% of Welsh respondents felt as though they were too busy to provide the level of care they want to provide. This is consistent with the survey results from RCN Wales's 2021 survey, where 62% responded in the same way.

2.3 The current NHS nursing workforce is feeling undervalued, under pressure and underpaid. In the 2023 RCN employment survey, 44.1% of Welsh respondents expressed that they are considering leaving or planning on leaving the profession. When asked for the reasons as to why they wanted to leave nursing (tick all that apply), 74.72% said they felt undervalued, 63.2% said they were exhausted and 49.16% said it was due to their stress levels. HEE commissioned research in 2020 found that basic changes to working conditions and breaks are needed as key

good foundations to ensuring that nurses feel valued and that they stay in the profession.¹

2.4 To ensure that nursing remains an attractive career, and to keep the nursing workforce wanting to provide care within the NHS, the nursing workforce deserve a fair and meaningful pay rise. This employment survey was of RCN members which was undertaken in 2023. The survey has so far received 847 Welsh responses from registered nurses, health care support workers and students working across all areas of health and social care.

3. Nursing vacancies

3.1 Significant nursing vacancies compromise the delivery of safe and effective care and hinders nursing staff in driving forward service improvement and addressing health inequalities.

3.2 Rafferty et al. (2007) found that patients in hospitals with the highest patient to nurse ratios had a 26% higher mortality rate.² A failure, therefore, to make nursing an attractive profession can be dangerous; low job satisfaction affects retention, which in turn mean fewer nurses and worse outcomes for patients.

3.3 In June 2023, the Welsh Government began publishing NHS Wales vacancy statistics. This follows a long campaign by RCN Wales calling for this data to be published and easily accessible. The first release was published on 29 June 2023. It estimated that, on 31 December 2022, there were 2,409 FTE vacancies among registered nursing, midwifery, and health visiting staff, with an estimated vacancy rate of 8.9%.³ The latest update, published on 24 January 2024, estimated that there were 2,581 FTE vacancies as at 30 September 2023, with a vacancy rate of 9.3%.⁴ Among nursing, midwifery and health visiting support staff, the Welsh

¹ [Mullen-Lowe-Research-Summary-June-2020.pdf \(england.nhs.uk\)](#)

² [Outcomes of variation in hospital nurse staffing in English hospitals: cross-sectional analysis of survey data and discharge records - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)

³ [NHS vacancy statistics: on 31 December 2022 | GOV.WALES](#)

⁴ [NHS Wales vacancy statistics, on 30 September 2023, \(official statistics in development\) | GOV.WALES](#) (Welsh Government has deemed the 31 March 2023 figures to be an “experimental statistical release” and “official statistics in development)

Government estimated a further 813 FTE vacancies as at 31 December 2022⁵ and 772 as at September 2023.⁶

3.4 The Welsh Government warns that because of their ‘experimental’ nature, these new NHS vacancy statistics are likely to underrepresent the true vacancy figure.⁷ More detail is needed in future releases relating specifically to vacancies among registered nurses, including a breakdown by Agenda for Change pay band. RCN Wales hopes to see this in future publications.

3.5 Registered nurse vacancies also lead to patients being cared for in inappropriate environments, of which “corridor care” is just one example. This can also refer to “onboarding” (allocating patients to wards/departments over establishment, i.e., in numbers leading to an inappropriate ratio of patients to registered nurses and health care support workers). Any departure from practices that ensure the highest quality of safe and effective care is unacceptable for patients, but it is also unacceptable for the nursing staff who are committed to delivering that care.

3.6 In its 2023 agreement with RCN Wales members, the Welsh government committed that neither onboarding nor corridor care would be enacted unless in exceptional circumstances, and then only through a named responsible executive. An escalation policy was also to be developed, containing “must not dos” in terms of care in inappropriate settings. This exception policy has been developed, but it appears the aforementioned “must not dos” are not part of it. The Welsh Partnership Forum has heard that groups are still developing approaches to the “must not dos” and to the enacting of onboarding/corridor care only through a named responsible executive. It is not known when these will be delivered.

3.7 In 2022 RCN Wales published *Retaining Nurses in the Profession: What matters?*, a research report into best practice in nursing retention and called for a national strategy to focus on improving known factors in retention such as access to continuous professional development and time flexing.⁸ The first HEIW National Retention Plan was published in 2023⁹; RCN Wales and looks forward its full implementation. However, these additional factors, whilst important, cannot

⁵ [NHS vacancy statistics: on 31 December 2022 | GOV.WALES](#)

⁶ [NHS Wales vacancy statistics, on 30 September 2023, \(official statistics in development\) | GOV.WALES](#)

⁷ [NHS Wales vacancy statistics, on 30 September 2023, \(official statistics in development\) | GOV.WALES](#)

⁸ [Retaining Nurses in the Profession: What matters? | Publications | Royal College of Nursing \(rcn.org.uk\)](#)

⁹ [Nurse Retention Plan \(nhs.wales\)](#)

compensate for low pay. Fair pay is the most salient factor in to needed efforts to retain nurses in the profession.

