

# RCN Institute:

## Highlights and achievements of 2025



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Published by the Royal College of Nursing, 20 Cavendish Square, London W1G 0RN

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# Foreword

Nursing in 2025 has faced profound and persistent challenges. From chronic workforce shortages and escalating burnout to the undervaluing of specialist skills and the erosion of professional identity, the pressures on the profession have never been greater. In this context, the RCN Institute of Nursing Excellence has emerged not just as a response, but as a resource – a centre of support, innovation and influence for nursing staff across the UK and globally.

The Institute was established to bring together evidence, expertise and community in a way that enables the profession to tackle its most complex issues. Its strength lies in its structure: five academies – Activism, International Nursing, Nursing Leadership, Nursing Practice and Nursing Workforce – each focused on a critical domain of nursing, and each working collaboratively to generate solutions, build capability and amplify the nursing voice. These academies are supported by our education and research teams.

Over the past year, the Institute has supported nursing professionals at every stage of their career. It has helped chief nurses make the economic case for investment in staffing, supported new graduates as they transition into practice, and provided leadership development, resources and advice to thousands of RCN members. It has also worked in close partnership with the two RCN committees (Professional Nursing Committee and Trade Union Committee), RCN Fellows, stakeholders and departments to ensure alignment with wider College priorities and to embed equity, diversity and inclusion across all its work.

The development of Nest, our new community of practice platform, will create a tangible space for dialogue, connection and shared learning – a place where members and staff can engage, contribute and grow together.

This report offers a snapshot of what has been achieved in our first full year. It reflects the Institute's commitment to evidence-based practice, to the values of the College, and to the belief that nursing excellence is not just an aspiration, but a shared responsibility. It is a fusion of knowledge and values, of head and heart – rooted in the conviction that nursing matters.

We know that the challenges facing the profession are real, and, in some cases, existential.

But we also know that through collective action, informed leadership and a commitment to excellence, we can shape a better future for nursing.

The RCN Institute of Nursing Excellence is here to help make that happen.



**Professor Jane Ball**  
Director, RCN Institute of Nursing Excellence

# The Institute of Nursing Excellence: an overview

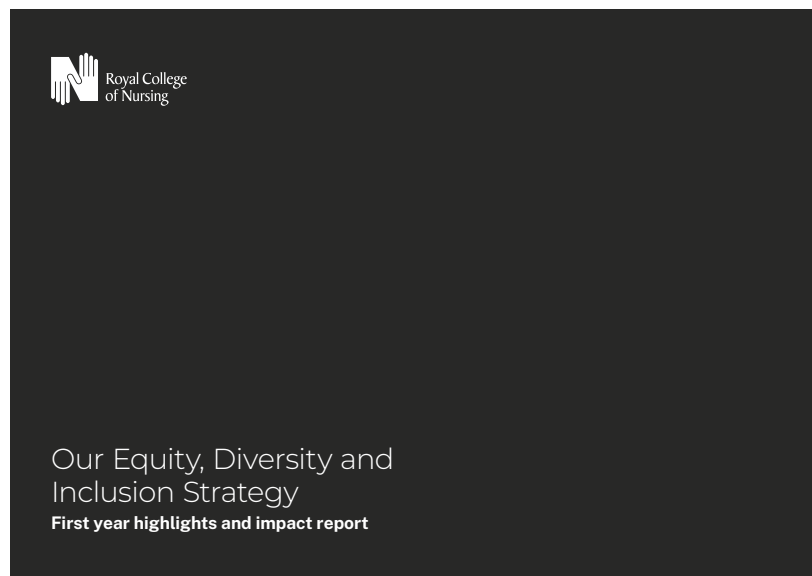
Our goal is simple: to enable nursing excellence across health and social care – now, and in years to come.

Harnessing expertise and evidence, the Institute offers leadership and practical resources across the profession, to enable individuals and systems to fulfil their potential.

The Institute's five academies: Activism, International Nursing, Nursing Leadership, Nursing Practice and Nursing Workforce – are supported by the RCN's research, education, and library and museum teams. The Institute focuses on aspects of nursing that apply across the profession, regardless of setting or stage of career.

It's our view that for nursing to be strong, we need everyone involved in nursing to actively engage, stay up to date, use data and evidence to inform what we do, lead change, and think globally whilst acting locally. The Institute is here to support nursing staff and students to do that individually and as part of a community.

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is at the heart of what we do within the Institute, in line with **our equity, diversity and inclusion strategy**.



The work of the academies and the teams that support them, reflect the RCN's commitment to the climate emergency and wider work on sustainability. While work has begun to embed the foundations needed to enable members to practice sustainably, this will increase from 2026 with a commitment from the Institute to showcase the breadth of nursing impact on this priority issue.



## ACTIVISM ACADEMY

When nursing comes together and stands up for its profession, for patients and themselves, it can achieve so much. The RCN's successes as a professional body and a trade union are always amplified when its members come together and get active. That's why the Activism Academy exists, to work across the College, to drive a transformation in the number and impact of active RCN members.

### Setting out a shared vision

In June 2025, **The RCN Activism Strategy 2025 – 2027** was published. The strategy is a blueprint towards a more active and engaged RCN membership where, together, members can achieve real change in the nursing profession and for all those who work within it. In her foreword to the strategy, RCN General Secretary and Chief Executive Professor Nicola Ranger said:

*I joined the RCN in the first week of the strikes and knew I was on the right side of history. It is a challenging time to be a nurse, and we need to be strong in valuing ourselves and our profession. That's why activism matters.*

**Professor Nicola Ranger**

RCN General Secretary and Chief Executive

The strategy comprises five visions for the College to work on together, where members are:

- organising for change
- influential in their workplaces
- driving change in the nursing profession
- empowered to stand up for inclusion
- a skilled and informed community.

We coordinated the development of the strategy, drawn from the insights of thousands of members and staff, and will help deliver on its implementation over the coming two years.

### Engaging active members

In June, working closely with the Nursing Practice Academy and the Nursing Workforce Academy, we held the first ever professional activism conference at RCN UK HQ in London, with members from across the forums in attendance. It had good attendance, great discussion and positive feedback that will inform our future work.

In September, we hosted the RCN Retired Members Conference, also in London, which saw retired members joining from across the UK, and an informative keynote speech from the General Secretary of the National Pensioners Convention, which the RCN is affiliated with.



The RCN Reps Project Board, comprising RCN members and staff from across the UK, has been carrying out complex and important work to ensure that the RCN can meet its bold commitment set out in the five-year strategic plan: **A new dawn for nursing: 2023-2027** to build a sustainable and scalable rep structure within the RCN, which enables effective recruitment, training and support of new reps, and ensures retention and alignment with the RCN's strategic goals and the diverse needs of our membership.

