

Celebrating Learning Disability Nursing in Wales



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1. What is a learning disability nurse?

A learning disability can be mild, moderate, or severe and the level of assistance and support an individual needs is dependent on the severity of their learning disability and the individual. People with milder learning disabilities most often live independently and care for themselves, manage everyday tasks, work in paid employment and can clearly communicate their needs and wishes. People with a milder learning disability may have additional needs that are not clear to people who do not know them well (National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE), 2023). People with a more severe learning disability are more likely to need support with daily activities such as getting dressed, washing, food preparation and keeping themselves safe. They may need support with mobility and have complex health needs and sensory impairment (NICE, 2023).

A review of mortality data relating to people with learning disabilities in Wales between 2012 and 2022 reveals a 20-year difference in life expectancy between people with a learning disability and the wider population (Watkins and Jones, 2024). Many of these deaths are avoidable and premature (White et al., 2023; Watkins and Jones, 2024) which reflects a deficit in preventative interventions. Vital opportunities for preventative support are being missed too frequently, due to poor coordination of care and a lack of appropriate communication (Morris and Julian, 2024).

Learning disability nurses (hereafter referred to as 'LD nurses') are registered nurses who provide specialist health care and support for people with a learning disability, their families and staff teams. Learning disability nursing is one of four fields of nursing and is a recognised route to registration with the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) as a registered nurse. LD nurses not only improve the health of people with a learning disability by providing direct care, but also by supporting people with a learning disability to access health services (Mafuba et al., 2023). For example, an LD nurse may help a person with a learning disability to access general practice or mental health services. LD nurses promote health, monitor and prevent deterioration in health, and support the management of long-term health conditions (for example, diabetes).

LD nurses work in and across a wide range of health and social care settings to support people with a learning disability wherever they are. They work in **learning disability specific services** (community and residential) or provide support in other settings (such as **prisons, acute care hospitals** and **primary care**). Whilst some of these services may be provided by NHS Wales, others are not.

2. The value of learning disability nursing

The value of learning disability nursing is clearly reflected in the evidence.

Community learning disability nurses undertake a range of activities to enhance access to acute health care for people with learning disabilities, even where acute care liaison nurses are in post, as shown by Rees and Northway (2022).

Rees and Northway also found that community learning disability nurses:

- are key to ensuring reasonable adjustments are made to “support preparation for accessing health care”
- work with secondary care staff to “make appropriate preparations to receive people with intellectual disabilities”
- promote reasonable adjustments and accommodations
- complete preparatory risk assessments
- are often responsible for initiating a “best interests discussion” which may be a crucial factor in ensuring that a person can legally receive care
- build rapport and trust with the person, which enables good communication between them and their LD nurse. In turn, this facilitates communication between the person and service providers
- advocate on behalf of an individual with a learning disability to ensure they can access care.

In both primary and acute care settings, liaison nurses are essential in promoting better coordination of services. For example, liaison nurses can improve identification of learning disabilities, improve access to cancer screening, and improve both the quantity and quality of annual health checks (Morris and Julian, 2024). However, realising the full benefits depends on having enough LD nurses to support the entire population of people with learning disabilities (Morris and Julian, 2024).

Meet **Megan Ware**

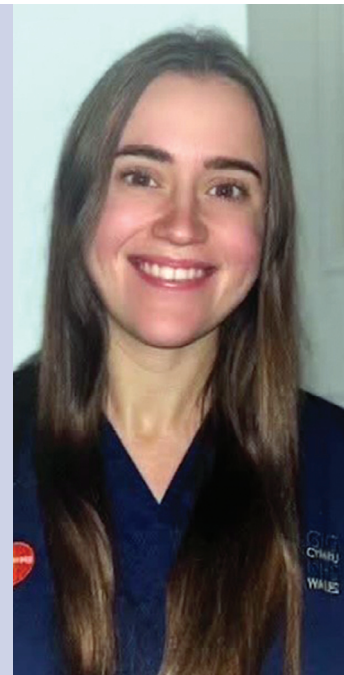
Learning disability nurse within a children's community nursing team, Hywel Dda University Health Board

"I work as a learning disability nurse in a children's community nursing team. My role involves health promotion and education for children and young people with learning disabilities and complex needs and for their families, as well as educating, supporting and advising other professionals about learning disabilities. It also involves prevention work such as low-level behaviour advice and interventions.