4. Agency nursing spending

4.1 A rise in agency nursing and overtime working indicate a struggling workforce. Agency nursing is attractive to many nurses as the pay is often better. With the knowledge that 60.4% of RCN Wales respondents to the 2023 employment survey were the main earner within their household it is not surprising that this is a more attractive option.

4.2 However, agency nursing is expensive and while there will always be a need for agency nursing to cover short term sickness or provide maternity cover, the rate at which the NHS is using agency nursing is unsustainable. Agency nursing is not a permanent solution for patient care as agency nurses are less familiar with ward layout, polices and equipment and are less able to provide continuity of care. To reduce the level of agency spending, NHS nursing pay needs to be increased.

4.3 In 2022/23, NHS Wales health boards spent £161.2m on agency nursing. This would pay the salaries of 5,591 full-time newly qualified nurses; this is a huge amount, especially when compared to the £133.4m spent in 2021/22, a figure which was already significant.¹⁰

4.4 Although work is underway in NHS organisations to reduce numbers of agency nurses, that resource is not yet being reinvested into the substantive workforce.

4.5 The Welsh government's 2023 agreement with RCN Wales members recognised the need to reduce NHS Wales's spending on, and reliance on, agency nursing staff over its own workforce. In line with that agreement, the Welsh government established a "partnership group" to develop actions in a number areas, explicitly including incentivising NHS employment e.g. weekly pay, annualised hours, and additional hours. Priority was to be given to issues around additional hours and developing a national approach to paying NHS "bank" shifts at substantive grade rates. On 13 December 2023, the Partnership Group issued

¹⁰ [RCN Nursing in Numbers 2023 | Publications | Royal College of Nursing](#)

its first and only Welsh Health Circular to date. This focused exclusively on a new control framework to reduce avoidable agency deployment. There is no sign of “priority” being given to the issues around additional hours and pay, but these will be critical to reducing avoidable agency spend. NHS Wales will continue to rely on agencies until it can compete with them for staff.

4.6 A related issue is that of work-life balance. In its 2023 agreement with RCN Wales members, the Welsh government committed to reduce last-minute shift changes by driving through rostering best practice including rosters issued 12 weeks in advance and incentivising the early filling of rota gaps. A working group was to be established in September 2023 and report by February 2024, with implementation to be completed by the end of 2024. The February 2024 update to the Welsh Partnership Forum regarding the 2023 agreement did not address these important commitments.

4.7 It is known that nurses often leave the NHS for agency working due to the ability to choose their own hours and for higher pay. A fair and meaningful pay rise would reduce the attractiveness of agency working and save public money.

5. Overtime

5.1 The Welsh government’s agreement with RCN Wales members in 2023 included a welcome acknowledgement of the fact of, and the unfair nature of, NHS staff working additional hours that are not remunerated. The offer included a commitment to work with NHS Employers to issue a pay letter by end of September 2023 to ensure that nurses are paid properly for the hours they work including their breaks and shift over runs in line with national agreed terms and conditions. At time of writing, this letter has not been issued. Neither has there been an update on promised work to ensure a robust system for logging and claiming additional hours is in place by April 2024.

5.2 In the same agreement, the Welsh government committed to establish a working group to report by Autumn 2023 on the feasibility of moving to a 36-hour working week without loss of earnings. This has been delayed to the end of March 2024, which previously was the deadline for defining a timeline to move to a 36-hour week. This commitment was a very significant part of the agreement RCN Wales members accepted in September 2023. A failure to deliver it will lead to a

serious loss of faith in the Welsh government's sincerity on the part of RCN Wales members.

5.2 In the 2023 RCN employment survey, 87.4% of Welsh members reported working at least an additional hour every week, an increase of 13.9% compared to 2021. In the 2023 survey, 45.7% of respondents reported working between 3-8 additional hours every week, and an additional 15% reported working over 9 hours. The rise in the number of additional hours nursing staff are working is troubling, as is the sheer number of respondents who work many additional hours per week.

