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Report on the Forums and Networks Review Recommendations

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Background

In 2021, a review of the forums and networks was undertaken to explore and recommend specific actions required to improve the support available to forums, as well as raise their professional profile in the organisation.

The report that followed included 15 recommendations, which were accepted by RCN Council in May 2022 ([RCN, 2022](#)). Each recommendation was considered at length and a plan of work agreed in collaboration with members of the RCN professional forums. This report provides a summary of the actions taken to implement and conclude the delivery of the recommendations.

Since the review was commissioned, a lot has changed in the external environment for the nursing profession and within the RCN. The establishment of the RCN Institute of Nursing Excellence, and its constituent academies, has changed the context within which the forums operate. The Nursing Practice Academy has become the home for most professional forums. Through the broader network of academies, there is the potential for greater visibility and support to forums. This enables them to lead positive changes in health care and highlight the importance of professional activism.



We have remained committed to progressing the implementation of the recommendations from the forum review to support forums to function more effectively. The changes implemented have helped to strengthen the foundation on which they operate, ready to contribute to the strategic aims, ambitions and priorities of the RCN through new ways of working. The impact of some of those changes is now being realised.

Implementation of the recommendations

The progress made on the implementation has been set out to reflect broadly the recommendations to which they align. The impact of some of the changes implemented is demonstrated in the operational functioning and ongoing leadership of the forum steering committees.

Governance processes

Recommendation 1: Develop a comprehensive governance framework.

Recommendation 2: Set out the approval process for establishing and disestablishing forums and networks.

Recommendation 3: Development of a central web-based repository.

The publication of the Forums and Networks Review came at the same time as two independent reviews on the culture and governance of the RCN. The recommendations from these reviews resulted in a significant programme of work to transform the culture and governance of the organisation. Strengthening the governance of the professional forums in line with the review findings has been just one element of the changes put in place. Much of the work required to support the development of a comprehensive governance operating framework is well underway and near completion.

The Professional Nursing Committee (PNC) has delegated responsibility (from Council) for the governance of the professional forums. They work closely with the Forum Co-ordinating Committee (previously known as the Forum Governance Group) and the Forum Chairs Group (previously the Forum Chairs Committee). At the time of the review, there was a lack of clarity and potential overlapping areas of accountability. The terms of reference (ToR) for these groups have been reviewed and updated (including the change of names) to make clear the roles and responsibilities of each entity. The updated ToR makes the decision-making remit of both the PNC and Forum Co-ordinating Committee clearer and provides a more accurate description of the work of each entity. This clarity has helped to ensure that members understand the expectations of each of the governance entities. It also has the potential to help encourage interest from new members who might want to consider a role in these groups in the future.

One of the key recommendations of the review was the development of a process for establishing and disestablishing a forum. The lack of such a process has been raised by members on many occasions. The criteria and process for both the establishment and disestablishment of forums has now been developed and is being implemented, see rcn.org.uk/Get-Involved/Forums/Process-for-establishing-and-disestablishing-a-forum. Implementation of this process has enabled a small number of forums, where the focus and outputs are unclear, to be disestablished, and has provided a framework for members who might wish to request the establishment of a new forum.

The development of a central web-based repository is progressing. The initial phase focused on the structure of the webpages, ensuring that they are updated and organised in a way that is meaningful and easier to navigate. There is now a 'governance hub' for all RCN members in elected and appointed roles, which links to key governance guidance and policies centrally on the website for members to access easily. Further work will continue as planned to bring this development to a conclusion.

Staff resources to support forums

Recommendation 4: Determine professional staff capacity and expertise required to support the forums and national network.

Recommendation 5: Determine the operational capacity required to support the business of forums and national networks.

With the development of our Institute of Nursing Excellence, of which the Nursing Practice Academy is an integral part, there has been an increase in the availability of staff and the operational arrangements in place to support the forums. As well as recruiting additional staff, the project co-ordinators and administrators that support the forums, previously managed by another department, have been transferred and integrated into the nursing teams within the Nursing Practice Academy. This has helped to increase operational visibility and co-ordinated oversight of the roles which support the effective functioning of forums. The ongoing review of staffing capacity within the service is integral to business-as-usual management.

Funding forum activity

Recommendation 6: Review of the finance accounting framework.

