![Coleg Nyrsio Brenhinol Cymru / Royal College of Nursing Wales logo]

Royal College of Nursing Wales:
Priorities and recommendations for nursing education and lifelong learning in Wales

Acknowledgements

RCN Wales would like to express its sincerest thanks to the members of the RCN Welsh Board who contributed their expertise, insight, and oversight to the development of this work. We are also grateful to our partners across Wales who provided constructive feedback throughout the development of the priorities and recommendations. Finally, we extend our appreciation to our members who generously offered their time to review and comment on this document, helping to strengthen its relevance and impact.

RCN Legal Disclaimer

Contents

Executive summary

> Education is a driver of workforce capability, sustainability, professional fulfilment and person-centred care.

The nursing workforce in Wales is central to delivering safe, compassionate, person-centred care across increasingly complex health and social care systems. As services continue to evolve and workforce pressures intensify, education must equip the nursing workforce for practice while also building resilience, enabling research, and supporting the nursing workforce to lead change. This document updates and succeeds the RCN Wales Education Strategy (2016), setting out clear priorities and recommendations that position education as a driver of workforce capability, sustainability, professional fulfilment and person-centred care across increasingly complex health and social care systems. Strengthening professional learning and reflective practice is essential to developing a confident and values driven profession. Revalidation, restorative clinical supervision, mentoring, and coaching must be embedded through organisational systems that ensure protected time, skilled facilitation, and supportive cultures. These approaches help nurses learn from experience, maintain emotional wellbeing, and deliver high quality care even in demanding environments.

Education must also foster a research informed workforce. Investment in digital and data fluency, clinical academic partnerships, and advanced and consultant level roles will enable nurses to generate and translate evidence, drive improvement, and contribute to population focused care. Stronger alignment between education, research, and practice is needed to ensure that new knowledge is rapidly translated into high quality care.

Finally, Wales requires a flexible, knowledgeable, and resilient workforce built through education that reflects real service needs. Clear career pathways, compassionate and inclusive leadership development, and co-ordinated workforce planning and commissioning are essential to supporting nurses to adapt, thrive, and progress across diverse settings.

Together, these priorities provide a coherent approach for partners across the system to ensure education supports a confident, resilient, and future-ready nursing workforce capable of meeting the evolving needs of the people of Wales.

Foreword

The role of the registered nurse and nursing support workers continues to develop to meet the changing needs of patients, their families and carers in an evolving health and social care landscape. To deliver services that meet these needs, we require a highly skilled, motivated and engaged workforce, which strives constantly to improve patient care. Education within nursing is delivered in a variety of ways in Wales, whether it be education for those who are new to care, pre-registration nurse education or postgraduate qualifications; nurse education is a career spanning journey. Access to high quality education and opportunities for lifelong learning are fundamental to achieving a nursing workforce that is research-informed and highly skilled to deliver safe and effective nursing care.

It is the vision of RCN Wales to ensure that all nursing support workers and registered nurses in Wales are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to provide high-quality, person-centred care in a changing health and social care landscape, through education that is inclusive, evidence-based, future-focused, and underpinned by professional values. This document builds on and succeeds RCN Wales' previous Education Strategy (2016) and reflects our position, priorities and recommendations for the future of education and lifelong learning for nursing in Wales. It is intended to inform, influence and support strategic decision-making of key partners across Welsh government, education, workforce and practice. As well as to empower RCN Wales members to influence education and workforce decisions within their own organisations.

Jackie Davies
Chair of the Royal College of Nursing Wales Board

Helen Whyley
Executive Director, Royal College of Nursing Wales

Introduction

Building on the vision set out in the Foreword, this document outlines the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) Wales' position on the future of nursing education and lifelong learning across Wales. The RCN represents both registered nurses (RNs) and nursing support workers (NSWs) across all sectors, promoting excellence in practice and influencing health and social care policy. As set out in its Royal Charter, the RCN's core purpose includes advancing the science and art of nursing and promoting high quality education and professional development across all fields of practice. quality education and professional development across all fields of practice.

The intention of this document is two fold; firstly, to inform, influence, and support strategic decision-making across Welsh government, education, workforce, and practice and secondly to empower RCN Wales members to influence education and workforce decisions within their own organisations. This will help ensure those accessing health and care services in Wales receive the highest quality of nursing care across all services and settings. Realising this aspiration requires a well-educated, digitally agile, resilient, and flexible workforce with access to high-quality education and ongoing professional development. This will enable nurses to deliver a safe, compassionate, and evidence-based care that positively impacts patient experiences and outcomes.

In addition to its commitment to the public, RCN Wales has a key role in supporting nursing roles to access necessary education and lifelong learning as part of its ongoing work to support and value the profession. Research demonstrates that when staff are supported emotionally and professionally, they feel valued and nurtured, which in turn enables them to thrive and deliver safe, effective, and compassionate care (West et al., 2020).

"

When staff are supported emotionally and professionally, they feel valued and nurtured...

Background

Against this backdrop, this document builds on and repositions the RCN Wales Education Strategy (2016), updating it for the contemporary policy and workforce landscape. With leadership and input from our RCN Wales Board Members this document reflects the changing context and policy landscape within which nursing and nurse education operates. The priorities and recommendations have been contemporised so that our position remains live and future focused. To inform this work board members have explored the complex interplay of political, economic, sociological, technological, legal, and environmental (PESTLE) factors which are outlined below.