5.3 In September 2023 there were 24,161 FTE registered nurses employed by NHS Wales.¹¹ Among respondents to the 2023 RCN Employment Survey located in Wales, 87.4% worked additional hours at least once a week, which equates to 21,117 nurses. Supposing these nurses worked just two additional hours a week, the NHS would receive 42,234 additional hours of work in that one week: the equivalent of 1,126 full-time registered nurses (based on a contract of 37.5 hours).

5.4 Taking the new 2023 employment survey information that 39.5% of registered nurses (9,544 FTE nurses) work 3-6 additional hours, if each of these nurses work at least 4 hours of overtime, this equates to 1,018 full time nurses.

5.5 Information released in response to an FOI request revealed that, collectively, the seven NHS Wales health boards spent a total of £33.78 million on overtime for nursing in 2022/2023.¹² According to the 2023 employment survey, 41.8% of additional hours were not paid. This indicates that the £33.78 million is an underrepresentation of how many additional hours are worked by nursing staff. The figure is very concerning and demonstrates a high reliance on nursing good will. This is unsustainable.

6. Sickness and absence rate

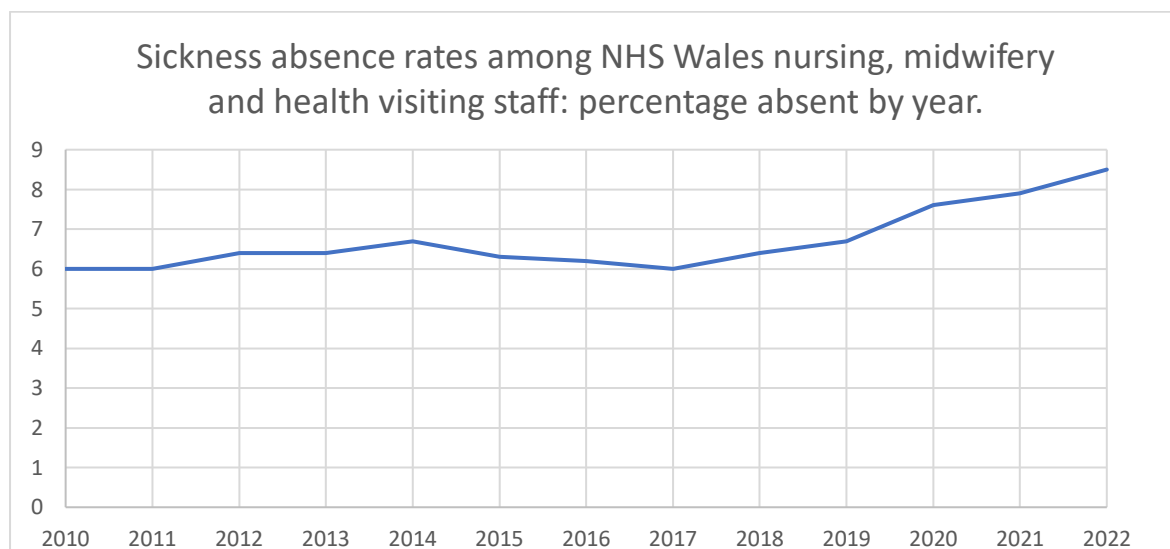
6.1 Rafferty et al. (2007) found that nurses in hospitals where patient ratios were higher were approximately twice as likely to be dissatisfied with their jobs, to

¹¹ [Nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff, by grade and area of work \(gov.wales\)](#)

¹² [RCN Nursing in Numbers 2023 | Publications | Royal College of Nursing](#)

show high burnout levels, and to report low or deteriorating quality of care on their wards and hospitals.¹³

6.2 The table below shows the annual sickness absence rate of nursing, midwifery and health visiting between 2010-2022, which increased from 6% in 2010 to 8.5% in 2022 (the latest complete year for which data is available). The average sickness rate for January-September 2023 is 7.3%.¹⁴



6.3 The combination of vacancy rates, challenges in retention, sickness rates and a reliance on nurses' good will is not sustainable.

7. COVID-19 impact

7.1 Nursing staff were at the forefront of the response to COVID-19 pandemic by providing complex clinical care, vaccinations, communication, triaging, as well as psychological support of patients, their families and colleagues.

7.2 While it has been 21 months since Wales's last remaining Covid restrictions came to an end¹⁵, the impact of COVID-19 is still widely felt; nurses have not had the opportunity to fully recover from burnout and stress that resulted from the pandemic, with many suffering from moral injury. Nurses have also had to go

¹³ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17064706/>

¹⁴ [Percentage absent by staff group and date \(gov.wales\)](#)

¹⁵ [Coronavirus regulations to end in Wales | GOV.WALES](#)

straight from a pandemic, the effects of which are still felt, to a crisis in waiting times.