"There is a lot of liaising with other professionals to ensure the care children and young people receive is holistic. Additionally, I support the children and young people as they come up to the age where they transition to adult services. It can be a very anxious time for them. I encourage their independence, support them and their families, and help ensure that transition is smooth. Furthermore, the role I play amplifies the voices of children and young people and helps ensure that they are involved in their health care. That ultimately helps them be as independent as possible, encouraging their social acceptance and involvement.

"I was involved in supporting a 16-year-old who had a history of several hospital attendances with chest infections. In readiness for his admission, I worked with the liaison nurse to produce a reasonable adjustment plan for him. This included things such as ensuring he had a side room and that his parents were able to stay at all times, knowing about him having an unsafe swallow but it still being in his best interest to be allowed to eat orally, and so on.

"As he was 16, he needed to be admitted to adult wards, and his parents were extremely anxious. With his named nurse, I arranged joint visits to the wards so that they could meet the main staff and see the main wards he would be accessing. Sadly, he was admitted a few weeks later, and he passed away in hospital a few days after that. His parents were very grateful to have been introduced to the ward and felt like their son's death wouldn't have been as peaceful without the support transitioning to adult wards."



"HOLISTIC"

Cavanagh et al. (2024) explored the experience of people with learning disabilities in Wales in relation to annual health checks. They highlighted the need for greater support for them to be able to manage long term health conditions themselves, and a greater focus on preventative health care. The study highlighted gaps in service provision that community learning disability nurses in Wales would be well-placed to address.

What is more, *all* health care staff need *some* education on learning disabilities. Without this education, people with learning disabilities are highly vulnerable, as evidenced by tragic cases like that of Paul Ridd. Paul, who had a learning disability and lived in Wales, passed away in 2009 at the age of fifty-four. The Public Services Ombudsman for Wales determined that “the care he received actually contributed to his death”. Sadly, Paul’s story is not an isolated one.

In response to this tragedy, Paul’s family campaigned with others for better training and support for health care staff. The Paul Ridd Learning Disability Awareness Training was established in 2022 and is now mandatory for all public facing NHS Wales staff. The training forms Tier 1 of the Learning Disability Educational Framework for Healthcare Staff in Wales. Since its launch, the framework has expanded with a second tier aimed at health and social care professionals who work in learning disability services. Learning disability nurses – especially specialist and consultant nurses – are essential to develop and deliver training like this and prevent such tragedies in the future.



2.1 Tackling health inequalities

There is growing evidence highlighting the health inequalities experienced by people with learning disabilities (for example: Rickard and Donkin, 2018; Morris and Julian, 2024). Whilst life expectancy for people with a learning disability has increased overall in recent years (Coppus, 2013), on average it remains 20 years lower than that of their non-learning-disabled peers (O’Leary et al., 2018).

Increased life expectancy also means that many people with learning disabilities are living into older age and hence experiencing more age-related health problems. However, due to a range of factors, they often experience these at a younger age compared to their non-learning-disabled peers (Schepens et al., 2018). Some of these health issues are preventable and/or amenable to effective management, which highlights the importance of proactive interventions. Nonetheless, at present, many people with learning disabilities are living with complex health needs and multiple health conditions (Tyrer et al., 2019).

A review of mortality data relating to people with learning disabilities in Wales between 2012 and 2022 similarly finds a 20-year disparity in age at death between people with a learning disability and the wider population (Watkins and Jones, 2024). Many of these deaths are avoidable and premature (White et al., 2023; Watkins and Jones, 2024) which reflects a deficit in preventative interventions. Too frequently, vital opportunities for preventative support are missed due to poor coordination of care and a lack of appropriate communication (Morris and Julian, 2024).

LD nurses have the potential to significantly reduce the health inequalities that people with learning disabilities in Wales experience now. Their work addresses key aims set out in the Welsh Government (2023) National Workforce Implementation Plan for NHS Wales, which aims to focus on preventing and reducing health inequalities whilst also meeting the needs of an ageing population. The work of LD nurses also addresses key priorities for the Chief Nursing Officer (CNO) for Wales through improving health and social care outcomes and promoting health care equality (CNO Wales, 2022).