Political factors encompass the evolving policy landscape within both Wales and the wider UK, and the ways the RCN Wales can influence the nursing and nurse education priorities. Continued political commitment to recruitment, development and retention of the nursing workforce is critical, as is the influence of cross-party groups and reviews such as the NHS Wales Bursary Consultation. Devolved government policies, including specific commitments to workforce commissioning and planning also have a significant impact.

Economic pressures are acute and wide-ranging. Financial constraints within the health, social care, and higher education sectors have been compounded by the cost-of-living crisis and Brexit-related funding challenges which continue to affect the sustainability of nurse education. Variability in pay, conditions, and commissioning across sectors further complicate workforce planning and progression opportunities, particularly in under-represented or independent sectors, such as mental health, learning disability and social care settings.

Sociological factors reflect a changing and increasingly diverse society. Inequalities in access to and provision of services, especially in mental health and learning disabilities, as well as issues around cultural competence, racism and discrimination, require targeted attention. Wales-specific considerations, including language, identity, and action plans addressing LGBTQ+ and racial equality, underscore the need for an inclusive approach to education. Social care pressures and an ageing population also highlight the need for a responsive and adaptive approaches to nurse education.

Technological advancements have the potential to significantly transform nurse education as well as the delivery of health and social care. Increasing digitalisation, artificial intelligence (AI), and emerging digital tools offer new opportunities to enhance learning, streamline clinical processes, and support more personalised, data informed care. As technology evolves, so too does the expectation that nurses and the wider health and social care workforce can effectively use digital systems, interpret data, and engage with AI enabled tools. This places increasing importance on developing enhanced digital fluency across a diverse and intergenerational workforce, ensuring that all staff feel equipped, supported, and empowered to use technology to its full potential.

Legal and regulatory factors continue to evolve, shaping the structure and requirements of nurse education. Key legislation, such as the Nurse Staffing Levels (Wales) Act 2016 and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, set clear expectations for the workforce. Regulatory requirements from the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) and proposed changes to the *Code* (NMC, 2018b) and revalidation, as well as the advent of *Principles for Advanced Practice* (NMC, 2025) highlight the need for education to remain current and compliant.

> " Political, economic, sociological, technological, legal, and environmental factors shape nurse education.

Environmental factors introduce additional complexity. Geographical disparities across Wales impact recruitment and retention, particularly in rural and under served areas. Environmental sustainability and green policies are becoming increasingly relevant, as is the need to align educational settings and placements with broader NHS and governmental sustainability goals.

Taken together, these PESTLE factors reinforce the need for a dynamic, inclusive, and sustainable approach that supports the nursing workforce across all sectors in Wales.

Strategic context for nurse education in Wales

Nurse education in Wales is shaped by an evolving policy landscape marked by increasing service complexity, shifting population needs, and growing expectations for digital and evidence informed care. While the core values of nursing, compassion, professionalism, and person-centred practice remain constant, the breadth and depth of nursing responsibilities have expanded significantly. Nurses are delivering more complex interventions, working across diverse health and social care settings, and navigating rapid technological change. This context demands a workforce that is adaptable, digitally fluent, and supported through high quality, career-long education.

Political and system-level drivers

A series of national strategies continue to define Wales's direction for the health and social care workforce. *A Healthier Wales: Our Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care* (HEIW, 2020) set the expectation for an adaptable, skilled workforce supported throughout their careers, highlighting the importance of inter-professional learning and digital innovation in nurse education. Similarly, *A Healthier Wales: Our Plan for Health and Social Care* (Welsh Government, 2021a) positions prevention, community based services, and person-centred care as priorities, requiring curricula that prepare nurses for holistic, population focused practice.

Retention pressures are also influencing the educational landscape. *Retaining and Valuing Nurses within the NHS in Wales* (HEIW, 2023b) emphasises the role of supportive learning environments, mentorship, and postgraduate development in improving satisfaction and career longevity. Workforce expansion needs are captured in the *National Workforce Implementation Plan* (Welsh Government, 2023), which calls for increased capacity, innovative education models, and data informed planning to stabilise workforce supply. Furthermore, the *Workforce Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy* (Welsh Government, 2021b) require education providers to remove barriers, foster inclusive environments, and ensure recruitment and training reflect the diversity of Wales' population.

The *Social Care Workforce Delivery Plan 2024–2027* (Social Care Wales, 2024) positions education as a core system driver, highlighting excellent education and learning as a central action area. It emphasises the need to strengthen learning pathways, enhance access to high quality training, and ensure the workforce has the skills required to meet increasing demand and adapt to changing models of care. The plan also recognises the need for a digitally ready workforce, linking education to digital capability, and underscores leadership development as an essential component of workforce learning.

More recently, the *Nursing Preceptorship and Restorative Clinical Supervision Position Statement* (Welsh Government, 2024a) establishes a national, consistent approach for preceptorship and restorative supervision, reinforcing the need for emotional wellbeing and reflective practice to be built into the educational ecosystem from the outset. These requirements are not peripheral, they form essential infrastructure for a sustainable nursing workforce.

Population and workforce pressures including an ageing population, increased multi-morbidity, and nurse shortages, underscore the urgency of the *Strategic Nursing Workforce Plan* (HEIW, 2025). It calls for improved recruitment, retention, and transformation of nursing roles, aligning closely with RCN Wales's emphasis on strengthening workforce capability through education.