In June, we hosted two webinars with the RCN Marketing Team and member leaders to support internationally educated nurses to get active. We had over 150 unique attendances and very positive feedback.

## Organising for nursing

Throughout 2025, we developed and launched an innovative pilot project designed to empower RCN members to take collective action in their workplaces on the issues that matter most to them. The pilot, called Workplace Teams, will partner with groups of RCN members at 26 diverse nursing workplace settings across the UK, providing a tailored learning package, bespoke expert coaching and support, and resources to create sustainable workplace structures that increase RCN visibility and participation.

In addition to launching Workplace Teams, we also assisted and led on a number of local organising drives with RCN members throughout the year, including initiatives around banding in the south east and in Scotland; bank staff issues in the West Midlands; cancer care treatment in Northern Ireland; mileage issues in the eastern region; student campaigns in Wales; car parking in the south west; and non-NHS pay work in Yorkshire and the Humber region.

We contributed significantly to the RCN-wide efforts in the summer to achieve a high turnout in its consultation of members in England and Wales on Agenda for Change contracts. We worked with the RCN Trade Union Committee, region and country teams and others to recruit and support nearly 5,000 members who wanted to take action to increase the numbers taking part. This, in turn, helped result in a record consultation turnout.

## Developing skills and knowledge for active members



We progressed hundreds of newly accredited RCN trade union representatives through our Pathway Learning and Development Programme in 2025, providing key foundational skills and knowledge. We also worked with colleagues in RCN England to develop and deliver a new pathway for temporary RCN stewards recruited in integrated care boards, to support members with organisational change challenges, as they emerged.

We hosted two major UK conferences for reps, one in spring and one in autumn. At the autumn conference, we launched a new edition of **Ask. Listen. Act.** a resource supporting RCN reps to champion and advocate for the RCN's **Nursing Workforce Standards** within their

employer. This was the result of a positive collaboration with the Activism Academy, the Nursing Workforce Academy and other teams.

Development throughout 2025 saw a pilot of a learning and development programme for members in RCN committee roles in November and December, with the intention to widen the programme in January 2026.



## INTERNATIONAL NURSING ACADEMY

The International Nursing Academy is dedicated to advancing the education and professional development of nurses and health care professionals worldwide.

By building partnerships with nursing organisations and institutions across the globe, and engaging RCN staff and members with expertise in global nursing, we promote bi-directional learning, cultural competence, and professional growth.

Through these collaborations, we share best practices and research to raise standards of care internationally and contribute to wider health initiatives and disaster response. Currently, we are delivering seven active programmes across 10 countries and territories, with a focus on education, leadership, research, advocacy, quality improvement and mental health.

We live the values of nursing through our practical approach and actions.

Three core principles guide our work:

- humanitarian action
- strategic partnerships
- signposting, support and advocacy.

Programmes are designed for maximum impact and sustainability, adhering to local and international standards while embedding equality, diversity and inclusion. By combining professional development, technology-enabled learning, rigorous quality assurance, and ethical practice, we ensure our programmes are co-designed and co-implemented, relevant, inclusive and responsive to the needs of the global nursing workforce.

### Summary of programmes

We operate across a diverse range of countries and territories, including Gaza and the West Bank, Ghana, Malawi, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, the UK Overseas Territories (Anguilla, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands and St Helena). Our reach reflects a commitment to supporting nursing in both humanitarian and development contexts, often in regions facing significant health system challenges.

We work with a broad spectrum of beneficiaries, including ministries of health, nursing associations, nurse leaders, clinical nurses, academics, students, nursing support workers and allied health care professionals, ensuring that our interventions are relevant and responsive to local needs.

A core element of our work is advocacy – amplifying the voices of nurses working in conflict and crisis settings. Through initiatives such as the **Care amongst the chaos: The voices of nurses working in conflict** report, we document and share the lived experiences of frontline nurses, using their insights to inform policy, raise awareness, and call to action at national and international levels.





As a leading member of the International Council of Nurses, our impact is magnified through strategic partnerships. We work globally with academic institutions, RCN Fellows, charities and individuals to strengthen the global voice of nursing. These collaborations take shape both within specific programmes and through ongoing technical support for global health initiatives.

## Programme highlights

In the last year, we begun work to develop high-impact programmes across humanitarian and development contexts, placing global nursing and members at the heart of everything we do.

In Sri Lanka, we have delivered educational programmes on older persons and non-communicable diseases to support nurses working in communities across the country. A curriculum review, co-produced by the Post-Basic Nursing College, the Sri Lankan Nurses Association and the RCN, is underway. This review aims to enhance education in areas that are becoming increasingly common in Sri Lanka, thanks to a rising life expectancy and better living conditions. Supported by the World Bank and the World Health Organization, the programme engages national nursing bodies, government stakeholders and diaspora partners to shape future nursing education.

In Myanmar, the Phoenix Nursing Education Programme supports degree-level education for 125 student nurses in conflict-affected regions. The programme supports both undergraduate studies and a bridging pathway from diploma to degree. With support from UNICEF, Community Partners International and Global Health Partnerships, we have worked in collaboration with local faculty and fellows to deliver this unique and groundbreaking work.

Across the UK Overseas Territories, a programme funded by the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) supports mental health awareness and quality improvement for nurses in Anguilla, British Virgin Islands, Cayman, and St Helena. Six months into the programme, nurses across the territories are working on initiatives including improvements to nursing triage in hospitals, staff wellbeing, diabetes care, and discharge planning, as well as undertaking an extensive mental health education programme.

In Malawi, we are working in partnership with the National Organisation of Nurses and Midwives of Malawi, focusing on nurse-led research and quality improvement, leadership development, workforce advocacy and retention. A postgraduate diploma and mentorship scheme are also being designed to support senior nurses.

In Ghana, a recent visit helped define a leadership and research programme, with working groups now preparing a costed proposal.

In Palestine, we have been working to enable technical nursing support through an experienced charity and collaborating with a hospital and academic centre in the West Bank to develop a quality and leadership nursing postgraduate diploma.

A parallel pro bono initiative is expanding access to specialised nursing skills in partnership with humanitarian organisations. Globally, a simulation project is developing smartphone-based virtual reality modules for nurses in conflict zones, with a pilot planned in Myanmar and technical development underway with a UK university.

We also continue to publish in academic journals, post blogs and undertake podcasts and interviews.

These programmes reflect the International Nursing Academy's commitment to sustainable, nurse-led impact across diverse global settings, and this work places the RCN at the heart of international developments in our profession and benefits our members through shared learning and service development.

We are all global nurses.



## **NURSING LEADERSHIP ACADEMY**

The Nursing Leadership Academy serves as a catalyst for positive change across the health and social care landscape. Established to empower nursing professionals at every stage of their careers, the academy provides world-class leadership development opportunities grounded in the values of compassion, integrity and evidence-based practice.