In its Strategic Nursing Workforce Plan for Wales, Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW) states:

“Nurses have a pivotal role in improving the health of our population, influencing health inequalities, and leading on the public health agenda for families and individuals across the life course.

“For this to be successfully achieved the nursing workforce will need ongoing support from the systems that educate, train, employ, and enable them to practice autonomously.” (HEIW, 2025)

LD nurses are well placed both to make a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of people with learning disabilities and to provide leadership in terms of achieving the vision for nursing in Wales as outlined in the Strategic Nursing Workforce Plan.

However, realising this potential will require investment in the workforce. At a minimum, the workforce needs to be maintained at the current level, but expanding the role to encompass greater preventative work would require an increase. Welsh Government action is needed – to assess current population need and to plan for the future – if the health inequalities people with learning disabilities experience are to be addressed. Such action would be consistent with a further CNO Wales priority, namely the workforce (CNO Wales, 2022).



Meet **Clair Hermon**

**Primary liaison learning disability nurse,
Aneurin Bevan University Health Board.**

“I have been a learning disability nurse for 32 years. Most of my career has been as a community learning disability nurse.

“Now, as a primary liaison learning disability nurse, I work in partnership with GP practices to increase the uptake and quality of annual learning disability health screening checks.

“People with a learning disability face many barriers to accessing health care. We work in primary care to share our specialist knowledge of learning disability. Our role is necessary to ensure they have equitable, good quality health screening and services so that their health needs are identified and met.

“It is well documented that people with a learning disability die approximately 20 years younger than members of the population without a learning disability, from treatable illnesses. Barriers to accessing health services mean these illnesses often go undetected and untreated, pushing mortality rates up.

“Our role is very much needed to support people to access services, and to support those services in primary care in understanding and meeting the complex needs of each person.

“Since I have been in this role, we have supported the identification and treatment of illnesses such as diabetes, cancer, constipation, respiratory illness and hypertension as just a few examples.”

3. Challenges in learning disability nursing

Ensuring an adequate and sustainable learning disability nursing workforce is critical. Without action now by the Welsh Government and HEIW, the right number of learning disability nurses with the right knowledge and skills will not be available to meet current and future need.

This section explores some of the main challenges.

3.1 Lack of data

There is no available comprehensive data regarding the whole learning disability nursing workforce in Wales. Current planning assumptions may therefore be inaccurate. This is true despite an acknowledgement by the Welsh Government (2023) that workforce data is ‘vitally’ important not only to support planning but also to inform education commissioning.

Workforce information is currently collected from – and hence reflects the position of – NHS Wales. However, learning disability nurses work across a range of settings including prisons, the independent sector, schools and charities. If the requirements of these sectors are excluded from planning, there will continue to be a shortage of learning disability nurses. Given that the Welsh Government specifically aims to encourage newly qualified nurses to work in the independent sector (Welsh Government, 2023) it *must* address this.

Learning disability nurses are now often working in a greater variety of roles often not formally identified as learning disability posts (such as in teams for children with disabilities or in specialist epilepsy services). These posts would not be identified in the workforce requirements for learning disability nurses, further diminishing the accuracy of current figures.

There is also a lack of accurate data regarding the number of people with learning disabilities in Wales. This is the case even though the Welsh Government’s own Learning Disability Action Plan (2022) recognises the importance of accurate data to inform policy development, going as far as proposing that the costs and benefits of a data observatory be explored.

The most recent figures published on StatsWales indicate that there are approximately 12,300 people with learning disabilities in Wales (StatsWales, 2023). However, the true numbers are likely to be much higher, as this figure reflects only those known to local authorities. Many more (particularly those with mild and moderate learning disabilities) may not be supported by learning disability services. Indeed, using 2024 population data from the Office for National Statistics, Mencap has estimated that there are 54,000 adults with a learning disability living in Wales (Mencap, undated).

Single overall estimates such as these also mask differences in terms of need that may arise due to factors that affect health and wellbeing such as level of impairment, age, gender, socio-economic status and geographical location.

