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SPRING 2022  
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### ADVICE

How to support  
flexible working  
requests

### ACTION

Making RCN  
standards  
work for you

### CAREER

How activism  
can keep you  
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PAULINE'S MAKING SURE MEMBERS ARE TREATED FAIRLY

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## Contents

### UPDATE

RCN campaigns, resources and events **4-5**

### PEOPLE

Recently elected Council members share their ambitions **6-7**

### ACTION

Managing long COVID absences **8-9**  
Making RCN standards work for you **10-11**

### PULL-OUT POSTER

Flexible working **12-13**

### OPINION

Get involved in RCN projects **14**  
Have your say on your magazine **15-16**

### CAREER

How activism can keep you connected **17**

### CLINICAL

Influencing with RCN forums **18-19**

### ADVICE

How to support flexible working requests **20-21**

### WELLBEING

Three activists share their top time management tips **22-23**

Don't forget, this is your magazine. If you've got a story to share, tell us by sending an email to [activate@rcn.org.uk](mailto:activate@rcn.org.uk)

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This issue of *RCN Activate* went to press on 6 April. Find the latest RCN advice and information: [rcn.org.uk](http://rcn.org.uk)



**RCN Congress** takes place from 5-9 June in Glasgow

## Cathartic Congress

RCN Congress 2022 is almost here. It's been three years since we've been able to gather in person, and I'm so excited about the prospect of being with members again.

We've all had a very tough couple of years, and many of us will be feeling isolated and lonely. You may ask "Am I the only person feeling like this?" Congress will show you that other people have been through very similar experiences to you. This year, I think there will be a cathartic feeling of sharing our experiences of nursing in the pandemic.

One of the things I always look forward to are the emergency agenda items. If you're thinking about submitting one, grasp the opportunity and do it. Sometimes members might not submit what they think is an "obvious" item if they think someone else might have already submitted it. But don't assume anything.

There's a lot happening in nursing right now. Congress creates an environment where we can speak up and be listened to. Take a look at the agenda for debates, learning and wellbeing sessions: [rcn.org.uk/congress](http://rcn.org.uk/congress)

See you at Congress 2022!

**BJ Waltho**

Chair of RCN Congress

**FAIR PAY  
FOR NURSING**



## Our campaigning

We've set our UK pay position for 2022-23, insisting that ministers rethink current pay plans or risk staff losses that erode safe care standards.

We're demanding an NHS pay award of 5% above inflation, which was running at 7.5% when we submitted our evidence to the Pay Review Body (PRB).

The NHS PRB advises governments on Agenda for Change pay, terms and conditions, and takes evidence from trade unions, employers and governments. It's been asked to make recommendations on NHS pay for staff in England, Northern Ireland and Wales and to report back in May 2022.

The Scottish government has not given the PRB a remit to make a recommendation on NHS pay in Scotland and will negotiate directly with the health trade unions. It has not yet indicated what the timetable for negotiations will be.

Earlier this year, the UK government indicated an NHS pay award of 2-3% for staff in England. The amount set aside for NHS pay in Westminster determines the initial funding available in all parts of the UK.

Join our fight for fair pay: [rcn.org.uk/fair-pay-for-nursing](https://rcn.org.uk/fair-pay-for-nursing)

## Raising concerns

We've launched a new online toolkit to help nursing staff who are considering escalating an issue at work. It includes information to help members navigate the process, from identifying a potential concern through to formally reporting it to senior colleagues.



The toolkit has been designed to help members decide when to take a workplace issue further and includes a flowchart to support them in deciding what, when and how to report concerns.

It outlines the types of concerns that might be raised, such as staffing and patient safety, a lack of support or training, as well as cultural or criminal issues.

Access the Raising Concerns toolkit: [rcn.org.uk/raising-concerns](https://rcn.org.uk/raising-concerns)

## EMERGENCY AGENDA ITEMS AT CONGRESS

Feel passionately about a current nursing issue and want to see some action? Why not submit it as an emergency agenda item for debate or discussion at RCN Congress?

Emergency agenda items must be an issue or topic that has arisen since the closing

date for agenda items, which was earlier this year. All activists can submit emergency agenda items through their representative committees from now right up until Congress finishes on Thursday 9 June.