This year, we have strengthened our position as a leading voice in nursing leadership, supporting the RCN's mission to ensure that nursing staff are respected, empowered and equipped to influence health care at every level.

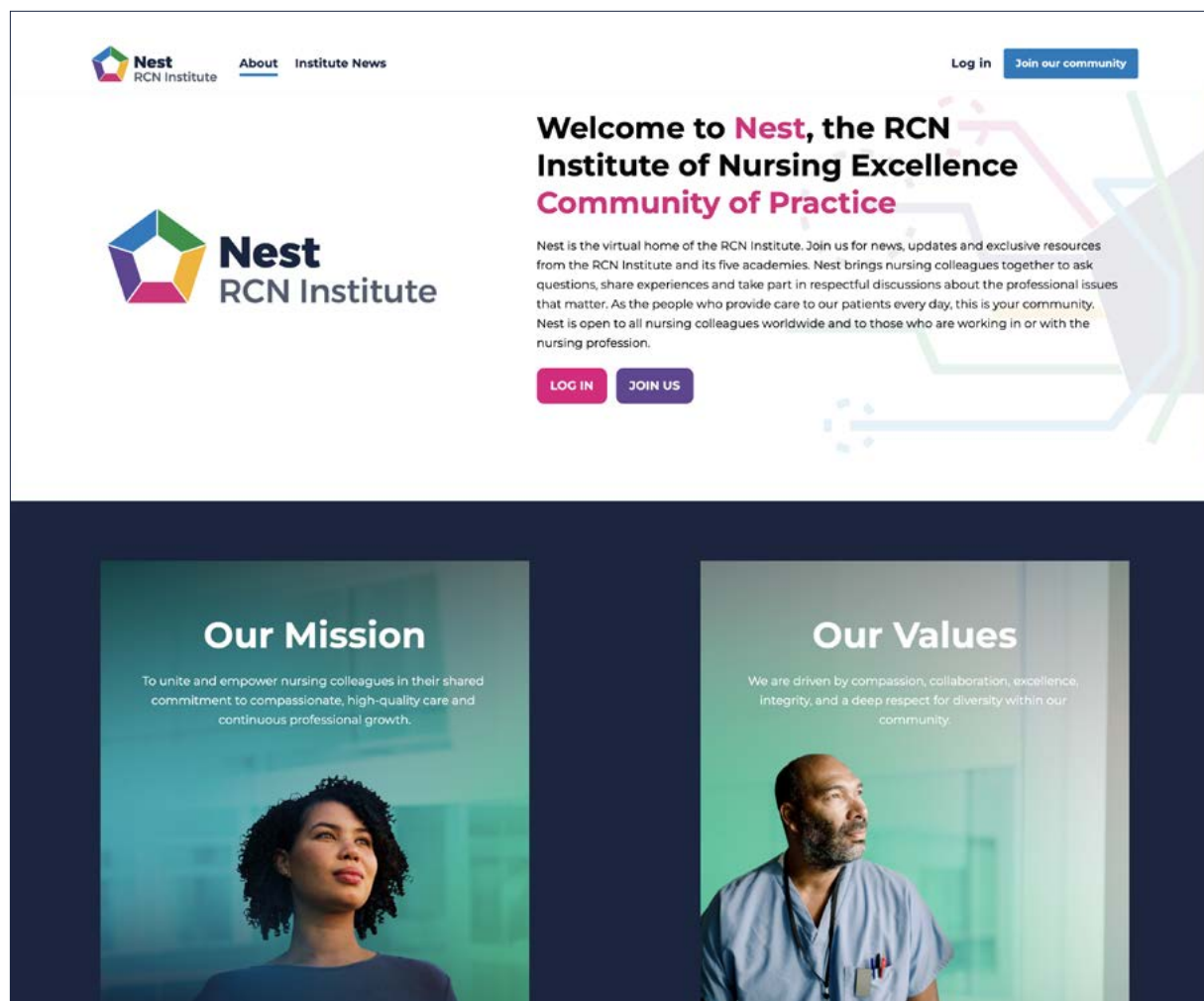
Our updated suite of programmes provides development for nursing professionals setting out on their leadership journey and offers support for others at different stages of their careers. New programmes have been developed with partner organisations that are co-designed and rooted in the context in which their leaders work. These include a suite of short and long programmes for nursing staff that develops skills to lead complex and high stakes investigations in the workplace. The team have delivered workshops in the north-west region and are working with several NHS trusts to create bespoke training programmes that focus on the needs of their workforce.

Two leadership summits were hosted for chief nursing officers and deputies which shed light on some of the greatest challenges facing our senior and executive nurse leaders. The summits created opportunities to come together, away from the day-to-day issues, and provide a space for discussion and debate between peers and leading experts.

The RCN work to end corridor care was strengthened by a series of four webinars: Leading without Compromise, which aimed to support staff working in challenging and inappropriate environments.

We are also exploring global partnerships and international consultancy. We have developed a network with senior executive nurses from the USA and are developing opportunities to support leadership development in Ghana, Myanmar and Saudi Arabia in collaboration with the International Nursing Academy.

A key area of development has been the creation of Nest – an interactive online community of practice that showcases the work of the Institute. Nest creates opportunities for networking, debate and discussion. It offers easy access to event bookings, news and the latest information from each of our academies. In 2026, it will also host the RCN Mentor Me programme, offering early career nurses mentorship through a national mentorship programme. To aid this programme, the academy has supported 12 Institute staff to undertake and complete formal mentorship training.



We continue to shape the future of nursing leadership – equipping professionals to lead with courage, compassion and conviction. Our success lies in the nursing professionals we have trained and in the transformational impact those leaders have on teams, organisations and the patients they serve.

As we move forward, our commitment remains clear: to inspire and develop nursing leaders who drive positive change, influence policy, and uphold the values that define our profession.



## NURSING PRACTICE ACADEMY

The Nursing Practice Academy provides nursing staff with the clinical skills and knowledge they need to deliver exceptional patient care with confidence.

We develop evidence-backed guidance, standards and learning programmes; collaborate with and provide expertise and recommendations to other organisations, and we promote a culture of continual learning and development among nursing staff.

### Working with our forums

Throughout 2025, we delivered all recommendations from the 2022 **RCN Forums and Networks Review Report**, to ensure improved governance and engagement.

We also ran a joint workshop with the Activism Academy that equipped forum chairs with professional activism skills. The workshop received overwhelmingly positive feedback.

### Influencing national policy and ethical practice

The RCN's UK-wide position statement on **assisted dying** was also updated. We developed FAQs and launched dedicated webpages to support informed nursing dialogue on this sensitive issue.

We also coordinated cross-organisation input into the Chief Nursing Officer England and workforce strategy, ensuring nursing voices shaped national priorities.