In a recent workshop relating to nursing workforce modelling hosted by HEIW, 468 whole time equivalent (WTE) learning disability nurses were reported as working in the NHS in Wales. However, NMC figures for April 2023 to March 2024 show that there are 993 registered learning disability nurses living in Wales (NMC, 2024). The difference between these two figures is explained, in part, by challenges in comparing WTE with individual practitioners, and the fact that some may be still on the register whilst being retired from practice. Wales shares a long and porous border with England, and RCN Wales estimates that nurses living in Wales but working in England outnumber those living in England but working in Wales by some 20% (RCN Wales, 2024, p. 8). However, this would still leave around 300 LD nurses in Wales who are likely to be working in Wales outside of the NHS.

While all other fields of nursing saw an increase in registrants in Wales of around 2% during 2023-24, learning disability nursing saw 0% growth in that time (NMC, 2024).

3.2 Workforce planning

To ensure that services provided to individuals with learning disabilities are evidence-based, data planning of services is essential. However, data pertaining to the number of places on university courses commissioned by the Welsh Government for learning disability nursing students is not publicly available at the time of writing. RCN Wales obtained the figures in 3.2.1 by directly contacting HEIs.

There has been a slight increase in the number of places commissioned for learning disability nursing student places in recent years. However, in 2022-23 only 55 students were recruited to the 77 commissioned places available. Hence the number of commissions for learning disability nursing in Wales was kept at 87 for both 2023-24 and 2024-25 (significantly less than the required 171 places health boards identified as necessary in their integrated medium-term plans, or IMTPs). HEIW has said that commissions will rise when recruitment to target is achieved (HEIW, 2022).

It is also important to consider the profile of the workforce and not just the total number. Registered nurses enter NHS Wales at Agenda for Change band 5, and HEIW (2022) indicates that only 20% of the learning disability nursing workforce are employed at Agenda for Change bands 7 and above. This is the lowest percentage of any nursing field. Conversely, 35% of the learning disability nursing workforce are employed at band 3, meaning they are not registered nurses. This is the highest percentage of all areas of nursing and more than double that of mental health at 14%. These facts raise concerns about career progression and leadership whilst also highlighting that registered nurses working in learning disability services are responsible for supervising a greater percentage of unregistered nursing staff.

The age profile of registered learning disability nurses also shows some differences compared with other areas. Twenty-five per cent of registered learning disability nurses are aged 55+ compared with 23% in mental health and 20% in adult (HEIW, 2022). Given that many of those aged 55+ may still have mental health officer status and hence can retire at 55, this gives rise to concerns regarding future workforce numbers.

3.2.1 Student recruitment

RCN Wales contacted each Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Wales offering full time learning disability nursing to determine recruitment to learning disability nursing courses in the 2023/24 academic year. Table 1 below shows the information collated:

Recruitment to learning disability nursing courses in academic year 2023-2024

University	Commissions	Offers	Commenced course
Swansea mental health	29	5	3 (1 transfer from mental health)
USW (Sept)	22	24	27 (+2 part time)
USW (April)	14	14	14
Bangor	22	3	3 (+1 deferred until 2024)

In addition, figures obtained from the Open University indicate that they had 12 students following their part time learning disability nursing course in 2023/24. Of these, two were expected to graduate in academic year 23/24, four in 2024/25, four in 25/26, and two in 2026/27.

As shown in Table 1, in the academic year 2023/24, one HEI recruited above target numbers whilst the other two significantly under-recruited. Including the two part-time students in these figures along with the four Open University students due to qualify in the same year (2025/26), only 60.9% of the available 87 places have been filled. In 2026, there will thus be 34 fewer newly qualified learning disability nurses than commissioned and 122 fewer than health boards requested in their IMTPs. It is also important to remember that, as noted in the previous section, the IMTP figures are themselves likely to underestimate true need.

Some actions have been taken to try and increase recruitment to learning disability nursing courses. In March 2022, Swansea University became the fourth provider to offer the undergraduate learning disability nursing course in Wales (there are established courses at the University of South Wales and Bangor University, and the Open University has more recently supported learning disability nursing students). This has increased the geographical spread and offers more local education for students, especially those living in the Hywel Dda University Health Board area.