Regular reviews of the Forum Co-ordinating Committee budget (which supports forum project activity) are undertaken throughout the year by the committee, and additional steps have been put in place to help support forecast project spend. Further to this, an agreement to adopt a three-year budget cycle for forum project activities has been achieved. This will help to provide more assurance and support forums with the longer-term planning of activities and ongoing financial backing required for the completion of projects. The allocation of forum funding for some of the professional outputs that have wider benefits to RCN members is yet to be fully addressed. Ongoing discussions with finance colleagues regarding budgetary management of forum funds will continue.



Changes to the recruitment process

Recommendation 7: Consider the requirement for three-year membership as a minimum for Forum Steering Committee member.

Recommendation 9: Ensure all recruitment to Forum Steering Committees adheres to the organisation's EDI commitments.

A review of the governance rulebook has led to changes that allow greater flexibility in the recruitment process for forum steering committees.

Repeated representation from forum members highlighted the difficulties imposed by the rule that members could only apply for appointment to a forum steering committee if they had been an RCN member for three years. In response to the recommendation of the review, this rule has now been changed. This may be one of the reasons that there has been a notable increase in the number of applications from members wanting to be part of the forum steering committee. In 2024 there were 224 applications, compared to the annual average of 150 that is normally received.

At the time of appointments to forum steering committees, it is now possible to have a reserve list of members that meet the requirements of the role at interview but are not able to be appointed due to the insufficient number of forum steering committee vacancies. If an existing committee member steps down during the year to leave a vacancy, a member on the reserve list can be approached to become part of the steering committee. This will support ongoing quoracy of the committee, minimise disruption as well as improve succession planning.



A review of the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) statement in the promotion and advertising of forum appointments is routinely undertaken annually and all project funding requests and subsequent developments are required to undertake an Equality Impact Assessment.

We will continue to strengthen and ensure EDI is considered in all aspects of forum activity. This is closely aligned to work underway across the RCN to strengthen the commitment to EDI, as set out in our RCN Group EDI strategy which was launched in May 2024 ([RCN 2024](#)). Demonstrating and monitoring the impact of the EDI strategy requirements and how it supports the diversity and inclusion of the membership is being taken forward under the scope of the EDI Programme Board.

Leadership of Forum Steering Committees

Recommendation 8: Consider putting in place a process for succession planning for Forum Chairs.

Changes to the recruitment and election timelines have meant that a formal handover period between the outgoing and incoming chair is written in the provision of the rules. This supports a planned handover for the ongoing leadership and continuity of the forum work.

The role of vice chairs (previously absent) has become formalised in the governance rules. The ability to elect a vice chair has enabled the leadership of the Forum Steering Committee to be further supported to maintain the momentum of the work and contribute towards effective succession planning.

Communicating and engagement support with the membership

Recommendation 10: Ensure dedicated communication support.

Recommendation 13: A long-term plan that is focused on encouraging and engaging the wider membership in the work of forums and networks.

All forum chairs have been provided with an RCN email address and each forum has a shared mailbox. The Forum Steering Committee also has access to the Microsoft Teams platform which enables the members to use for corresponding and sharing documents, particularly in relation to the development of projects. This has helped to provide a more professional representation when communicating with members and stakeholders more widely, and a clearer distinction between the work undertaken on behalf of the RCN and that of other roles.

In addition to these new developments, work has been undertaken to promote further use of the existing communication tools. Consequently, there has been a notable increase in the use of the RCN Member Communication Centre (MCC) as an effective way of communicating and engaging directly with members about educational resources, upcoming events and general updates about the work of the forum.

As part of the wider changes in the culture of the RCN, work has been done to define member involvement across the organisation with a 'root and branch' review on how we engage with members, see rcn.org.uk/About-us/Our-governance/How-we-work/Our-structure/Member-involvement. The multiple ways in which this happens at all levels, including with the professional forums, have been highlighted. We will continually communicate, raise awareness and involve members as part of the business-as-usual activity. The next stage of work planned will be to investigate the latest technology that can be used to encourage and engage the membership more widely in all the RCN work, including the forums and networks.

Training and development support

Recommendation 11: Ensure dedicated policy support to ensure the skills and capabilities are used to best effect externally in representing the profession.