### Advancing clinical and practice development

Our Psychosocial Interventions (PSI) Programme was co-designed with service users and experts to enhance mental health nursing skills. It focuses on:

- clinical impact: nurses apply trauma-informed tools like the stress bucket, which improves patient engagement
- practice development impact: participants use PSI to design new service models
- professional impact: the programme supports nurses' confidence and career progression in mental health.

### Innovating through creative engagement

Developing *Blue*, is a play which explores wellbeing, stigma and compassionate leadership and aims to foster cultural dialogue in health care.

## Setting and accrediting standards

We developed the Supporting Compassionate Practice Environments (SCoPE) Accreditation Programme – the RCN’s flagship initiative to embed compassionate, inclusive and psychologically safe cultures across UK nursing environments. Building on the 2024–25 *Compassion in Practice* standards, SCoPE offers a scalable, service-level accreditation model that transforms evidence-based standards into measurable cultural improvement.

SCoPE strengthens workforce morale, retention and policy influence, positioning the RCN as the national leader in workplace culture accreditation. The standards will be launched in 2026 and taken to RCN Congress.

We published national neonatal qualified in specialty (QIS) standards with NHS England, creating a blueprint for education and quality assurance. We also progressed professional nurse advocate (PNA) accreditation and refresher programmes.

## Empowering nursing support workers (NSWs)

We delivered multiple educational events across the UK for NSWs, including: how to identify and raise concerns webinar, which attracted 82 attendees.

We also prepared for a major NSW conference, and, in collaboration with the Nursing Workforce Academy, published defined **nursing support worker roles and level descriptors** to clarify career pathways. More information can be found here: **RCN defines nursing support workers and their level descriptors**.

## Learning disability

The UK learning disabilities nurse review aims to strengthen the future of learning disabilities nursing across the UK. This work was prompted directly by members through the RCN Congress 2024 matter for discussion, entitled: Redefining learning disability nursing. This was then re-acknowledged at the RCN Learning Disability Nursing Forum’s Workforce Summit (2024) and reaffirmed by a 2024/2025 UK-wide member survey.

Feedback highlighted persistent concerns around public and professional misunderstanding of the role, barriers to recruitment, and limited visibility across services. In response, the RCN asked whether the current title of registered nurse in learning disabilities remains fit for purpose.

## Driving equity and inclusion

We launched the Global and Ethnic Minority (GEM) Project, an action-research initiative to identify and address barriers to career progression for nursing staff from global majority and ethnic minority backgrounds.



## Showcasing community nursing

In August, the *Forums in Focus* campaign delivered strong engagement across multiple channels. The campaign succeeded in reaching a targeted audience and driving meaningful interactions – particularly through social media, video, and targeted email content. The videos had 52,147 views, and social media had 100,000 impressions and 4,000 engagements.



## Influencing standards and guidance

We endorsed key national resources, including:

- Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health's *Facing the Future* – standards for paediatric emergency care
- *Ward Rounds Fit for the Future* guidance, embedding nursing leadership in post-COVID models
- *Manifesto for a Mentally Healthier Nation*, advocating for prevention and community-based care.

## Regulation

The RCN is a key stakeholder in the NMC Code and Revalidation Steering Group, which brings together representatives from across the four UK nations to review and update professional standards. The chief and deputy chief nursing officers have been actively attending these meetings to ensure that the voice of members is heard. The review aims to keep both the Code and revalidation relevant to today's health and social care landscape. It addresses priorities such as equality, diversity and inclusion; learning from high-profile inquiries and considering emerging developments, including the role of artificial intelligence in clinical practice.

The *Protect Nurse* campaign continues to be driven by RCN members, with meetings jointly held alongside policy and communications teams and chaired by the deputy chief nursing officer (DCNO). Thanks to this sustained advocacy, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) is drafting changes to General Medical Council legislation and engaging with the NMC and the Health and Care Professions Council.

DHSC plans to begin developing the detailed proposals for *Protect Nurse* this year, ahead of a formal consultation on the NMC Order. The RCN will maintain close engagement with DHSC and officials to ensure that the original intent of the campaign remains central to the design of this new legislation.

Following the Independent Cultural Review of the NMC, the chief and deputy nursing officers have attended stakeholder meetings focused on strengthening regulatory oversight of nurses. These NMC Independent Oversight meetings were convened to challenge delays in investigations and reinforce accountability, with key stakeholders scrutinising updates and offering constructive challenge, where necessary. Over time, this collaborative and persistent approach has led to measurable improvements in investigation outcomes, demonstrating the value of consistent stakeholder engagement and strategic oversight.

## **Independent health and social care**

The Independent Health and Social Care (IHSC) programme is a cornerstone initiative within the organisation. Driving transformation across health and social care, this programme of work now sits within the Nursing Practice Academy.

Over the past three years, the head of IHSC has worked in close collaboration with IHSC leads across the UK to champion this agenda and embed practices nationally. This work has been strategically aligned with the RCN's priorities and will support the objectives of the NHS 10-year health plan, which prioritises a fundamental shift from hospital to community-based care. Through this programme, significant progress has been made in strengthening partnerships and amplifying the member voice in the IHSC.

## **IHSC nursing support workers (NSWs) workstream**

A survey conducted with IHSC NSW members, in consultation with the RCN's NSW Committee, has provided valuable insights into members' experiences with the RCN and workplace issues. These findings will help shape phase two of the workstream and strengthen the organisation's ongoing projects, campaigns and initiatives already underway across the RCN.

A report summarising the first phase of the workstream is also scheduled for completion in December. The insights gathered will inform and guide future work within the IHSC team.



## Agency nursing

The workstream completed an agency nursing members survey and thematic review to understand key motivations for agency work, such as: flexibility, varied roles and more free time. Strong partnerships were established with key stakeholders, whose input provided additional data, whilst forming a collaborative appetite to provide solutions. A successful networking event was co-produced with stakeholders, strengthening engagement and setting the foundation for future initiatives.

## England

### Independent health care sector (IHSC) activity

A group of lead nurses for the IHSC are working with the RCN's policy and research teams who are leading on a project to gather insights from nursing staff and stakeholders in adult social care to help inform RCN policy position.

We developed a resource for newly registered nurses (NRNs) to promote careers in the IHSC sector, and a webinar is planned for early 2026, to promote student placements and careers in the IHSC sector, in partnership with Skills for Care.

### Men in Nursing project

We carried out scoping for the UK-wide *Men in Nursing* project – which examines inclusion and gender diversity within the profession. Four focus groups were facilitated to explore the experiences of male members. Feedback from these sessions is currently being analysed to inform next steps.

We joined a collaborative working group, comprised of representatives from the University of Dundee, London South Bank University, New York University and NHS Fife, to address this issue. In November 2025, we jointly presented to the Council of Deans of Health during their diversity month activities with the session titled: Who Cares? Men in Nursing: Evolving Narratives for a Diverse Workforce.