In addition, HEIW has produced a 'PageTiger' resource providing information regarding learning disability nursing and the courses available in Wales. This is available via the HEIW website. Whilst this appears to have had limited impact on 2023 student recruitment, discussions with HEIs in early 2024 suggested that there had been an increased number of applications for the 2024/25 academic year.

A lack of awareness of learning disability nursing as a career option remains a key issue impacting student recruitment. Whilst HEIW's PageTiger resource is a positive development, crucially, people visiting HEIW's website for career advice will already be considering a career in health care. In contrast, discussion with learning disability nursing students indicates that many are primarily motivated by the prospect of working with people with a learning disability. People who are unaware of learning disability nursing as a career option may not even *consider* consulting a health care career resource.

Some students report having received poor career advice, such as being told learning disability nursing does not exist, or that it is not worth undertaking the course since there are no jobs available in the field. To try to raise awareness and counter this misinformation, HEIW funded each of the HEIs during academic year 2023-24 to recruit two existing students to act as ambassadors who will go out to schools and colleges to make presentations to staff and students. This is a recent development, and its effectiveness will be important to monitor. Early feedback suggests there has been a positive reception with links being made with Careers Wales, schools and colleges. If effective, there may be a need for continued investment in this scheme since, by their nature, potential student cohorts will change annually.

A further measure introduced over the past 18 months is to allow students who commence nursing courses in adult, mental health or children's nursing – but express an interest in learning disability nursing – to undertake a 'taster' placement in their first year. If they then decide they wish to switch to learning disability nursing, this is facilitated. To date, two HEIs have seen one transfer each, while in a third, 12 students have transferred. In the case of the latter HEI, this number includes three students who transferred from another HEI not offering the learning disability programme. A common factor in these transfers is that individuals indicated they did not know learning disability nursing programmes existed until commencing their course. HEIs report that prospective students attending open days often are unaware that learning disability nursing is an option. This is further evidence of the need to raise awareness of learning disability nursing.

A further factor impacting student recruitment is the financial challenges that students can experience. Whilst the bursary provides some income for students, and they do not have to pay tuition fees, many students who opt for learning disability nursing are mature students with family commitments and responsibilities. To assist with addressing this issue, more flexible routes into nursing have been made available. For example, a two year PG Dip is available for those already holding a relevant first degree, part-time courses are being offered, and funding has been made available for a small number of care staff working in the independent sector to undertake a part-time course via the Open University. However, the PG Dip and flexible routes were not included for learning disability nursing in the education commissioning process, and hence exceptions must be requested. This can lead to delays in decision making and present a further barrier. It also means that some health care support workers, and those who could achieve registration in two rather than three years, are not automatically enabled to undertake the course. This is a major omission given the need to increase the number of learning disability nursing students.

3.2.2 Student retention

Financial pressures, misconceptions about learning disability nursing, and care commitments all impact retention of learning disability nursing students.

Whilst the NHS Wales bursary is attractive (and it is important that it is maintained), financial pressures can still prove challenging. In addition to general living costs, the dispersed, community nature of learning disability services means that clinical placements can involve travelling considerable distances often inaccessible by public transport. Support is available to assist with fuel costs, but students must bear the costs

of purchasing and maintaining personal vehicles. HEIW have covered accommodation costs for students undertaking placements in rural areas, but personal transport is still usually required. Travel to university can also incur considerable costs.

Students can experience negativity from others (for example: student peers, clinical staff, family) who may perceive learning disability nurses as not 'real' nurses and reinforce the incorrect perception that there are no jobs available. This can be demoralising for students, particularly when combined with suggestions from others that career development opportunities are limited. Whilst learning disability lecturing staff work hard to dispel this misinformation, it can have a negative impact on student wellbeing and their desire to complete their course.