Find out more: [rcn.org.uk/congress](https://rcn.org.uk/congress)



## Nurses' Day 2022

This Nurses' Day on 12 May, we're celebrating the incredible difference you and your colleagues make

to patients' lives by sharing stories that demonstrate the #BestOfNursing.

Despite working through extremely challenging circumstances, nursing staff continue to go above and beyond to deliver highly skilled, safety-critical care to patients every day.

We're asking members and the public to share their #BestOfNursing stories on social media. We've created a range of social media graphics you can download and use to share your stories.

You can also order badges, posters and use our Teams background to celebrate in the workplace.

Find out more and order Nurses' Day materials: [rcn.org.uk/nurses-day](https://rcn.org.uk/nurses-day)



Sajid Javid and Dr Denise Chaffer at RCN HQ

### ENGAGING POLITICALLY

The first two meetings in a series of high-level RCN political engagement events across the UK have taken place in England and Scotland. The Valuing Nursing Summit in London brought together members from diverse professional backgrounds to speak directly with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Sajid Javid. In Scotland, Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care Humza Yousaf and key opposition members of the Scottish parliament heard heartfelt stories from frontline nursing staff.

## Agenda for Change job evaluation update

The new RCN Trade Union Committee job evaluation subgroup, made up of RCN reps from across the UK, is developing plans to support RCN members and reps in seeking improvements to fair pay through job evaluation wherever they work.

The NHS Job Evaluation Group is undertaking a review of all nursing profiles over the next two years. Key to the review will be for the RCN to build the language and a body of evidence for the nursing job demands, and competencies acquired through experience and reflective learning.

RCN reps are encouraged to work with their managers and support all band 2 nursing support

workers in updating their job descriptions to reflect the clinical skills required for their job demands and support them in grading reviews. This may be undertaken in partnership with other local staff side trade union colleagues.

Find out more about NHS job evaluation: [rcn.org.uk/NHS-job-evaluation](https://rcn.org.uk/NHS-job-evaluation)



**“If you’d have told me 10 years ago that I’d be on the BBC asking Boris Johnson a question, I’d say ‘yeah right’,” says Mel Kerr, recently elected Vice Chair of RCN Council.**

At the age of 27, Mel is one of the youngest people to ever hold this role. Her youth, she says, can definitely be an advantage. “I’m in the prime of my career, or possibly haven’t even it hit yet. I can see where there are issues or room for improvement with fresh eyes,” she says.

Mel’s a resuscitation practitioner at United

Lincolnshire Hospitals NHS Trust and has been an accredited RCN steward since 2017. She also sits on her trust’s staff side and is the branch chair for North Lincolnshire. “As a working nurse, I see the challenges first hand, and I’m genuinely not afraid to speak my mind if I think there’s something that needs to be said,” she explains.

### Planning for the future

When she isn’t working at her trust or doing RCN work, Mel can be found trawling through social media platforms, finding useful insight she can

bring to Council. “Another positive of my age is that I’m very adept with social media,” she laughs.

“When we haven’t been able to see members face-to-face over the past couple of years, platforms such as Twitter and TikTok have been a really useful tool to find out what challenges they’re facing,” she says. But there are also positive stories that can be found too. “I use social media to build relationships with members, and equally they can reach out to me on my platforms. This can help inform what I do on members’ behalf on Council.”

Mel’s really passionate about making Council more representative. “I think succession planning is the way to do this, and that’s one of my priorities for my term. To be a successful member-led governing board, we need to be fully representative of the membership,” she says.

As part of this, she wants to encourage people to nominate themselves for elections within the RCN. “I want to see more people considering going for governance positions,” she says.

“I also think doing an ‘open day’ type session for members to experience the inner workings of Council would be beneficial. Governance can be complicated, so seeing it working first-hand would definitely help make things clearer,” she says. “Get involved!”