Recommendation 12: Provide bespoke media training, including maximising the use of social media.

Recommendation 14: Give consideration to developing a Forum Steering Committee member annual plan of training and continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities.

The value of policy and media training are recognised as important knowledge and skills required when representing the RCN. However, developing a bespoke media training programme for forum members is not considered to be the most effective use of time and resources, given the infrequency in which members are likely to be asked to speak or provide information for the media. Further to this, it is highly unlikely that members would be expected to represent the RCN and provide policy content or engage with external journalists or the media without internal support before, during and after the event.

Dedicated policy information briefs and advice are provided to members as and when required as part of the preparation for representing the organisation or with any project developments. These maximise the expertise and experience of member contribution at external stakeholder engagements.

The RCN Communications Team is committed to supporting the Forum Steering Committee members to maximise different modes of communicating widely and have provided guidance on the professional use of social media platforms. Their input has increased particularly since our decision to withdraw from Twitter (rebranded as X) to enable communication via social media to continue.

The development and delivery of a leadership support programme for forum chairs, which include topic areas such as emotional intelligence to lead a voluntary team, understanding activism and member engagement, was completed. In addition, a series of pre-recorded online units that cover various aspects of leading a forum has been made available to all forum steering committee members through their RCN login. A bespoke induction programme for new forum steering committee members and a separate one for forum chairs, with elements of the leadership support programme incorporated, will continue to be provided to further support learning and development needs to undertake the role of leaders for their forum.



Promotion of forum activity

Recommendation 15: A Valuing Forums and Networks Toolkit should be developed based on the Valuing Reps Toolkit.

A review of the Valuing Reps Toolkit was undertaken as members felt that a similar resource should be replicated for forums. Although called ‘toolkit’, it was found to be an information pack that highlighted the achievements and work undertaken to support the reps working in the regions at the time.

Each year, we highlight the achievements of the forums; in the RCN's *Review of the Year* ([RCN, 2024](#)) and details are also shown on the individual forum website. The forum induction pack is also updated every year and is a source of information provided to the forum steering committee members. A short video which summarises and celebrates some of the forum work that has been produced is showcased at RCN Congress and subsequently made available on the forum's landing page. Given the information already provided to highlight and promote forum activity, further work on this recommendation was not considered necessary.



The Activism and Nursing Practice academies are working through the Forum Chairs Group to support the forums as they seek to engage more actively with their members and with the wider RCN membership.

Conclusion

The fundamental principle of the work undertaken was to improve forum support to enable them to function more effectively and contribute to delivering the professional output as indicated in our Royal Charter; the changes implemented have made it easier for this to be achieved. The Institute of Nursing Excellence and its constituent academies will continue to work with members to improve the ways of working through which the professional forums and networks operate, to enable them to embody excellence in practice and shape the professional priorities within the RCN.

The recommendations of the review implemented support and strengthens the work of the professional forums to effectively lead on the delivery of clinical guidance and standards, share clinical expertise to inform and influence policy development and leverage, as well as support the development and delivery of educational events and programmes of work across the UK. The ongoing monitoring and impact of the changes achieved through the implementation of the review recommendations will become 'business as usual' activity.

The Nursing Practice Academy will continue to facilitate and collaborate with members to ensure there is synergy with the work of forums and the related academies to align with that of the strategic priorities by coordinating and connecting, where appropriate, all areas of the RCN to meet and continue to strengthen the voice of nursing.



Further reading

Royal College of Nursing (2022) *RCN Forums and Networks Review Report*

rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-forums-and-networks-review-report-uk-pub-010-240

Royal College of Nursing (2025) *Process for Establishing and Disestablishing a Forum*

rcn.org.uk/Get-Involved/Forums/Process-for-establishing-and-disestablishing-a-forum

Royal College of Nursing (June 2024) *Our Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy*,

rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/equity-diversity-and-inclusion-strategy-uk-pub-011-613

Royal College of Nursing (2025) *Member Roles, Engagement and Participation*

rcn.org.uk/About-us/Our-governance/How-we-work/Our-structure/Member-involvement

Royal College of Nursing (2025) *RCN Annual Review of the Year 2024*

rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-annual-review-of-the-year-2024-uk-pub-011-902



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