## **Sexism and racism in the IHSC**

Following the independent inquiry into the NMC, which highlighted that younger males from global majority backgrounds are disproportionately referred for disciplinary processes and NMC fitness to practise procedures, a project group has been established to develop a comprehensive support programme.

This initiative aims to provide advice and guidance for nurses and health care staff working in IHSC settings, as well as IHSC employers. The project is scheduled for completion by November 2026.

## **Northern Ireland**

The lead nurse for IHSC in Northern Ireland is also the co-chair for Northern Ireland Practice & Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery (NIPEC) career pathway for care homes.

## **Scotland**

The RCN Scotland community of practice for care home nurses is working with older people and gathering feedback and survey responses to evaluate its impact. Planning for a recruitment day at Nuffield Hospital in Glasgow progressed to increase member and rep engagement.

Scotland's IHSC lead has reviewed and provided feedback on the NHS Long-term conditions – framework: consultation paper and School and Public Health Nurses Association's independent school nurse guideline endorsement, with ongoing work alongside Scottish Government and key stakeholders on the review of Scotland's Health and Social Care Standards and definitions of care.

## **Wales**

We delivered four IHSC roundtable events throughout the year, alongside additional influencing and support for the establishment of a government-led community of practice for social care nursing.

IHSC's influence within the Welsh chief nursing officer (CNO) office continues to grow, with the deputy CNO now assuming responsibility for IHSC.



# NURSING WORKFORCE ACADEMY

Established at the end of 2024, the Nursing Workforce Academy uses robust evidence to combat the nursing workforce crisis. We focus on the systemic causes of trends that are driving up mental ill health and attrition among nursing staff and driving down the quality of patient care. We seek to demonstrate the value of the nurse in achieving nursing excellence and identify means of ensuring care is a safe and positive experience for both staff and patients.

Building on existing collaboration and co-production with RCN members, and across the wider Institute of Nursing Excellence, we are co-creating a portfolio of accessible resources and guidance to translate and share the evidence base which underpins quality and safety in health care.

To achieve this, we have established three priority areas in line with the RCN's five-year strategic plan: **A new dawn for nursing: 2023-2027**, and specifically, Goal 1: The RCN as the Voice of Nursing.

Our workstreams sit within these priority areas: the value of safe nurse staffing, work lives and wellbeing, and professional practice.

## Priority area one: the value of safe nurse staffing

### Registered nurse-to-patient ratios

In May 2025, Professor Jane Ball published an evidence-based statement: **Registered nurse staffing levels for patient safety, care quality and cost effectiveness**, in which she demonstrated the impact of nurse staffing levels on patient outcomes, cost effectiveness and health care efficiency.

This laid the foundation for the academy work on registered nurse-to-patient ratios. We have undertaken a large-scale review and critical appraisal of all safe staffing guidance that exists for specialties across the UK, due to be published early 2026. This will be a live ratios resource to support workforce leaders, policy makers, academics, clinical managers and nursing staff. The resource will also serve to identify gaps and opportunities for us to progress our mandate to lead the development of ratios across the clinical settings.

We are also working in collaboration with academic partners to develop a series of evidence briefs demonstrating the wider value of registered nursing. The first, evaluating the evidence for nurse-to-patient ratios, was published in late October 2025.

Work planned for 2026 includes building the economic case for ratios, building ratio case studies, the design and development of new member surveys related to ratios and skill mix and refining the academy's contribution to long-term campaigning for ratios.

## Substitution

In response to concerns raised over registered nurse posts being advertised to other health care professionals and nursing associates, in July 2025, the RCN's statement on substitution was updated. The statement reports that:



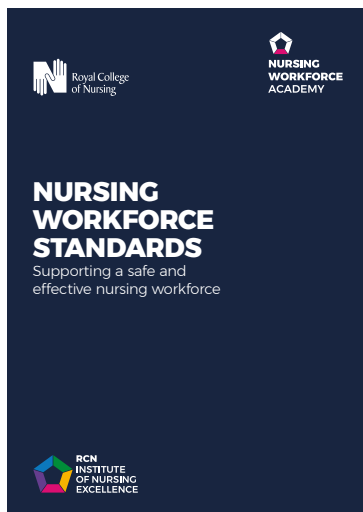
A registered nurse must never be substituted with any other health care professionals including nursing support workers.

The academy will monitor this position statement and lead on future developments.

## Priority area two: work lives and wellbeing

### Nursing Workforce Standards (NWFS)

Introduced in 2021, the standards were the first national blueprint for addressing nursing shortages across the UK, setting out the standards we expect of a nursing workforce in all health and care settings.



In 2024-2025, we worked with our members and listened to their professional nursing expertise, to review the standards and make them more accessible and strengthen the evidence base. The new and improved standards were published and launched at Congress in May 2025.

Methods of dissemination include accredited workshops, the NWFS champions initiative, updated practice checklists, tools for RCN reps and presentation at both internal and external events. Future work will include mechanisms to evaluate uptake and impact of the standards.



## Priority area three: professional practice (in partnership with the Nursing Practice Academy)

### Ending corridor care

We are supporting the organisational campaign to end corridor care by reviewing and bringing together resources available for members, staff and the wider public on the RCN website. We are also providing nursing support to the wider campaign.



### Nursing support workforce definition and levels

The first phase of the professional framework programme developed the **Definition and Principles of Nursing**, and standards for advanced, enhanced and consultant levels of nursing. The second phase of the work, in collaboration with members, field experts and other RCN teams, has developed a definition and descriptors for two levels of nursing support work – assistive and supportive – which will provide clarity for the nursing support workforce, employers, regulators and policy makers. An employer's guide is also being created.

### Career frameworks

The professional framework programme has resulted in a suite of online resources describing and supporting what it means to be a nurse. Working with the Professional Framework Joint Partnership Board, nursing career frameworks, competencies and career information from across the UK and all settings has been collated into one accessible resource. We will continue to monitor, review and update.

### European Federation of Nursing Associations (EFN)

Wendy Preston, Head of Nursing Workforce, chairs the EFN's advanced practice nursing working group and supports UK and devolved nation specific conversations and influence regarding advanced level nursing. This is important given the NMC commitment to regulating advanced level nursing and increases the visibility of the RCN globally, and offers exciting opportunities in 2026 and beyond.