7.3 Not only are nurses still being affected by the impact of the pandemic, but the fact that COVID-19 has not gone away –it remains endemic –means that it is still actively affecting nurses.

8. Agenda for Change

8.1 In its offer to RCN Wales members dated 18 July 2023 the Welsh government acknowledged concerns that the Agenda for Change (AfC) pay structure is not working as it should for RCN Wales members. It committed to reviewing the national role profiles and developing a national plan and methodology to ensure that day to day expectations fit with the pay band of individuals. To date, this has not happened.

8.2 In the same offer to RCN Wales members dated 18 July 2023, the Welsh government made a commitment that NHS Employers would set up a working group to plan how job descriptions can be reviewed every three years, and explore a potential mechanism to identify priority areas. The working group's first progress report was due by the end of 2023, via the Partnership Agreement Hub. To date, this has not happened either.

8.3 Job evaluation is a key component of the AfC pay structure. The basis of the claim that AfC ensures equal pay for work of equal value is that it is underpinned by an analytical job evaluation scheme. Yet job descriptions no longer reflect the work that is done. It is vitally important that job profiles are kept up to date to reflect the complexity of modern nursing.

8.4 NHS employers should ensure that all NHS organisations fully implement the terms and conditions laid out in the Welsh government's offer dated 18 July 2023, which RCN Wales members accepted in good faith in September 2023.

9. Recruitment and Retention Premia

9.1 Recruitment and retention premia where market pressures arise. As part of its negotiations with the Welsh Government in 2023, RCN Wales drew attention to the fact that retention premia are not currently being used in nursing. In addition, the PRB can recommend national recruitment and retention premia for particular groups of staff where there are national recruitment and retention pressures.

9.2 Above, RCN Wales has demonstrated the level of staffing crisis that exists in the NHS. In addition to an appropriate pay award, RCN Wales calls on the PRB to recommend national recruitment and retention premia for the nursing workforce.

9.3 RCN Wales considers this the only means of stability for the nursing profession. Without premia of this nature, the health and social care workforce will continue to haemorrhage staff and further still, compromise patient safety.

9.4 The cumulative impact of decade-long wage stagnation, combined with soaring cost of living pressures, point to the need for a significant pay uplift as part of an overall package of measures to address the workforce crisis.

9.5 The RCN calls on the PRB to recommend an increase: so that nursing and other NHS staff can cope with rising and rapidly fluctuating costs which may continue to increase significantly over the pay year; to begin restoration of 'lost ground' against the rises in the cost of living as part of an overall commitment to pay restoration with a clear timetable/timescale; and to absorb the impact of increases to pension contributions.

10. Economic challenges

10.1 The RCN Employment survey (2023) found that 54% of Welsh respondents reported that their earnings represent about or more than half of the household income, demonstrating the importance of nursing staff pay in supporting their household.

10.2 Many RCN Wales members complained that, as one member put it, “responsibilities, expectations and accountability [are not] reflected in pay”, with working above band being a common experience.

10.3 Members said that they would be able to get a less stressful job with lower qualification requirements. In one member’s words, they have *“too much responsibility, too close to minimum/living wage. Would be better off working in retail unqualified”*, with another member saying that they *“could work in local recreation centre with no responsibility (and no unpaid work) for more pay.”*

10.4 HCSW are a valuable part of the nursing team, providing support and care for patients and are crucial for ensuring safe and effective care, and yet their pay does not reflect this.

10.5 There is a clear need to financially support the nursing workforce in Wales. Not only is the NHS the largest employer in Wales, but the nursing workforce represents over a third of all those employed by NHS Wales. A consequence of a pay rise for the nursing workforce would be to greatly improve the financial situation of families and communities across Wales.

10.6 The annual RPI inflation rate was 4.9% in January 2024¹⁶, and CPIH increased from 0.9% in January 2021 to 4.2% in January 2024¹⁷. Nursing staff are expectant of an above inflation pay award to help manage rising cost of living.