More recently the publication of the *Strategic Vision for Nursing and Midwifery in Wales 2025–2030* (Welsh Government, 2025b) positions education as a core driver of professional excellence, highlighting the need for lifelong learning, strengthened career pathways, and the use of evidence, data, and implementation science to support continuous development. It emphasises that empowered, skilled practitioners are essential to leading change, driving innovation, and delivering high quality, person-centred care across the Welsh health and care system.

Furthermore, the *Strategic Action Plan for Building Research Capability* (Welsh Government, 2025a) positions research as core to all professional roles and insists on dedicated infrastructure and leadership to cultivate nurse researchers. However, without strong educational alignment and investment, this vision risks remaining aspirational rather than transformative.

Together, these political and system level expectations require nurse education in Wales to be flexible, future-focused, digitally sophisticated, and tightly connected to population and service needs.

Higher education context

The higher education landscape in Wales is experiencing significant pressure, with implications for the sustainability and quality of nurse education. Across the UK, applications to undergraduate nursing programmes have declined since the pandemic, While universities must continue to pursue their academic missions, including research excellence and global competitiveness, they also carry essential civic responsibilities, playing a crucial role in developing and sustaining the future nursing workforce across Wales.

Despite these challenges, the continued commissioning of graduate nurse education remains vital to the health and wellbeing of communities across Wales. HEIs require sufficient expertise, infrastructure, and geographical reach to ensure equitable access to programmes that reflect Wales's diverse population and service demands. As nursing is a lifelong profession, access to high quality postgraduate education is equally essential. Redeveloping the post registration ecosystem including enhanced, advanced, and consultant level pathways must therefore be a strategic priority for both education providers and system partners (HEIW, 2025; HEIW, 2023a). Crucially, this provision must remain responsive to the diverse nursing fields and contexts in which nurses practise, spanning acute, community, mental health, learning disability, and other specialist settings.

Nursing research in Wales has gained national and international recognition for its quality, relevance, and impact (Welsh Government, 2025a). Research active nurse academics create dynamic learning environments in which teaching, research, and innovation intersect, enhancing both the student experience and clinical practice. Therefore, a whole system perspective is needed to maintain the quality and relevance of education. This includes strengthening inter-professional learning, ensuring coherent progression from undergraduate to postgraduate pathways, and aligning practice learning opportunities with population health needs. The erosion of the academic workforce threatens this alignment by limiting innovation, narrowing curriculum breadth, and constraining students' opportunities to learn within research active environments.

Professional drivers and the safety-critical nature of nursing

Defining nursing

The RCN (2021) defines nursing as 'a safety-critical profession founded on four pillars: clinical practice, education, research, and leadership. RNs use evidence-based knowledge, professional and clinical judgement to assess, plan, implement and evaluate high-quality person-centred nursing care.' This contemporary definition depicts the change and increased complexity that the nursing profession has seen over the last two decades. To support this further the RCN (2024a) has outlined the levels of enhanced, advanced, and consultant nursing practice, aligned with *NMC standards* (2018b) and the *HEIW Professional Framework* (2023a). These pathways support career progression and ensure nurses are equipped to lead and innovate across all areas of practice, underpinned by educational frameworks.

A profession built on expertise and evidence

Nursing is the largest safety-critical profession in health and social care. RNs apply evidence-based knowledge and clinical judgement to deliver high-quality, person-centred care. This includes the vital contribution of the nursing support workforce, working under appropriate supervision. The RCN's five-year strategy (2023a) sets out a bold vision for the profession, one that values, supports, and empowers nurses to deliver excellence in a rapidly changing health and social care environment. In addition to this, the RCN's Research Strategy (2025c) underscores the need for research to generate, translate and apply evidence that strengthens nursing practice and outcomes.

> **"**
> Nursing is the largest safety-critical profession in health and social care.

There is a substantial and growing body of evidence demonstrating that RN staffing levels have a significant impact on both patient and nurse outcomes. Inadequate staffing has been linked to increased risks of patient harm, including preventable complications and in-hospital mortality, and effects on staff include burnout, occupational injury, and lower job satisfaction (Dall'Ora et al., 2022; RCN, 2025d). Furthermore, the RCN position on role substitution (RCN, 2025b) highlights the risks associated with diluting nursing care, which in turn can lead to a deficit in care, quality and safety. Consequently, there must be continual research to inform safe thresholds, supervision models, skill-mix effects and patient outcomes; to enable this, nurses must be supported to lead the generation of evidence (RCN, 2025c).

Global perspectives and priorities

The *State of the World's Nursing report* (WHO, 2025) calls for nursing education to be strengthened and identifies this as a critical component of global health systems. It underscores that the quality and accessibility of nursing education directly influence the effectiveness, equity, and resilience of health care delivery worldwide.

The report highlights the need for countries to invest in expanding the capacity of nurse education, including increasing the academic workforce, improving infrastructure, and ensuring that clinical training environments are robust and well-resourced. It also stresses the importance of aligning nursing education with evolving health system needs, particularly by integrating competencies related to primary care, public health, and digital health technologies. Furthermore, the report advocates for the development of postgraduate pathways that enable nurses to take on expanded roles, especially in under served areas. This includes not only developing clinical expertise but also leadership, policy, and research skills.

Nursing support workers

The RCN has defined nursing support work, distinguishing between supportive and assistive roles. 'Nursing support workers are collaborative members of nursing and multidisciplinary teams, providing person-centred nursing care across health, social care and education settings. While they are responsible for their own actions, all nursing care they deliver is delegated and supervised by RNs. Their role supports and assists RNs in delivering safe and effective care for individuals and populations' (RCN, 2025a).