# Research

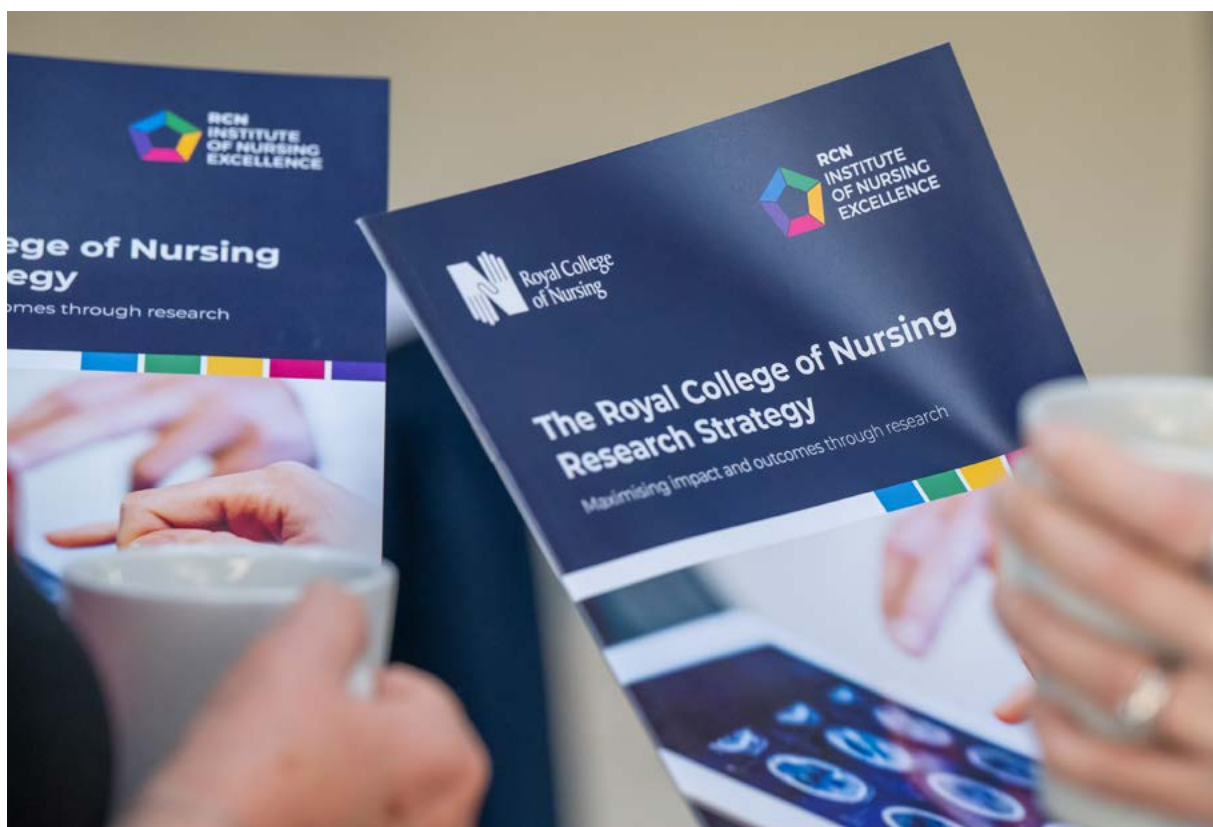
The RCN has been at the forefront of supporting nursing research for decades. From our specialist **Nursing Research Forum**, to our prestigious annual **International Nursing Research Conference**, the RCN has long recognised the value that nursing staff can bring to research, and the value that evidence generated from research brings to the care we deliver for our patients. After more than a year in development, in September 2025 we launched our new **RCN Research Strategy**.

The **impact of nursing research** on patients and public health is profound; from tackling obesity and improving lives of cancer survivors, to preventing pressure ulcers and influencing policies on safe staffing. Yet the full potential of nursing research remains untapped. We still face major challenges in achieving parity with medical research in terms of recognition, investment and opportunity.

The RCN's new research strategy supports and champions nursing research. It outlines why research matters, how we can nurture it, and the role the RCN can play by working with others to embed a research culture across the profession – from day one of entering nursing throughout the nursing career path.

Nursing staff are uniquely placed at the heart of every care setting and specialism. That's why it's vital that they are empowered with the skills to understand, engage with and lead research – to ensure the care we deliver is safe, effective and future-ready.

Alongside the launch of the RCN Research Strategy, we have reached several key milestones for research.



## RCN International Nursing Research Conference

The RCN's annual research conference took place between 8-10 September in Exeter, and was attended by over 330 delegates from 17 different countries. This is the second year that the conference has combined academic research with clinical research delivery to showcase the breadth of research roles, expertise and impact. The theme for the 2025 conference was: Nursing Research: transforming global health in a changing world.

For the first time this year, the Institute funded 10 subsidised delegate spaces aimed to widen participation, especially for students, international nurses, peer support workers, people with lived experience and early career nurses and researchers. We had 146 applicants for these 10 spaces, demonstrating huge interest and need. We plan to continue subsidising 10 spaces in 2026 and to build capacity to strengthen this space. The **RCN International Research Conference 2026** will take place in Glasgow.

## Winifred Raphael Memorial Lecture

This annual public lecture, funded by the RCN Foundation, was reinstated this year following an absence since the COVID-19 pandemic. **Professor Dawn Dowding spoke on: The value of nursing in the digital age.** This event was originally planned to be in-person only, but demand was so high that we expanded both accessibility and capacity by switching to a hybrid format – and more than 300 people attended.

## RCN Congress workshops

A series of evidence-based workshops were led, designed and delivered between research and library teams, including: finding and evaluating evidence, critical thinking and criticality. These were introduced to encourage members to engage with research when submitting agenda items for Congress.

During Congress, presentation skills workshops were facilitated in collaboration between research, library, education and leadership teams, with full rooms and great feedback all round. Members gave very positive feedback on the workshops, noting their increased confidence in public speaking and a stronger understanding of how to use evidence to support their ideas in discussions. Facilitators also observed a transformational impact on those who attended the workshop, especially when compared with participants who had not taken part.

The Congress Agenda Committee recognised the importance of this ongoing work, and have approved these workshops to continue each year for the foreseeable future.



## Research hub

Our nursing research webpages have been updated – with support from the RCN Communications Department. Our next task is to integrate our research hub with Nest. This space will offer a unique platform – providing an interactive global community of practice for people to learn, share ideas, opportunities and network around nursing research.

# Education

At the heart of the Institute of Nursing Excellence is our commitment to advancing nursing through transformative education. Each of the five academies, every programme, and every element of our education, learning and development innovation starts here – from RCN Learn and online learning to in-person programmes supporting clinical practice.

Here's how we have supported the Institute's academies.

## Nursing Leadership Academy

We supported the successful development and implementation of a new programme to improve skills in statement writing and providing evidence. This two-day programme, designed for nurses and health care support workers, was delivered in the north-west region. There are a further four commissions for 2026 and plans are underway to develop a much longer programme for senior nurses working as ward managers and matrons. This is planned to start in early 2026, in three additional NHS trusts.