10.7 The cost-of-living crisis is having a widespread impact on RCN members. One RCN Wales member, for example, said that although they were “working hard”, that they would *“need to find an extra job”* as their income is “not enough to pay my bills”. Another member said that they were “unable to meet daily expenses” as “more than half [of their] salary goes for rent, Tax and other bills”. And another member said that their income was *“not enough money to pay bills, mortgage food petrol etc.... Not in line with daily costs”*.¹⁸

¹⁶ [Consumer price inflation, UK - Office for National Statistics](#)

¹⁷ [CPIH ANNUAL RATE 00: ALL ITEMS 2015=100 - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

¹⁸ RCN Wales members from 2023 RCN Employment Survey

10.8 Some RCN Wales members are even having to rely on foodbanks.¹⁹

10.9 An increasing number of Welsh families are being pushed into fuel poverty due to rising energy prices, which affect rural households especially. In April 2022, following the introduction of a new price cap, the Welsh Government's estimated that up to 45% of all households in Wales were in fuel poverty, with 8% in severe fuel poverty.²⁰

10.10 Under the October-December 2023 direct debit price cap, the average annual bill for typical gas and electricity consumption is £1,834, which is 51% higher than in winter 2021/22²¹. The price cap has increased by 5% to £1,928 for the first quarter of 2024.²²

10.11 NHS staff are facing significant financial pressures: from 1 January 2024, the price for energy a typical household who use gas and electricity and pay by Direct Debit went up by £94, taking the price cap from £1,834 to £1,928 per year.²³ With a higher proportion of nursing staff in Wales being the main or primary breadwinner for their family this will disproportionately affect nursing staff, and families in Wales.

10.12 It is important that the nursing workforce and nursing students feel financially secure within their careers. A fair and meaningful pay rise would considerably reduce the need for the nursing workforce to seek secondary employment, easing anxieties regarding pay for everyone –but, importantly, for those who are the main breadwinner in their household.

10.13 For more information regarding the economic and demographics of the nursing workforce please see the RCN evidence submitted to the Pay Review Body.

¹⁹ [Welsh nurses using foodbanks says RCN as strike ballot opens | South Wales Guardian](#)

²⁰ [Written Statement: Fuel Poverty \(13 April 2022\) | GOV.WALES](#)

²¹ [CBP-9714.pdf \(parliament.uk\)](#)

²² [Changes to energy price cap from 1 January 2024 | Ofgem](#)

²³ [Changes to energy price cap from 1 January 2024 | Ofgem](#)

11. Conclusion

11.1 RCN Wales again requests a substantial and an above inflation pay rise for nursing in 2024-25 that delivers pay justice to one of the lowest paid professions in the public sector and is predominantly female.

11.2 RCN Wales members expect to see all the Welsh government's commitments from the July 2023 offer delivered. The significance of that offer, which RCN Wales members accepted in good faith in September 2023, cannot be overstated. The offer ended the first ever period of industrial action by Royal College of Nursing members on the island of Great Britain. If the promises therein are not delivered, RCN Wales members will question the Welsh government's commitment to any future offer, to the nursing workforce, and to delivering safe and effective patient care.

11.3 RCN Wales once again calls for immediate national nursing Recruitment and Retention Premia to address the chronic and increasing nursing workforce shortages faced in Wales and across the UK in all NHS areas and specialities.

11.4 RCN Wales calls on the PRB to make recommendations regarding career progression for nursing (such as automatic progression) and to confirm that Agenda for Change in 2024 does not accurately reflect the relative job weight of the realities, complexities, and development trajectories of nursing as a modern graduate profession, best to enable the recruitment, retention and motivation of nurses in the short and medium term.

11.5 The nursing workforce in Wales is tired, and feels undervalued, under-pressure and burnt out. The amount spent on agency fees combined with the reliance on nursing staff goodwill to work overtime is unsustainable.

11.6 NHS Wales has a serious shortage of registered nurses and is failing to retain enough individuals in the nursing profession.

11.7 The Welsh Government must tackle these existing workforce shortages and ensure that nursing is an attractive career option, well-paid and meaningfully

supported. This should be done by implementing the National Retention Plan in full and increasing financially sustainable routes into nursing education.

11.8 The PRB must make recommendations that will support the recruitment and retention of nursing staff. In addition to an initial restorative pay award, RCN Wales calls on the PRB to recommend immediate measures to implement national Retention Premia Payments and Recruitment Premia Payments for the nursing workforce as a matter of urgency to address the ever-worsening workforce crisis. To understand the extent to which nursing staff are under pressure, indicators of population need and workforce pressure such as vacancy rates, agency spend, and workload pressure should be considered.

Coleg Nyrsio Brenhinol Cymru - Royal College of Nursing Wales

The RCN is the world's largest professional union of nurses, representing over half a million members, including nurses, midwives, health visitors and nursing students, with around 30,500 members in Wales. The majority of RCN members work in the NHS with around a quarter working in the independent sector. The RCN works locally, nationally and internationally to promote standards of care and the interests of patients and nurses, and of nursing as a profession. The RCN is a UK-wide organisation, with its own National Boards for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The RCN is a major contributor to nursing practice, standards of care, and public policy as it affects health and nursing.

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

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