

RCN Briefing: A Workforce Strategy for Wales

The Welsh Government have commissioned Health Education and Improvement Wales and Social Care Wales to publish a workforce strategy for health and social care. The final strategy is intended to be published in November 2019.

Wales needs more registered nurses to deliver care. This requires an increase in student numbers and measures to safeguard international recruitment and address retention.

Evidence for the nursing shortage in Wales can be seen in the NHS nursing vacancy rate, the dramatically increasing rate of spend on agency nursing and the extreme shortage of registered nurses in the independent sector.

In addition, RCN Wales believes that this strategy must address the following points:

Leadership and Culture

The workforce strategy should include a commitment to publish a workforce and education-commissioning plan on an annual basis. This Plan should be subject to public scrutiny through the National Assembly for Wales Committee process.

This Plan should reflect the Integrated Medium Term Plans (IMTPs) of the NHS bodies (which should include the full needs of the social and independent sectors in their areas). It should set out clearly the intended education commissioning figures for year ahead to fulfil the Welsh Government's priorities. This must include compliance and extension preparation for the Nurse Staffing Levels (Wales) Act 2016.

An annual workforce plan would set out the framework of capacity for any specific healthcare strategy/delivery plan (e.g. for cancer, for mental health) to work within.

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The strategy needs to set out a more transparent process for education commissioning with clear roles for stakeholders, which must include Higher Education Institutions, professional bodies and trade unions.

Having a clear transparent process for stakeholders to contribute evidence would increase confidence in the process and outcomes and increase the quality and robustness of the outcomes and their relationship to the needs of Welsh health and social care.

Workforce Planning and Intelligence

The Workforce Strategy must be cognisant of the need to fulfil the requirements of the Nurse Staffing Levels (Wales) Act 2016. This Act protects patient lives and the provision of quality care.

Section 25A of the Act is a general duty on NHS organisations in Wales. Where they provide nursing services the organisation must provide “sufficient nurses to allow the nurses time to care for patients sensitively.” Section 25D specifies that the Welsh Government shall issue further guidance to the NHS on their duties under this Act and Section 25E specifies that Health Boards must publish a report every three years which clearly lays out steps taken to adhere to the Act, any breaches of the Act and any mitigating actions.

This legislation was fully implemented in April 2018. The first statutory reports from the NHS as required under the Act will be due in 2021. The IMTPs of NHS Wales should be including the workforce required to fulfil this legislation and as this process continues, knowledge of what this entails will increase. The workforce strategy should look to incorporate the learning for the legislation into its strategic approach across all professions.

Section 25B and 25C of the Act specifies that in adult acute medical and surgical wards the level of “sufficient nursing” must be calculated according to a specific methodology as laid out in the guidance. The Welsh Government has made a commitment to extend this requirement to other areas of care such as mental health, community nursing and children’s wards. The national programme for safe staffing which is developing these methodologies for workforce planning currently sits within 1000 Lives Plus Programme in Public Health Wales. This programme is central to workforce planning and the RCN believes it should be moved to HEIW to ensure continuity and synchronicity across all workforce programmes. This would allow for better integrated planning to fulfil the

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requirements of Section 25A in terms of commissioned services where nursing is provided.

The workforce strategy should include a commitment to improve the quality and range of published workforce information at a national level in Wales. This should include published vacancy rates in the NHS by profession and information on the social care and independent sectors.

Published workforce information in Wales is scarce. Administrative data held privately by NHS Wales includes the scale of vacancies in the NHS. The RCN estimates nursing vacancies in NHS Wales as about 1500.

Statistics Wales publishes some workforce information but the quality of the data provided by NHS Wales is poor.

The workforce strategy should include a commitment to improve nationally published activity and outcome information on NHS provided community care.

Good workforce planning requires activity and outcomes data. These indicators inform the analysis of how many staff are needed with which skills. Currently activity data (e.g. ambulance times, waiting times) relates to secondary care but care delivered in the community is increasing in volume and complexity and this is the policy direction of travel.

Attraction and Recruitment

A sustainable funding system for health care professional education (including financial support for students) is required for a credible long-term workforce strategy.

The Welsh Government currently pays the university the cost of nursing tuition fees. If students commit to working for NHS Wales for two years they receive a non-means tested grant of £1,000 and can apply for a means tested bursary and other means-tested benefits. In contrast the UK Government abolished the student nurse bursary in England and the number of applicants for nursing in England plummeted by 30%. Dropout rates from courses are also much higher than Wales.

However, Wales is not reaping the full benefits of the decision to retain the bursary. Since 2016, the Welsh Government has confirmed this decision for a year or two years at a time. In July 2019 a further round of 'engagement' was announced. This uncertainty means that potential students in Wales are confused and disheartened. Moreover, the university planning their finances

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cannot be certain of the future system. This is having a negative impact as departments fail to invest in nursing and consider making cuts to provision instead.