This year, we have completed a review and refresh of our current leadership offer to meet the changing model of leadership. We are currently planning market research to establish the demand for a core programme with bespoke modules to provide RCN Leadership bronze, silver and gold awards.

Staff from the Education Team have also undertaken action learning set and mentoring programmes to further develop services in these areas.

## Nursing Practice Academy

The professional nurse advocate (PNA) half-day programme has now been quality assured. The pilot launched in December 2025 and ongoing programme delivery is planned from early 2026. Members of the education team will support the development and facilitation of these sessions.

Our Psychosocial Interventions (PSI) Programme has been developed in collaboration between the Nursing Practice Academy and the RCN Education Team. The PSI programme aims to strengthen the capabilities of the mental health nursing workforce. It has been collaboratively developed with input from service users, family representatives, and both national and international experts in psychosocial interventions.

The Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) Programme has had 121 students over the last two years and we're currently reviewing the programme to ensure it represents contemporary clinical practice. The Fitness to Practice and Demonstrating Value Masterclass study days continue to be delivered.



## Nursing Workforce Academy

We are working in collaboration with the Nursing Workforce Academy on the nursing support workforce definition and levels workstream, to develop supportive educational standards.

## International Nursing Academy

Two members of the education team, with qualifications and experience in public health, supported the academy in the development and delivery of educational programmes on older persons and non-communicable diseases to support nurses working in communities across the Sri Lanka. We are also supporting the quality assurance of the academy's Myanmar curriculum.

## Activism Academy

We're working with the Activism Academy on making our student ambassador scheme more engaging. The Activism Academy also supported the delivery of the 2025 Student Ambassador Conference in November.

## RCN King's Nursing Cadets

On 11 March 2025, His Majesty King Charles III reiterated his commitment to supporting young people to get into nursing by attending our event to relaunch the RCN Prince of Wales Nursing Cadet scheme, to the RCN King's Nursing Cadets. His Majesty met cadets from across the UK, including the 1,000th cadet to progress through the programme. In a series of practical learning scenarios, cadets demonstrated some of the skills they have acquired. During 2025, the scheme has grown to 1,481 cadets.





In early 2025, to understand the long-term impact of the programme, we carried out a survey to all those who had completed the programme. From a total of 767 cadets, we saw a healthy 30% response rate. The survey captured career pathways, perceptions of nursing and reflections on their experience. Results showed that 53% of respondents are now working in or studying towards a health-related field as a direct result of completing the programme, 31% of which are specifically in nursing or health care support worker roles. When asked how the programme prepared them for future careers, 70% said they felt 'very' or 'extremely' prepared.

**Students** – RCN Congress 2025 held several student events that were well evaluated, including a networking session with Professor Nicola Ranger. At Congress, student ambassador Alex Knight (below) raised an emergency debate on the shortage of jobs for newly registered nurses. The debate was passed, and we campaigned with colleagues across the RCN, including Nursing Policy and Public Affairs and Communication departments, until the government announced the Graduate Guarantee for nursing students completing in 2025. As part of the campaign, a webinar with over 400 student attendees was run to explore the issues and opportunities. With over 30,000 RCN student members, we continue to develop new ways to engage with this vital group.



In June, the first student festival took place in Nottingham which was a resounding success and attended by hundreds of students from across the UK. The festival will move to another part of the UK for 2026.

The 2025 student ambassador conference was a collaboration with the Activism Academy and ambassadors worked with their regional and country student leads to develop action plans which they can implement locally.

Student membership continues to be a priority for the RCN in 2026 with a focus on the student membership offer, a re-modelled student ambassador programme and an opportunity for increased engagement with second-, third- and fourth-year students.



We have continued to develop and enhance RCN Learn (the RCN's dedicated online learning platform), offering high-quality, evidence-based resources for nurses, nursing support workers, and other health and social care professionals. It supports continuing professional development and NMC revalidation through a wide range of courses, frameworks, and tools designed to foster lifelong learning and enhance patient care. We're currently consulting members on how to integrate RCN Learn across the Institute of Nursing Excellence and its five academies.

## **Quality assurance of education, learning and development**

We continue to implement and embed the RCN quality assurance (QA) policy which applies to all new professional education, learning and development resources, and includes a process for requesting new materials and reviewing published content annually. Guided by the QA Framework's nine quality standards – aligned with the Quality Assurance Agency's quality code – this ensures resources follow a full quality lifecycle from development through implementation, evaluation and review. We are also extending quality assurance processes to clinical publications and exploring event quality assurance, acknowledging this is a complex, long-term project requiring organisation-wide commitment.

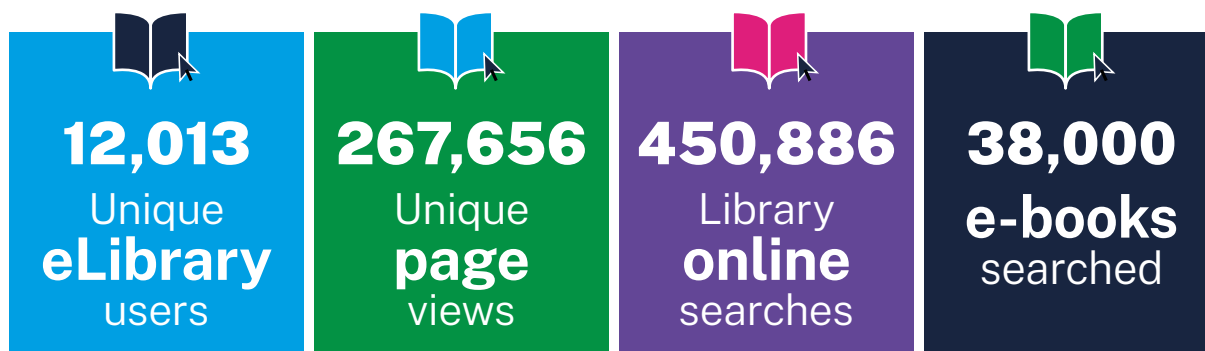
## **Education Forum and conference**

The Education Forum centres on delivering an effective steering committee, engaging members through diverse communication channels, maintaining a visible presence, supporting professional development, and ensuring long-term sustainability.

The annual RCN Education Forum Conference took place from 31 March to 2 April in Glasgow, attracting almost 400 delegates. The theme was: advancing the nursing workforce through inclusive education and practice, and it celebrated inclusive education practices that develop skilled health and social care professionals – from nursing support workers to advanced practitioners – highlighting evidence-based and innovative teaching methods, lifelong learning and strategies for resilience and efficiency.

# RCN Library and Museum

**2025 stats** (Q1 – Q3 only)



The Library and Museum team maintain our professional offer through participation in committees, presenting at and attending professional conferences and publications. This year, we have presented on our exhibition programme, power BI reporting, partnership working and wellbeing in libraries and museums. Our published articles appeared in the *British Journal of Healthcare Assistants*, *Social History Curators Group News* and *History of Human Sciences*. We run our own Nursing Librarianship Conference, the 2025 theme was ‘Change, react, adapt: future-proofing nursing library services’.