## Social butterfly

Mel’s one of the youngest people to ever become Vice Chair of RCN Council and has big ambitions to engage with members through social media



“

**I’m genuinely not afraid to speak my mind**

**“I want what’s best for members. If that means standing up and shouting from the rooftops, then that’s what I’ll do,” says Carol Popplestone, recently re-elected Chair of RCN Council.**

While Carol has been the interim Chair of Council since July 2021, she feels “really honoured” that she has been re-elected as Chair. She’s been a registered nurse since 1978, and currently works as a clinical nurse specialist for Macmillan Cancer Support. She’s also an accredited RCN steward.

So, what is it that keeps inspiring her to do more for members? “I love my job. I really am so passionate about my role as a clinical nurse specialist. My patients are my number one priority, but I really enjoy the RCN work as well. I like to think I’ve made a difference to a member’s life, making their working life better,” she explains.

### Carol’s priorities

Communication is key, Carol says, and her career experiences to date have helped her refine this skill. “I speak to a lot of patients, and sometimes have to deliver bad news, so knowing how to communicate well is an important ability,” she says. “I would also consider myself a fair person. I treat people as equals and include everyone.”

## Keeping it real

Carol explains how her ‘do what’s right’ approach helps in her role as Chair of RCN Council



“

**I treat people as equals and include everyone**

Reflecting on and modifying the culture within the RCN is one of Carol’s top priorities for her term of office, which runs until 31 December 2023. “This means providing stability for our members. I want members to know that we’re listening to them,” she says.

Carol wants Council and the RCN to be truly

**READ  
MORE  
ONLINE**  
[rcn.org.uk/  
activate](https://rcn.org.uk/activate)

member-led, and transparent. “If a member wants to observe a Council meeting, they’re very welcome to. They have a right to know what we do and what we’re discussing,” she says.

Carol’s ultimate goal for her time on Council is to “do what’s right”. She says: “That’s my life philosophy.”

Words by Bethan Rees

# Winning the long game

When a trust decided to go against national guidance on managing long COVID-related absence, the RCN led the challenge

With the Office for National Statistics estimating that around 122,000 health care workers in the UK have long COVID, how these staff are supported by their employers is becoming a key issue for the RCN.

In September 2021, RCN rep and staff side chair Pauline Harrison heard that two members living with long COVID were facing escalating sickness absence proceedings. One was at a stage where they could potentially be dismissed, and Pauline knew she had to act. “The trust was treating people with long COVID as they would those with normal sickness,” she explains.

Another member had respiratory problems, which were being managed at a special clinic, plus brain fog and extreme fatigue. “She was doing everything she’d been asked to do to manage the symptoms of her illness,” says Pauline. “However, she found no leeway at all in the way her absence was dealt with. It felt very unfair. I knew I had to fight for my members.”

When Pauline spoke to other unions representing different health care professions, it became clear

they were experiencing similar problems with their members too. “Yet there are unanimously agreed national and regional guidelines that say while long COVID should be managed, it shouldn’t trigger the usual approach to long-term sickness absence.”

## Overturning the decision

Concerns were formally raised and, with the whole of staff side in agreement, Pauline led discussions to try to overturn the policy. In February 2022, the trust finally backed down. Now they’ve agreed to pause any triggers for long COVID-related absences for three months, with those who’ve already faced proceedings having them rescinded.

“We achieved a U-turn, which was a really good outcome,” Pauline says. “It illustrates how well we worked with other unions, how strong we are together and how instrumental the RCN has been in leading the way.”

A meeting to discuss what happens next has also been agreed. “We want to see what the national guidance says,” explains Pauline. “Then we’ll ask the trust to follow that and not deviate with their own version.”

Pauline has been supported from the beginning by RCN Regional Officer Wes Auden. “When I first heard about what was happening to our members, I felt what the

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I knew I had to fight for my members



trust was trying to do was fundamentally and morally wrong,” he says. “If we let the wall leak on this issue, the whole dam could collapse, potentially having an impact on RCN members all over the country. I knew we had to take a strong and united stand.”

Wes was particularly aware that the numbers of nursing staff affected by long COVID were likely to grow, with the pandemic far from over.

### Taking a united stand

“Long COVID is a new condition that we still know very little about,” he says. “But we do know that people have been experiencing its effects for more than a year and it’s disabling. It needs to be treated as a disability, rather than managing it in the same way as long-term sickness absence. Otherwise, we could eventually be losing

a lot of staff, not only from the trust but from health care providers around the country.”