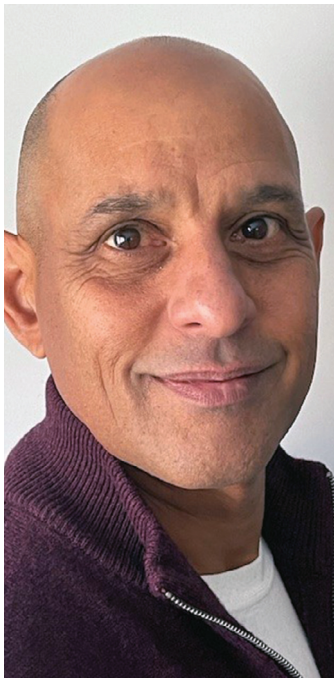
Many learning disability nursing students also have caring responsibilities for a family member with a learning disability or autism, both of which can involve significant support needs. This is an important motivating factor in their choice of course but also needs consideration in terms of student support and retention.

3.2.3 Recruitment and retention of registered nurses

To receive the NHS Wales bursary, students are required to work for two years in Wales post-qualification, applying for posts via the streamlining service. However, in recent years, some health boards have failed to upload their learning disability posts to streamlining at the appropriate time. One recently advertised only two posts through streamlining, despite having requested many more learning disability nurses in its integrated medium-term plan. These actions inadvertently reinforce the misconception that posts are not available for newly qualified learning disability nurses, and impact negatively not only on those seeking their first post as a registered nurse, but also those earlier in their courses who hear about this.

In 2023, several newly registered learning disability nurses secured posts in the independent sector upon qualification. However, discussion with social care providers suggests students are not always aware that this is an option within the terms of the bursary, and such posts are not included in streamlining. This again means that a full picture of potential employment opportunities can be difficult to obtain.

Learning disability nurses are increasingly working in a diverse range of settings, and career paths may encompass both working in the health service and other sectors. However, these potential career paths are not always visible to nursing students and newly qualified nurses. Since learning disability services are often located in a shared directorate with mental health, senior positions are often filled by those with a mental health background. The Welsh Government directly provided initial funding for consultant nurses at the beginning of devolution and this led to a rise in the overall number of consultant nurses, but this funding has long come to an end and funding is now the responsibility of health boards and trusts. However, since at least 2009, there have *never* been more than two learning disability nurse consultants in Wales, despite calls over many years for this number to be increased (RCN Wales, 2022). Wales had a Professor of Learning Disability Nursing for 20 years, but this post has not been replaced following retirement of the post holder in 2023.



Meet Neil James

Consultant Nurse in Learning Disability at Swansea Bay University Health Board and The University of South Wales.

“I really enjoy my job because I get the opportunity to explore ways in which to make a difference to the lives of people with a learning disability via the services they receive. I get to work with other like-minded passionate and committed learning disability nurses which inspires me to always look at how to support and make a difference.

“Because of the values we hold, we strive to ensure that people with a learning disability and their carers get the best opportunity to have a quality of life and to receive services that meets their needs. An example of how I am trying to support service development and enhance delivery has been in the setting up of a group for Community Team Clinical Lead Nurses where we meet across the year to discuss and explore the ways that we work and to provide consistency of experience. The group focuses on sharing, hearing, evidencing and developing the team’s support and service delivery.

“I would like to see a commitment to support from the Welsh Government to the enhancement of the learning disability nursing profession by investing in the roles of enhanced, advanced and consultant nurse practitioners. This, I believe, will help in supporting career opportunities and pathways of expertise that will encourage staff development and only support the recruitment of a future workforce.”

Recently, the contract for delivery of the learning disability nursing specialist practitioner qualification (SPQ), a master’s level post-registration qualification, has been awarded in Wales. This is a welcome development. Prior to this, there had been no post-registration courses in Wales specific to learning disability nursing for many years. From a university perspective, there is often a reluctance to provide courses specific to learning disability nursing since the numbers undertaking them are small in comparison to other groups, and hence not viewed as financially viable. Learning disability nurses thus undertake generic master’s level courses, often seeking to relate their assignment work to their field of practice.

There is thus a need to clearly identify career options for learning disability nurses and to better support career development and progression.

Meet Dr. Ruth Wyn Williams

Lecturer in Learning Disability Nursing, School of Health Sciences, Bangor University.

“As a learning disability nurse, I am an experienced lecturer who facilitates learning and teaching on undergraduate and postgraduate health care programs at Bangor University.

“It is a privilege to help future nurses who are passionate about providing quality services, and to be part of their journey to develop their specialist skills and knowledge in the field. I strongly believe that you must work in partnership with people with a learning disability in any learning disability nursing role and especially in the process of planning and providing education.