The Welsh Government's intention to introduce registered nursing associates (RNAs) into Wales represents a significant development in the nursing workforce landscape (Welsh Government, 2024b). While RCN Wales recognises the potential contribution of this role, its successful integration depends on a robust strategic approach that safeguards the integrity and safety of registered nursing. RNAs must support and complement, not replace, RNs. Clear and enforceable parameters of practice, strong governance, and rigorous supervision structures are essential to ensure this distinction is maintained.

Furthermore, the development of an appropriate educational framework is critical. Any RNA programme must be designed to strengthen the wider nursing workforce rather than diverting or diluting pathways into registered nurse training. The role must sit within a clear career structure that enables individuals to progress into RN education, rather than functioning as an alternative route that undermines RN supply.

Nurse staffing levels (Wales) Act 2016

Since its implementation, the Nurse Staffing Levels (Wales) Act 2016 has positively impacted nursing practice and patient care. Increased nurse staffing has directly contributed to improved safety and outcomes. The Act has embedded patient safety as a shared responsibility and highlighted the importance of sustainable workforce planning. It has also improved data collection and monitoring, supporting more informed decision-making.

However, the RCN Wales *Progress and Challenge* report (2023c) identifies ongoing difficulties in operationalising the Act due to workforce pressures. This stresses that new roles, such as RNAs, must not reduce the number of RNs on shift and reflect a move towards generic roles which do not reflect the distinctiveness of the four fields of nursing. Continued investment in staffing is essential to uphold the principles of the Act and ensure safe, effective care, even amid financial constraints.

> "
> Registered nurse staffing levels have a significant impact on patient outcomes.

Empowering nurses for the digital age

Digital transformation is reshaping health care delivery, and nursing must be at the forefront of this evolution. Access to accurate, timely, and interoperable data is essential for delivering safe, efficient, and person-centred care. However, many health care settings continue to rely on fragmented digital systems or paper-based records, which can compromise safety, continuity, and quality of care. To address these challenges, nurse education must embed digital fluency across all levels of learning, from pre-registration to advanced practice (Council of Deans, 2026).

Nurses must be equipped to understand how data informs clinical decisions, supports evidence-based practice, and enhances patient outcomes. Informatics should not be taught in isolation but integrated throughout curricula in ways that reflect real-world clinical environments and enable data-driven approaches. This includes hands-on experience with digital tools and systems, critical appraisal of data, and understanding the ethical and legal implications of digital care.

Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and ambient technologies (AI scribe) are beginning to augment nursing practice (Ruksakulpiwat et al., 2024). These innovations have the potential to reduce administrative burden, minimise duplication of tasks, and streamline documentation, enabling nurses to spend more time delivering high-quality, compassionate care. To harness these benefits, nurses must be empowered with the skills and confidence to use digital technologies effectively. Most importantly, they must be active participants in shaping the design and implementation of digital solutions. Their insights are critical to ensuring that technologies align with the realities of nursing practice and truly support patient-centred care (Rony et al., 2024).

This requires a strong emphasis on nurse leadership in digital transformation. Education providers must cultivate leadership capabilities that enable nurses to influence digital policy, collaborate with developers, and advocate for systems that enhance care delivery. By embedding digital competencies, fostering innovation, and promoting nurse-led design, we can ensure the nursing workforce is prepared to lead in a rapidly evolving health care landscape.

> **"**
>
> Nursing education must embed digital fluency across all levels

Welsh language and bilingual workforce capability

Language is fundamental to dignified, safe, and person-centred care. For Welsh speaking individuals, receiving care in their preferred language is not simply a matter of choice but an essential component of effective communication and clinical safety. Evidence shows that linguistic need directly influences understanding, trust, and outcomes, particularly for people receiving mental health, learning disability, and end of life care (Edwards et al., 2025).

Nurse education must therefore embed the principles of the Active Offer, as outlined in *More Than Just Words* (Welsh Government, 2022), ensuring that Welsh language use is proactively supported rather than reliant on individuals requesting it. This requires education providers to integrate Welsh language learning into curricula, offering opportunities to develop linguistic skills and apply them confidently in practice learning environments.

Meeting Wales's bilingual needs also demands system level planning. Workforce commissioning and practice learning placement design must reflect local and national linguistic demographics, ensuring that services can consistently deliver the Active Offer and build linguistic capability across the nursing workforce. This includes supporting students and staff to develop Welsh language confidence at all levels and expanding Welsh medium and bilingual learning opportunities within both academic and practice environments.

BACK TO CONTENTS

Summary

Nursing is a dynamic, evidence based, and safety critical profession at the heart of health and social care in Wales. Education is the foundation upon which service transformation depends. A strategic, inclusive, and forward thinking approach to nursing education is therefore essential to ensure nurses are equipped to meet current and future challenges, lead innovation, and deliver the highest standards of care across all settings. By investing in education, we invest in the future of nursing and in the health and wellbeing of the people of Wales.

The future of nursing in Wales relies on a workforce that is skilled, adaptable, and resilient capable of delivering high quality, person-centred care across complex and evolving systems. Education is central to achieving this. It equips nurses with the knowledge, skills, and values required to respond to contemporary challenges while shaping the future of care.