Wes believes the strength of unions working together was crucial in the trust’s decision. He advised Pauline to speak to her fellow staff side unions early on to ascertain if they were experiencing the same problems.

When it became clear they were, he spoke with fellow regional officers about the situation and guided Pauline to seek a way in which the unions could work together to bring about the right outcome for members. “We weren’t backing down one bit,” he recalls. “I think the trust realised they were on a road to nowhere.”

*Words by Lynne Pearce*

Pauline Harrison, pictured by Lucy Hunter



**i** Find out more about long COVID and time off: [rcn.org.uk/covid-time-off](https://rcn.org.uk/covid-time-off)

### Tips to help reps facing similar challenges

- Make sure you have a set person who will take the issue forward.
- Trust your instincts and if something feels wrong, but you’re not sure, seek advice from your regional RCN officer. They’re there to support you, so talk to them at the earliest opportunity.
- Use your staff side effectively. Tap into that network, finding out if your colleagues have had similar experiences and have good ideas of what to do next.

Mark Butler,  
pictured by  
Steve Baker



# Gold standard

Mark explains how he's using our Nursing Workforce Standards to support members at work

The RCN's Nursing Workforce Standards have been created to explicitly set out what must happen within workplaces to ensure the delivery of safe and effective patient care.

The standards are proving to be a fantastic resource and I've been able to use many of them in my work representing members. I recommend them to all RCN reps.

### Standards in action

I had one case involving a member who was a very experienced and dynamic ward sister. In the middle of the pandemic, she moved from a hospital setting to a very busy community-based team, where

she was given a caseload, but no support or help to adapt. In her new role, she followed a policy that applied in hospitals, but there was no equivalent in the community setting. This resulted in a complaint and my needing to represent her.

As her health was being adversely affected, I was able to cite Standard 13 (see box on the right), which talks about how staff are entitled to work in healthy and safe environments.

Standard 10 was also useful, as it talks about how more senior staff, who are taking on additional or different roles, need a period of preceptorship

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**As a result of my intervention, managers decided there was no case to answer**



until their competence and confidence are achieved. As a result of my intervention, managers decided there was no case to answer and she returned to work, receiving her back pay and a formal apology.

Another case involved a health care support worker who worked night shifts on an acute mental health admissions unit. There was an incident where a fire alarm was activated as a prank.

She was disciplined over a complaint that she shouted at a patient, but it was to make herself heard above the noise of the alarm. The consequences of facing a disciplinary included losing such a large amount of her

wages she was forced to start using food banks.

### A robust approach

In my role representing her, I was able to talk about the qualities of good leadership, referring to the introduction in the standards document, which says: "Nursing leadership must embody compassion both in style and behaviour towards the staff they lead."

I also cited Standard 12, which talks about how leadership should support and nurture psychological safety, and Standard 10. Eventually, the case was dismissed and the member returned to work, with the opportunity to have more training, helping her career pathway.

These standards are helping to create lasting change,

with my trust working towards a new and improved system that is altering how we deal with a range of issues, including absence management, disciplinarys and performance. This has come about through me repeatedly asking managers to show how they're complying with these standards.

I think the standards have demonstrated to managers that the RCN's approach is more robust than ever. These are the standards we expect as a minimum and as an employer, if you're not meeting them, you need to be prepared to be challenged.

*Mark Butler is RCN West Midlands Regional Board Chair and has been a steward for more than 20 years.*

### Which standards did Mark use?

**10** Registered nurses and nursing support workers must be appropriately prepared and work within their scope of practice for the people who use services, their families and the population they're working with.

**12** The nursing workforce should be treated with dignity, respect, and enabled to raise concerns without fear of detriment, and to have these concerns responded to.

**13** The nursing workforce is entitled to work in healthy and safe environments.



**i** Read the workforce standards in full: [rcn.org.uk/nws](https://rcn.org.uk/nws)



# Working Flexibly to Support a Healthy Work-life Balance

This resource provides information on:

- the benefits of flexible working
- requesting flexible working
- ways to work flexibly
- case studies
- good policy development
- relevant legislation.