“Meaningful engagement, social justice, human rights and equity in health outcomes have always been key principles throughout my career across various areas of nursing.

“I had the opportunity to work in community health and social care settings, inpatient and residential departments in Wales, Australia and Argentina. And recently I have developed my skills in quality improvement, public health, and policy development and enjoy volunteering to improve care for children with a learning disability in Ukraine.

“But the foundation of my work as a learning disability nurse is to always create and take the opportunity to listen to, and learn from, individuals with a learning disability.”

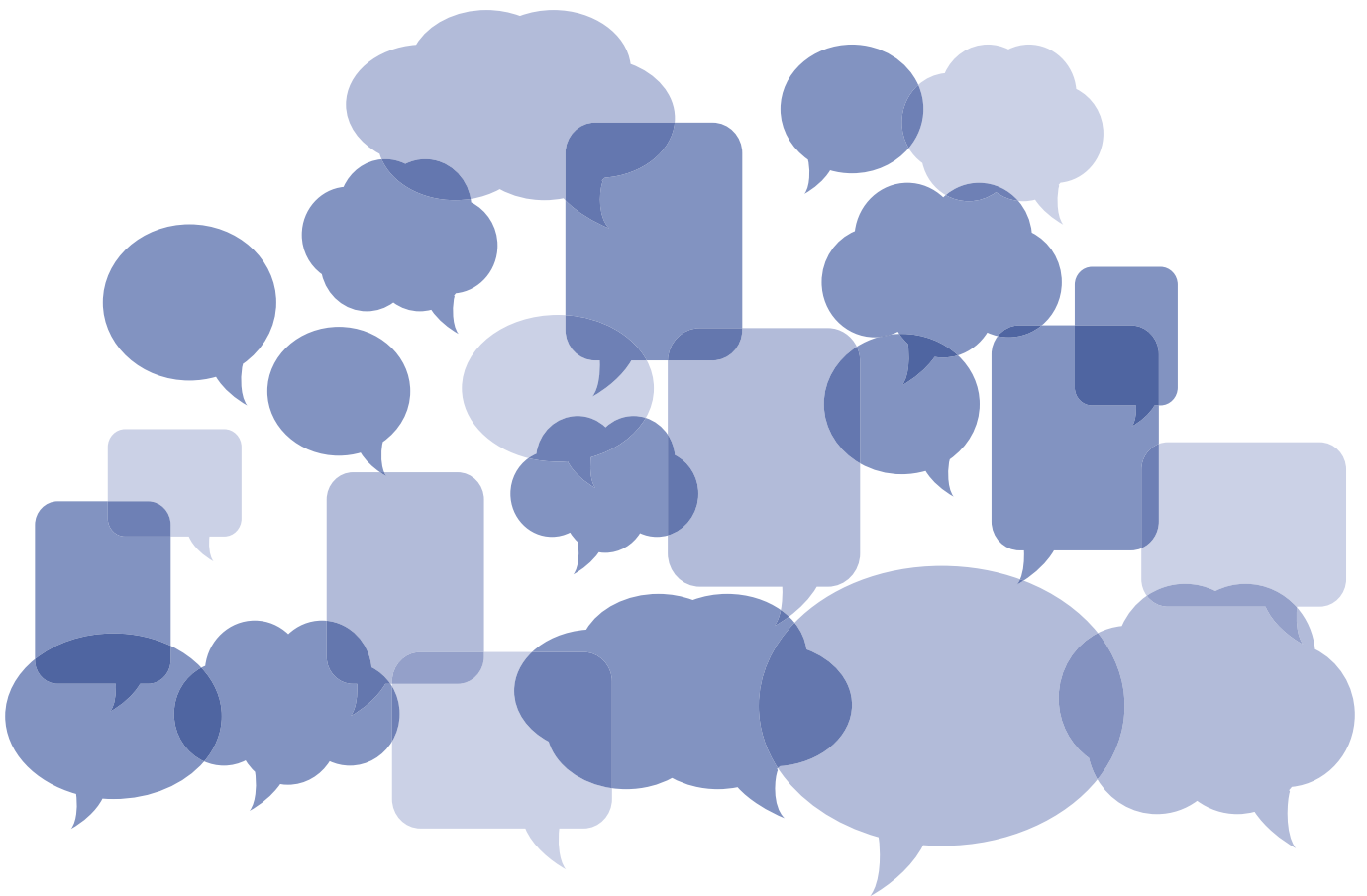


“MEANINGFUL”