The three priorities set out in the next part of this document highlight the essential role of education in supporting professional growth, leadership, innovation, and compassionate, evidence informed care. Taken together, they represent a coherent approach that positions education as the primary driver of a sustainable, future ready nursing profession in Wales.

These priorities are closely aligned with the themes of the *Chief Nursing Officer's Strategic Vision for Nursing and Midwifery in Wales* (2025–2030), which emphasises integrated learning and practice, continuous professional development, values based leadership, and a resilient, empowered workforce. This alignment reinforces a shared national commitment to advancing excellent, compassionate, and innovative nursing practice, and ensures that RCN Wales' recommendations complement wider system ambitions.

Priorities and recommendations

Set within this strategic context, the following section introduces three interdependent priorities designed to support a sustainable, future ready nursing profession in Wales. Nurse education in Wales must be understood as a connected ecosystem rather than a set of isolated components. The three priorities outlined in this document strengthening professional learning and reflection, fostering a research informed profession, and creating a flexible and resilient workforce are deeply interdependent and collectively form the foundation of a sustainable nursing profession. They also build directly on the core themes of the *RCN Wales Education Strategy* (2016), which emphasised lifelong learning, research aligned education, and a confident, compassionate workforce equipped to meet population needs.

The new priorities extend and contemporise these themes for the current policy and service landscape in Wales, responding to increasing clinical complexity, digital transformation, and ongoing workforce pressures.

Priority 1:	Priority 2:	Priority 3:
Strengthening professional learning, reflection and development across the nursing workforce	Fostering a research informed nursing profession	Create a flexible, knowledgeable, and resilient nursing workforce

Reflection and restorative supervision nurture professional identity, emotional capability, and compassionate practice central to the 2016 vision of a values driven profession. Research engagement strengthens evidence in formed leadership and scholarly practice, continuing the strategic direction set out in the earlier strategy. Workforce resilience and flexibility ensure nurses can apply these reflective and research informed capabilities across diverse and changing models of care. Together, the three priorities create a 'golden thread' of compassion, professional integrity, lifelong learning, and evidence informed leadership that supports wellbeing, strengthens decision-making, and enables safe, high quality care across a nurse's career journey.

Priority 1:

Strengthening professional learning, reflection and development across the nursing workforce

High quality nursing care depends on a workforce that is supported to learn, reflect, and grow throughout their careers. In a context of rising acuity, increasing complexity, and significant emotional labour, nurses require more than technical competence: they need professional judgement, emotional resilience, and environments that enable reflective practice. Strengthening professional learning is therefore essential not only to individual development but to sustaining a compassionate, safe, and values driven nursing profession.

Revalidation, restorative clinical supervision, and mentoring and coaching form the core of this professional learning infrastructure. When these mechanisms are embedded consistently through protected time, skilled facilitation, and strong organisational governance, they help nurses make sense of their experiences, process the psychological demands of practice, and develop confidence and capability. These benefits extend beyond individuals, they enhance team functioning, support retention, and build cultures of inquiry and improvement.

A strategic, coherent approach to professional learning is therefore critical. By embedding these supports across all career stages and all settings, Wales can nurture a nursing workforce that is reflective, emotionally well, and equipped to lead change, drive service improvement, and sustain high standards of care.

"

High-quality nursing care depends on a workforce supported to learn, reflect and grow.

Recommendations: revalidation

1.1 Position revalidation as a meaningful professional learning process rather than a primarily administrative or compliance-driven exercise.

1.2 Ensure organisational systems provide protected time, and access to high-quality reflective learning to support meaningful revalidation.

1.3 Actively synthesise insights from revalidation to inform education, workforce planning, and service improvement.

1.4 Embed reflective practice as a standard expectation across all career stages to strengthen professional judgement, compassionate care, and adaptability.

Recommendations: restorative supervision

2.1 Integrate the principles of restorative supervision from pre-registration onwards to build understanding of reflective practice and system-enabled emotional wellbeing.

2.2 Prioritise restorative supervision operationally through protected time, suitable environments, and development of skilled supervisors.

2.3 Establish strategic leadership and governance roles to ensure consistency, measure impact, and reinforce restorative supervision as a core part of workforce culture.

2.4 Invest in the development and expansion of the Professional Nurse Advocate role to build organisational capacity, strengthen supervision structures, and enable the delivery of restorative supervision for all staff.

Recommendations: mentoring and coaching

3.1 Embed coaching and mentoring into everyday practice as essential components of compassionate and developmental management, creating a culture in which feedback is supportive, timely, and focused on learning, capability development, and staff wellbeing.

3.2 Ensure coaching and mentoring are available to all nurses across career stages, supporting self-directed growth, professional autonomy, and career transitions.

3.3 Provide protected time and resources for mentors, coaches, and learners to build relationships, develop skills, and engage in reflective learning.

3.4 Adopt collaborative learning approaches across teams and professions with robust preparation for staff acting as supervisors and assessors.

3.5 Monitor quality and outcomes through feedback and workforce data to inform leadership development, workforce planning, and strategic transformation.

Priority 2:

Fostering a research informed nursing profession

Safe, effective, and future focused nursing practice relies on a workforce that is confident in using, interpreting, and generating evidence. As health and social care becomes increasingly complex and data rich, the ability to understand research, apply evidence, and contribute to improvement is not optional, it is central to contemporary nursing practice. Building a research-informed profession ensures that nurses can critically appraise emerging knowledge, reduce unwarranted variation, and contribute to care models that improve outcomes for individuals and communities.