[rcn.org.uk/working-flexibly](https://rcn.org.uk/working-flexibly)

# ‘Every rep had their views listened to’

Anne tells us how getting involved in RCN projects can improve your professional skills

Working collaboratively with the RCN has always been a positive experience for me. I previously worked on its *Spinning Plates* publication, and my latest project, the second edition of *Ask. Listen. Act.* guidance, is about how reps can use the RCN’s Nursing Workforce Standards.

Knowing I made helpful suggestions boosted my confidence. Every rep who was consulted on the project had their views listened to. We all gained from each other’s experiences.

Reps might find themselves in a difficult meeting, when things are heated, and they might want to suggest something, or get their point across. It can be tricky to express disagreement in a professional way. *Ask. Listen. Act.* offers phrases to help formulate questions and answers; the language staff might need in these situations.

One thing I would say to reps and active members is: unless you’re involved in projects and discussions, you won’t be able to change things, or lead on issues important to you.



I know a lot of reps feel like they don’t have the time, which is understandable. I was lucky and I fought for my facilities time, but I’d recommend all reps push for the facilities time they need.

Our input to the RCN is invaluable. Sometimes people forget how much experience they’ve got until we start sharing it. You might remember something that happened to you, or to one of your members, and you can often contribute more than you think.

Getting involved in projects can help reps professionally. You can improve your communication skills, and especially your networking skills. Taking in information from discussion groups and

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**Unless you’re involved, you won’t be able to change things**

becoming aware of what you can offer the conversation are valuable experiences.

Something I’ve learned is that you can’t always say what you think, you’ve got to temper your views to achieve successful conversation and debate. It’s a good skill to have – it enables you to be open and honest, but also clear and professional in your language. It keeps these spaces safe.

*Anne Penny is Vice Chair of the RCN’s North Yorkshire Branch.*

# What do you think?

COMPLETE  
THE SURVEY  
TO ENTER OUR  
iPAD PRIZE  
DRAW

We've made significant changes to *RCN Activate* magazine over the past 12 months, relaunching it with a clearer sense of purpose, a new design and distinct sections.

**We've launched a survey - the quickest way to do this is online - that takes just 10 minutes to complete.**

We're keen to know what you think and what more we could do to improve.

If that's not possible, please complete the below survey, remove this page and send to: Kim Scott, RCN Headquarters, 20 Cavendish Square, London W1G 0RN.

We're also interested to learn how much you value printed magazines, as we seek to reduce our impact on the environment and make best use of members' money.

Your responses will be treated anonymously and will be deleted once analysis is complete.

**i** Complete the survey online: [surveys.rcn.org.uk/s/mags-survey](https://surveys.rcn.org.uk/s/mags-survey)

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CONTINUES  
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PAGE

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<b>Which of the following would be attractive changes for RCN Activate? It is currently printed and posted to active members each quarter.</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Increased frequency <input type="checkbox"/> Decreased frequency <input type="checkbox"/> More pages <input type="checkbox"/> Fewer pages <input type="checkbox"/> Better paper quality <input type="checkbox"/> It is made online only <input type="checkbox"/> More adverts <input type="checkbox"/> Fewer adverts <input type="checkbox"/> None of the above <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify):
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<b>Would you miss RCN Activate if it didn't exist in print?</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No



# Pull up a chair

Sally uses her activism work to develop the profession she cares about so deeply

Sally Bassett is Chair of the RCN's Nurses in Management and Leadership Forum, and Chair of Forum Chairs. She's also a senior lecturer in the psychology and continuing professional development department at Oxford Brookes University and is doing a nursing doctorate. While the experience that comes from her active role is supporting her job and degree, it's also helping advance nursing practice.

Sally joined the RCN in the early eighties as a student nurse, and quite soon into her membership became a student steward. "I think that was some of the best managerial training I've ever had. I learnt skills such as negotiating and influencing, which are all positive nursing skills, and particularly useful in a leadership role," she says.

## Making a difference

Later in her career, Sally became a nurse advisor at the Department of Health and then a director in a consultancy firm but was really keen to stay rooted in nursing. That's when she joined the Nurses in Management and Leadership Forum steering committee. "It's an excellent way to stay connected and active within nursing and the profession."