4. The Welsh language

The Welsh Government does not currently publish data on the number of Welsh-speaking learning disability nurses in NHS Wales. A person with a learning disability needs to be able to communicate in their desired language whenever they come into contact with health or care staff; this includes assessment and treatment. The NHS Wales 'Active Offer' means services should be provided in Welsh without someone having to ask for it (Welsh Government, 2019). Being able to communicate with one's health care provider is central to informed consent, understanding of treatment plans, and feeling confident and reassured.

The Electronic Staff Record (ESR) is a tool used by NHS Wales to gather workforce intelligence. ESR records whether staff are able to speak Welsh, but information about fluency is not mandatory, leading to inconsistent information. RCN Wales estimates that a third of nurses and nursing staff in NHS Wales are Welsh speakers. However, many lack the support to become fluent enough to use Welsh professionally. The Welsh Government, HEIW and NHS Wales should address the need for health care in the Welsh language by providing educational opportunities in Welsh for the current workforce, bilingual IT systems and by providing more pre-and post-registration education in Welsh.



5. Actions for the Welsh Government

People with learning disabilities continue to experience health inequalities and premature and avoidable deaths. As this report shows, learning disability nurses have a key role to play in reducing these. However, there are challenges to identifying the number of learning disability nurses required, recruiting them, and retaining them. Whilst there have been some positive developments, much remains to be done to improve workforce planning, increase student recruitment, and support the career development of learning disability nurses.

Many of these challenges are identified in the Strategic Nursing Workforce Plan for Wales (2025). However, that document relates to the nursing profession in its entirety rather than the specific and different challenges pertaining to the different fields of nursing. As the smallest field of practice, there is a danger that important issues specific to learning disability nursing may not receive priority attention within a more generalised approach. There is thus a need for a specific focus on learning disability nursing.

Addressing the challenges outlined in this report requires a planned, coordinated approach. It requires that all key stakeholders are involved and accountable for the actions required of them. It also requires monitoring and evaluation to ensure effectiveness.

To ensure that the right number of learning disability nurses are in place to meet the needs of people with a learning disability in Wales across their lifespan, RCN Wales recommends the following actions:

ACTION 1

The Welsh Government should develop a learning disability nursing education and workforce action plan for Wales that is based on the health needs of the population. This action plan should:

- Include input from (but not limited to) HEIs, health boards, HEIW, commissioners of health care, the independent sector, the social care sector and the Royal College of Nursing.
- Encompass issues relating to workforce planning, student recruitment and retention, and registered nurse recruitment, retention and career development.
- Clearly identify the actions required, who is responsible for each action, and timelines for their delivery.

ACTION 2

The Welsh Government should establish an implementation group (including the stakeholder groups listed in Action 1) to monitor and oversee implementation of this action plan.

ACTION 3

The Welsh Government should significantly invest in expanding pre- and post-registration nurse education, which should include Welsh-medium nurse education, to ensure sufficient learning disability nurses to provide support for people across their lifespan.

ACTION 4

The Learning Disability Strategic Action Plan 2022-26 (Welsh Government, 2022) includes a specific action to 'ensure there are enough learning disability nurses in Wales to provide support for people throughout their lifespan'. The Welsh Government should review progress towards this goal.

ACTION 5

The Welsh Government should ensure that data regarding the whole learning disability nursing workforce in Wales is comprehensive, accurate, up-to-date and publicly available.



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The Royal College of Nursing is the world's largest professional organisation and trade union for nursing, representing over 500,000 nurses, midwives, health visitors, health care support workers and nursing students, including over 30,500 members in Wales. RCN members work in both the independent sector and the NHS. Around two-thirds of our members are based in the community. The RCN is a UK-wide organisation, with National Boards in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The RCN represents nurses and nursing, promotes excellence in nursing practice and shapes health and social care policy.

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