Achieving this ambition requires a system in which education, research, and clinical practice are closely aligned. Developing research-informed practice capability, and quality improvement skills across the full career continuum will ensure that evidence moves more rapidly into practice. When nurses are supported as research consumers, contributors, and leaders, they can shape service design, advance equity, and drive innovation across the system.

The recommendations below are essential to this: digital and data fluency, strong clinical academic partnerships, and advanced and consultant level roles that place research at the heart of practice. Together, these create an environment where research is embedded into everyday care, strengthening the profession's contribution to a continuously improving health and care system in Wales.

> " When nurses are supported as research consumers, contributors, and leaders, they can drive innovation.

Recommendations: digital and data fluency

1.1 Integrate informatics across nursing curricula to ensure understanding of the data–driven approach and its role in safe, effective care.

1.2 Ensure organisations provide structured learning for RNs and nursing support workers covering information governance, clinical systems, record keeping, coding, and data sharing.

1.3 Develop digital co-design skills within education, preparing staff to collaborate with system developers to ensure digital tools are fit for purpose and aligned with nursing practice.

1.4 Strengthen nursing leadership in digital transformation to influence the design, implementation, and evaluation of digital systems that augment practice and benefit patients and staff.

Recommendations: clinical academic partnerships

2.1 Establish workforce planning mechanisms to identify the number and type of clinical academic roles needed to drive research, innovation, and service improvement.

2.2 Implement the Follett principles (NHS Employers, 2024), emphasising joint working between universities and health boards for the appointment and management of clinical academics.

2.3 Establish sustainable models with dedicated funding to rebuild academic leadership and professoriate capacity to develop a pipeline of nurses with postgraduate qualifications and research supervision experience.

2.4 Embed clinical academic roles within health boards, with Executive Directors of Nursing leading networks to integrate research and innovation across the system.

2.5 Commission and fund postgraduate education (for example, MSc Clinical Research, Professional Doctorates) aligned to programmes of inquiry focused on improvement science and service transformation.

Recommendations: advanced and consultant nurse roles

3.1 Develop a robust approach to workforce planning and education commissioning for advanced and consultant-level practice, underpinned by a clear, nationally consistent methodology to determine the required size, shape and distribution of roles across Wales, aligned to population health need and service transformation.

3.2 Standardise programmes for advanced practice, enabling nurses to work confidently across settings and manage complex, holistic care while demonstrating clinical leadership across all four pillars.

3.3 Ensure all advanced and consultant nurse roles are underpinned by clear expectations to lead, generate, and apply research, driving evidence-informed innovation and improvement within services.

Priority 3:

Create a flexible, knowledgeable, and resilient nursing workforce

Nursing resilience is not an individual attribute but a system outcome. For nurses to thrive in increasingly complex care environments, education must be designed to build resilience at organisational and system levels through safe staffing, psychologically safe cultures, effective supervision structures, and equitable access to high quality education. When these foundations are in place, the workforce can adapt to change, sustain wellbeing, and deliver high quality, person-centred care across all settings.

To achieve this, nurses require structured career pathways, compassionate and inclusive leadership, and education and training that align with real world service needs. This includes enabling mobility across sectors, ensuring role readiness for emerging models of care, and supporting progression into enhanced, advanced, and consultant roles. It also requires workforce planning and education commissioning to be tightly aligned, informed by accurate data, and responsive to the future population need.

Together, these recommendations ensure that Wales develops a nursing workforce that is confident, capable, and supported, one that can meet current pressures, anticipate future challenges, and lead the delivery of high quality, sustainable care for the people of Wales.

> **"**
>
> Wales need a nursing workforce that is confident, capable, and supported

Recommendations: career development and role preparation

1.1 Ensure that preceptorship principles are integrated into structured programmes for all newly qualified nurses, with clear standards and expectations across all sectors.

1.2 Develop co-ordinated postgraduate education, delivered collaboratively across HEIs and employers, supporting career development across all four fields of nursing.

1.3 Design education at all levels to support new models of care, including rural health, integrated health and social care, and community-based care, incorporating population health approaches.

1.4 Ensure equitable access to education for nurses caring for defined population groups (such as people living with dementia, children and families, and those with mental health needs or learning disabilities) to deliver person-centred care beyond traditional field boundaries.

1.5 Facilitate opportunities for staff to gain experience across different services, removing unnecessary barriers to internal mobility.

Recommendations: compassionate and inclusive leadership

2.1 Embed compassionate and inclusive leadership across all levels of nursing curricula, with defined learning outcomes encompassing empathy, emotional intelligence, and reflective capability alongside clinical and technical skills.

2.2 Model compassionate and inclusive leadership consistently across education and practice, with educators, mentors, and senior nurses supported to demonstrate these behaviours in daily practice.

2.3 Commission structured leadership development and CPD programmes focused on compassionate and inclusive leadership, incorporating mentoring, coaching, reflective practice, and peer learning, and linking participation to professional advancement and revalidation.

2.4 Create and sustain psychologically safe and inclusive learning environments that promote respect, support, and the ability to raise concerns.

2.5 Align compassionate leadership education with national and system-level priorities, including NHS Wales Leadership Principles, wellbeing frameworks, and equality, diversity, and inclusion strategies.

2.6 Evaluate and strengthen compassionate leadership enablers over time, using insights to inform continuous improvement in staff wellbeing, retention, and patient outcomes.