## Library space and systems

In 2025, we completed phase two of the library services platform implementation, improving access to resources for our users, including a much-improved postal loan request process for members and staff. We continue to work with the IT Team to ensure membership data in the Library Services Platform is updated regularly and that single sign-on to our library resources is functioning. We are working closely with one supplier in particular (OCLC) to improve search functionality.

Published in 2024, **Our Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy**, has now been incorporated into the RCN’s wider EDI reporting. In 2025, we carried out a review of our exhibition spaces with disabled members and began to implement their recommendations, created guides on what to expect from training, events and visiting the library, explored best practice in other institutions, improved accessibility of our book shelving and updated our in-house classification scheme to address offensive terminology and outdated practices.

Following our achievement of very high customer service excellence scores in late 2024, we have quality assured our customer service provision through an internal review process. The Customer Services Team are integrating email responses into the Lib Answers platform, creating a simplified feedback process and beginning work on FAQs for our users to provide a seamless experience. We have been actively working to engage international members through focus groups and targeted email campaigns. We are continually revising our statistics dashboard, working with RCN data analysts to automate our processes and improve reporting.



## Member training and support

Throughout 2025, we have continued to actively support student recruitment and regional outreach. Library and museum staff volunteered for 48 student recruitment events, travelling across the country as far north as York and as far south as Bournemouth. Library teams have also attended conferences, hospital study days, regional events, branch meetings and annual general meetings to promote the benefits of the library and how we can support members and staff.

The Information Team have worked with Institute colleagues to develop a research skills and support programme, including well attended online and in-person presentation skills workshops at RCN Congress. We enhanced teaching and learning support by updating all-group training based on feedback, embedding AI discussions into lesson plans, and launching new in-person training sessions for learning reps. We also developed self-service resources, introducing new video tutorials and developing web pages for Google Scholar, Zotero and CINAHL. Our reading list development included lists for activism, neurodiversity, infection prevention and control, and record keeping, alongside popular annual Congress reading lists.

We have increased our provision of literature searches and evidence search summaries and are on track to exceed last year's numbers. The team conducted evidence searches to support the publication of the *RCN Nursing Workforce Standards* and updated key resources in the education, learning and development repository, including for good practice in record keeping and demonstrating value. We also initiated a search offer for systematic review projects led by Institute staff.



## Public exhibitions and events

In 2025, we have worked towards pursuing museum accreditation, submitting a full application in October. This involved development of our object collection (including cataloguing, labelling and improving storage), alongside the creation of detailed plans for collections care, emergencies, audience development, documentation and access. The entire collection is now catalogued and accessible, and we have facilitated several researcher visits. This has also supported our PhD student, co-supervised by Dr Sarah Chaney, who successfully passed his first-year progression and is now on a placement in the Museum and Events Team.

Our exhibitions and events programme continues to engage members and non-members alike. We partnered with the History of Nursing Forum and the Nursing in Justice and Forensic Health Care Forum to deliver a popular exhibition: Prison Nursing Unlocked, launched by Stephen Fry. Twelve members were active in our volunteering programme; they gained new skills in research and writing and contribute text and research to the exhibition. The Art of Nursing exhibition, which launched in June, has showcased many member contributions, including some of the 200+ placards produced in our Congress sign painting studio. Our success with art activities has led to the development of an application to Arts Council England for a writer in residence.



## Collections

In 2025, we carried out a full stock check and review of our print collections to maintain collection currency by removing outdated stock. These important but outdated texts were added to our permanent collection, to continue to develop this unique nursing resource. We have also purchased material to fill gaps and enrich the collection, such as **an 1868 text on 'bible-women nurses'**.

We have reviewed and renewed our online journals and added two new databases to support the research focus of the Institute. We've also begun to explore the implications of eBook changes. Many publishers are no longer offering eBooks for purchase (only subscription), requiring us to source a new supplier. Our ongoing work on ethical supply chains ensures that we investigate each supplier thoroughly.

The inclusion of our historic and contemporary collections on World Cat through OCLC has made our unique collections visible globally. This has led to an increase in researcher visits this year, notably from the US and Finland.



# Moving forward

As we move into 2026, the Institute of Nursing Excellence's focus remains clear: to strengthen nursing through evidence, education and collaboration. Our plans reflect both continuity and ambition – building on what works and innovating where change is needed.

In 2026, we will be publishing our new strategy and enable regular engagement through quarterly newsletters. A major development will be the launch of Nest, our community of practice, which will offer a dedicated space for dialogue, tailored learning and live discussion. It will be open to everyone, with exclusive resources available for members.

To ensure our work reflects the profession's priorities, we propose establishing a stakeholder advisory group and reviewing our education, professional development and events offer as we integrate with RCNi. We will continue to support access to research and research careers, alongside leadership development through summits for chief and deputy chief nurses. The bringing together of RCN and RCNi will improve the member offer, reduce duplication, enhance efficiency and create a unified organisation that delivers greater value to all members.

Safe staffing will remain a central theme. In 2026, we will publish a nurse-to-patient ratios resource, launch an awareness campaign, and produce a series of evidence briefs, including the economic impact of insufficient staffing. A four-country policy position on ratios and safe staffing levels will reinforce our advocacy.

Our events programme will include:

- RCN Education Forum Conference 2026, in Exeter, with a record 39% increase in abstract submissions
- RCN Student Festival, in Scotland, and an updated student ambassador programme to strengthen student engagement
- a renewed focus on student recruitment and supporting newly registered nurses through mentorship and transition programmes
- dedicated conferences for research, nursing support workers, and workplace representatives, alongside our support for RCN Congress.

Learning will advance through RCN Learn integration, offering quality-assured content across clinical practice and activism. Our Workplace Teams pilot and RCN reps project (phase 1) will deliver new structures, policies and processes to strengthen workplace representation.

Globally, we will expand partnerships with international nursing associations and academic institutions, commissioning research to inform policy and practice – particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Donor-funded programmes will continue to support nursing in conflict and disaster settings.

We will also host the RCN Long-term Conditions Conference 2026 in Sheffield, focusing on tackling health inequalities, and deliver a suite of new and enhanced learning programmes to equip members with the skills and knowledge to lead change.

2026 will be a year of purposeful action – advancing evidence, shaping policy and building capability across the profession. Together, we will ensure nursing has the influence, resilience and leadership it needs to meet the challenges ahead.



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

Published by the Royal College of Nursing  
20 Cavendish Square  
London  
W1G 0RN  
[rcn.org.uk](http://rcn.org.uk)

012 373 | January 2026



Royal College  
of Nursing



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