Widening access to nursing must be a feature in the workforce strategy

Wales needs to take action to ensure that its own supply of nurses is safeguarded and that access to the profession is widened. A national apprenticeship model (leading to a degree) and wider use of distance learning are required alongside a concerted effort to widen the scope of clinical placements offered. HRH the Prince of Wales has recently launched a nursing cadet scheme with RCN support and a cohort of youngsters from Wales. HEIW should also consider supporting this scheme.

Retention, reward and recognition, well being and support

The workforce strategy must focus on improving retention through ensuring safe nurse staffing levels, access to continuous professional development (CPD), measures to support well-being, good rates of pay and flexible working opportunities.

Increasing recruitment is not sustainable without improving retention rates. Nurses and nursing support staff are too often expected to deliver care to patients in numbers and with acuity levels that exceed safe levels. Nurses and nursing support staff are sometimes working 12 hours shifts without breaks. This can compromise safe, effective and dignified patient care and causes intolerable stress. The workforce strategy should be clear that good workforce planning means planning for safe working conditions including safe levels of staffing.

Many nurses in Wales have carrying responsibilities for both young children and older parents. Many choose to work for an agency or employer where they have more control over their working hours. The workforce strategy needs to set out how the NHS in Wales will modernise its approach to flexible working.

Learning and Development

Improving access to continuous professional development needs to be a priority for the workforce strategy.

Professional development and learning is a fundamental career-long requirement for every nurse. It is a requirement for successful revalidation by the Nursing and Midwifery Council and essential for patient safety and clinical effectiveness. Yet, because of the difficulty of backfilling nurses on the team,

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some employers have stopped all access to continuous professional development (CPD) for nurses. This means that keeping up to date (e.g. with new mental capacity legislation) and learning new skills (e.g. in looking after vulnerable patients with dementia) becomes something that nurses have to struggle to do in their own time and at their own cost. In contrast, doctors have access to CPD as part of their contracts.

‘Mandatory’ training includes equipment knowledge, emergency life support/CPR, and infection control. The 2019 RCN Employment Survey revealed that across the UK 85% of all nursing staff indicated that they had completed all their mandatory training but this fell to 70% in Wales. Across the UK 54% said they had completed their last mandatory training in normal working time but in Wales this falls further to a disturbing 29%. If nurses cannot complete even their mandatory training in work time there are simply not enough nurses employed to deliver safe patient care.

The workforce strategy should contain a commitment to improve access to CPD alongside a commitment to measuring this improvement through a nationally agreed indicator.

The workforce strategy should plan for a health and social care workforce that can deliver high quality care through Welsh and English.

Education through the medium of Welsh, Welsh language CPD and the increased availability of educational resources in the Welsh Language all increase professional fluency and confidence. Increasing access to this provision should be part of the strategic approach alongside targeted learning to improve fluency. The strategy should set out that linguistic awareness must be part of induction and mandatory training.

NHS IMTPS should already, according to Welsh Government guidance, set out the needs for Welsh language skills in their workforce. This need should then be reflected in the education commissioning process.

The workforce strategy should support the whole career pathway for Nursing including HCSWs, nursing students undertaking pre-registration education in a field of practice (Adult, Child, Mental Health and Learning Disability) through post-registration qualifications to Consultant Nurse and Nurse Director Level.

Post-registration qualifications create essential specialist generalist roles such as the District Nurse, the School Nurse, the Health Visitor and Advanced Nurse

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Practitioners working in primary care. To deliver on preventative health care the strategy needs to set out a requirement for a clear pathway of development for Practice Nurses. Clinical placements for nursing students in the independent sector, primary care and social care need to increase across Wales. The strategy needs to have clear commissioning process that includes governance arrangements and stakeholders. The strategy should also include the use of professional credentialing and accreditation for roles.

KEY NURSING WORKFORCE FACTS

- Every week nurses in Wales give the NHS extra hours to the value of 976 full-time nurses.
- NHS Wales spent £63.8m on agency nursing in 2018/19. A rise of 24% since last year. This is the equivalent salary spend of 2,635 newly qualified nurses. The Welsh Government must take action to reduce this spend.
- The 2017 RCN Employment Survey showed only 64% of nursing staff in Wales had been able to complete all their mandatory training with only 4% able to complete in working time. The Welsh Government must seek to improve these figures.

About the Royal College of Nursing

The RCN is the world's largest professional union of nurses, representing over 430,000 nurses, midwives, health visitors and nursing students, including over 25,000 members in Wales. RCN members work in all settings; prisons, primary care, hospitals, schools, care homes and communities in both NHS and the independent sector. The RCN works locally, nationally and internationally to promote standards of care and the interests of patients and nurses, and of nursing as a profession. The RCN is a UK-wide organisation, with its own National Boards for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The RCN is a major contributor to nursing practice, standards of care, and public policy as it affects health and nursing. The RCN represents nurses and nursing, promotes excellence in practice and shapes health policies.