Recommendations: workforce planning and education commissioning

3.1 Develop and commission education to support integrated and cross-sector role development, prioritising skills and competencies that enable nurses to work effectively across health and social care boundaries.

3.2 Strategically plan for underrepresented communities, including rural and remote areas, Welsh speaking populations, and other at risk groups, using locally delivered and digitally enabled education pathways. This planning must ensure that education commissioning reflects Welsh language needs, supports the Active Offer within practice learning environments, and builds linguistic and cultural capability across the nursing workforce.

3.3 Strengthen and protect workforce pipelines in high-need areas, such as learning disability and mental health nursing, through targeted incentives, funded places, career pathways, post-registration development, and return-to-practice programmes.

3.4 Develop system-wide data sharing and analytical capability to ensure workforce planning and education commissioning are based on accurate, real time intelligence across health and social care.

3.5 Ensure the student bursary offer supports financial sustainability and equity, enabling access for all learners and reducing attrition.

3.6 Commission flexible, blended, and responsive education that combines face-to-face, digital, and practice-based learning, adaptable to emerging service demands.

3.7 Embed collaboration and system level alignment in workforce planning through formalised mechanisms that ensure HEIW, HEIs, health boards, and social care partners share data, co-ordinate commissioning, and align education provision with population need.

Conclusion

Education is a decisive lever for shaping the nursing profession in Wales, and RCN Wales is committed to leading this agenda with ambition and clarity. The priorities and recommendations set out in this document show how education must be used to strengthen professional capability, build resilience, and enable nurses to deliver safe, compassionate, evidence informed care across all settings. Achieving this will require co-ordinated action across the whole system, with revalidation, supervision, research, leadership development and workforce planning working together rather than in isolation.

RCN Wales will continue to advocate for an education system that is reflective, research informed and responsive to service need. But this document is also a tool for members. We encourage nurses at every level to use it to influence locally: to inform conversations with employers, challenge unsafe or unsupportive learning environments, strengthen preceptorship and supervision arrangements, and shape local workforce and education planning. Members can use the priorities and recommendations to hold organisations to account, to improve access to professional development, and to advocate for the resources and structures necessary for high quality care.

The imperative now is delivery. RCN Wales will work alongside partners across government, education, workforce and practice to drive implementation and challenge where progress falls short. With collective leadership, empowered members, and sustained investment, education can become a driving force for workforce sustainability, professional fulfilment, and improved outcomes for people and communities across Wales. RCN Wales remains determined to lead this work and to support every nurse and nursing support worker to shape the future of their profession.

Reference list

Council of Deans of Health (2025) *Academic Educator Workforce Survey Reports*. Available at: councilofdeans.org.uk/2025/07/new-reports-council-of-deans-of-health-unveils-key-findings-on-nursing-midwifery-and-ahp-educator-challenges-and-opportunities (Accessed: 21 October 2025).

Council of Deans of Health (2026) *Principles for the use of generative AI in healthcare education*. Available at: councilofdeans.org.uk/resource/principles-for-the-use-of-generative-ai-in-healthcare-education/ (Accessed: 16 February 2026).

Dall'Ora C, Saville C, Rubbo B, Turner L, Jones J and Griffiths P (2022) Nurse staffing levels and patient outcomes: A systematic review of longitudinal studies. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 134. doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2022.104311 .

Edwards M E, Bodger O, Brown M, Roberts L, Roberts L D, Davies J S and Morgan A H (2025) The experience and perception of first language usage in healthcare: the Welsh perspective [Preprint]. *medRxiv*. doi.org/10.1101/2025.02.20.25322596 (Accessed: 21 October 2025).

Health Education and Improvement Wales (2020) *A Healthier Wales: Our workforce strategy for Health and Social Care*. Available at: heiw.nhs.wales/files/a-healthier-wales-our-workforce-strategy-for-health-and-social-care/ (Accessed: 10 October 2025).

Health Education and Improvement Wales (2023a) *Professional framework for enhanced, advanced and consultant clinical practice in Wales*. Available at: heiw.nhs.wales/workforce/workforce-development/professional-framework-for-enhanced-advanced-and-consultant-clinical-practice/ (Accessed: 10 October 2025).

Health Education and Improvement Wales (2023b) *Retaining and valuing nurses within the NHS in Wales*. Available at: heiw.nhs.wales/news/retaining-and-valuing-nurses-within-the-nhs-in-wales/ (Accessed: 10 October 2025).

Health Education and Improvement Wales (2025) *Strategic nursing workforce plan*. Available at: heiw.nhs.wales/workforce/strategic-nursing-workforce-plan/ (Accessed: 10 October 2025).

NHS Employers (2024) *Implementing Follett principles for health and care organisations: Guidance for HEIs and NHS provider organisations*. Available at: https://www.nhsemployers.org/system/files/2024-11/Follett-principles-guidance-for-HCPs.pdf (Accessed: March 2026).

Nurse Staffing Levels (Wales) Act 2016 (anaw 5). Available at: legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2016/5/contents (Accessed: 20 October 2025).

Nursing and Midwifery Council (2018b) *The Code: Professional standards of practice and behaviour for nurses, midwives and nursing associates*. Available at: nmc.org.uk/standards/code/ (Accessed: 10 October 2025).

Nursing and Midwifery Council (2025) *Principles for advanced practice*. Available at: nmc.org.uk/standards/guidance/advanced-practice-principles (Accessed: 10 February 2026).

Royal College of Nursing (1928) *Royal Charter of the Royal College of Nursing*. London: Royal College of Nursing.

Royal College of Nursing (2016) *Education Strategy: The Future of Nursing Education in Wales*. Available at: rcn.org.uk/About-us/Our-Influencing-work/Policy-briefings/education-strategy (Accessed: 10 October 2025).

Royal College of Nursing (2021) *Definition and principles of nursing*. London: Royal College of Nursing. Available at: rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/Definition-and-principles-of-nursing (Accessed: 21 October 2025).

Royal College of Nursing (2023a) *Five-year strategy*. Available at: rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-five-year-strategy-uk-pub-010-891 (Accessed: 10 October 2025).

Royal College of Nursing (2023c) *Progress and challenge in delivering safe and effective care*. Available at: rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-progress-challenge-2023-welsh-uk-pub-011-191 (Accessed: 20 October 2025).

Royal College of Nursing (2024a) *Levels of nursing*. Available at: rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/Levels-of-nursing (Accessed: 10 October 2025).

Royal College of Nursing (2025a) *Defining nursing support workers and their level descriptors*. Available at: rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/Defining-nursing-support-workers-and-their-level-descriptors (Accessed: 21 October 2025).

Royal College of Nursing (2025b) *RCN position on registered nurse substitution*. Available at: rcn.org.uk/About-us/Our-Influencing-work/Position-statements/rcn-position-on-registered-nurse-substitution (Accessed: 20 October 2025).

Royal College of Nursing (2025c) *RCN Research Strategy*. Available at: RCN Research Strategy Publications | Royal College of Nursing (Accessed 09 February 2026).

Royal College of Nursing (2025d) *Safe staffing: evaluating the evidence for mandatory nurse-to-patient ratios*. Available at: rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/RCN-Safe-staffing-uk-pub-012-306 (Accessed 09 February 2026).

Royal College of Nursing (2025e) *The Nurse Educator Workforce in Higher Education in England*. Available at: rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/PDFs/the-nurse-educator-workforce-in-higher-education-in-england (Accessed 09 February 2026).

Rony MKK, Parvin MR and Ferdousi S (2024) Advancing nursing practice with artificial intelligence: Enhancing preparedness for the future. *Nursing Open,* 11(1). doi.org/10.1002/nop2.2070 .

Ruksakulpiwat S, Thorngthip S, Niyomyart A, Benjasirisan C, Phianhasin L, Aldossary H, Ahmed BH and Samai T (2024) A systematic review of the application of artificial intelligence in nursing care: Where are we, and what's next? *Journal of Multidisciplinary Healthcare,* 17, pp. 1603–1616. doi.org/10.2147/JMDH.S459946 .

Social Care Wales (2024) *Social care workforce delivery plan 2024 to 2027*. Available at: content.socialcare.wales/about-us/workforce-strategy/social-care-delivery-plan-2024-to-2027 (Accessed: 17 November 2025).

Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (anaw 2). Available at: legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2015/2/contents (Accessed: 20 October 2025).

BACK TO CONTENTS

Welsh Government (2021a) *A Healthier Wales: our Plan for Health and Social Care.* Available at: gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-09/a-healthier-wales-our-plan-for-health-and-social-care.pdf (Accessed 10 October 2025).

Welsh Government (2021b) *Workforce equality, diversity and inclusion strategy: 2021 to 2026.* Available at: gov.wales/workforce-equality-diversity-and-inclusion-strategy-2021-to-2026-html (Accessed: 10 October 2025).

Welsh Government (2022) *More than just words: Welsh language action plan 2022 to 2027.* Available at: gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-07/more-than-just-words-action-plan-2022-2027.pdf (Accessed: 20 October 2025).

Welsh Government (2023) *National Workforce Implementation Plan: Addressing NHS Wales Workforce Challenges.* Available at: gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2023-01/national-workforce-implementation-plan.pdf (Accessed: 10 October 2025).

Welsh Government (2024a) *Nursing, Preceptorship and Restorative Clinical Supervision.* Available at: Nursing preceptorship and restorative clinical supervision: position statement (WHC/2024/012) | GOV.WALES (Accessed: 20 October 2025).

Welsh Government (2024b) *The future of the Band 4 nursing workforce in Wales: summary report.* Available at: gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2024-03/the-future-of-the-band-4-nursing-workforce-in-wales-summary-report-2024.pdf (Accessed:10 October 2025).

Welsh Government (2025a) *Strategic action plan for building research capability for nursing, midwifery and allied health professions in Wales.* Available at: gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2025-06/strategic-action-plan-building-research-capability-nursing-midwifery-allied-health-professions-in-wales.pdf (Accessed: 10 October 2025).

Welsh Government (2025b) *Strategic vision for nursing and midwifery: 2025 to 2030.* Cardiff: Welsh Government. Available at: gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2025-11/strategic-vision-for-nursing-and-midwifery-2025-to-2030.pdf (Accessed 12 Nov. 2025).

West M, Bailey S and Williams E (2020) *The Courage of Compassion: Supporting Nurses and Midwives to Deliver High-Quality Care.* The King's Fund. Available at: kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/reports/courage-compassion-supporting-nurses-midwives. (Accessed: 20 October 2025).

World Health Organisation (2025) *State of the world's nursing report 2025.* Available at: who.int/publications/i/item/9789240110236 (Accessed: 10 October 2025).

Coleg Nyrsio Brenhinol
Cymru
Royal College of Nursing
Wales