Being on the steering committee gave Sally the motivation to step up and do even more, and she put herself forward to be Chair of Forum Chairs. "I liked working with the other forum chairs to promote the contribution members can make to shaping professional practice. With the extra responsibility you have of being an ambassador for the whole forum community, it's important to have the support of your colleagues," she says.



“

**It's an excellent way to stay connected and active within nursing**

For a while, Sally didn't consider herself an "activist", she admits. "I had quite a narrow view of what that meant, and only associated it with trade unionism. But, when I became more involved with the RCN, I realised what I was doing was activist work.

"We're all in this profession to make a difference," she explains. "You can do this through direct delivery of care, but also the RCN provides a vehicle to advance the profession and therefore improve the care of people too. And you can contribute towards that, while developing your career, skills and network at the same time."

*Words by Bethan Rees*



Find out more about how to get involved in forum work:  
[rcn.org.uk/forums](https://rcn.org.uk/forums)

# Speaking up for the profession

The RCN's professional nursing forums can have a real-world impact on health policy through influential panels and committees. RCN Cancer and Breast Care Forum Chair Nikki tells us how

Nikki Morris was once a specialist cancer nurse – the first gynaecology oncology specialist nurse at Norfolk and Norwich University Hospitals Trust, in fact – and is now the CEO of Age UK Camden. She's also the Chair of the RCN Cancer and Breast Care Forum.

She's now in her final year as chair, having been a committee member for nearly eight years. During that time, the committee has created the *Career and Education Framework for Cancer Nursing*, which they'd like to see integrated into workforce planning programmes across the UK, plus an important publication on breast cancer care standards.

"Those were two really big pieces of work," Nikki says. "But the other thing we've focused on is increasing our representation on prominent committees so that we can influence decision-makers."

RCN forums can play a crucial role influencing at local, national and even international level. The RCN Cancer and Breast Care Forum has been a member of NHS England's Specialist Cancer Surgery Clinical Reference Group, the Cancer Recovery Task Force (COVID-19), cancer outcomes strategy implementation advisory group, and more. The forum is also involved with European and global oncology nursing groups.

## Representing the RCN

Nikki is currently on the Health and Social Care Committee's Expert Panel, evaluating progress on some of the UK government's commitments to cancer services in England. "Committees working at that level will often approach the RCN for nursing representation. That need will be met by RCN staff or, if it's more appropriate, it will come to the forum committee," Nikki explains.

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**I'm always amazed by the experience and expertise we find within the forum**

Words by  
Rachael Healy



Nikki Morris

“It shows the impressive reputation the RCN has, and also how the RCN values the forum.”

There are two big benefits to being part of such committees, Nikki says: “Firstly, by working with decision-makers and playing a part in meetings, as well as providing expertise we also learn a lot about cancer services and the wider health care context.

“It’s an opportunity for us to look at health services UK-wide, so that we as RCN forum committee members are not insular to the geographical area or disease site we’re in but can represent our members and patients with that wider knowledge and understanding.

“Secondly, we’re often the only nurse at the table. That’s

a big responsibility, but we have a real insight into what the nursing issues are and the patient perspective. All these committees want to understand the impact of health policies and services and what the issues are from a nursing and patient perspective.”

### The voice of nursing staff

Whoever is chosen to sit on the committee or panel can draw from the collective expertise of the forum, plus that of the RCN nursing professional lead who works with them. “That’s crucial, because you’re representing the forum, but you’re also representing the RCN.”

In the aftermath of COVID-19 and with a decade of austerity biting, it’s a crucial time for nursing staff to be heard, and for RCN members to influence health care decisions.

In cancer care, Nikki says there are two big issues. “One is workforce, which predates COVID-19. The

second is the effect of COVID on cancer services and individuals.”

Issues of succession planning, plus expanding and upskilling the workforce to keep pace with patient numbers and new treatments are vital issues that forum members can raise if they’re part of the right conversations.

For any forum to influence successfully, they need enthusiastic and knowledgeable members. “We really value people coming forward wanting to be on the committee, because we’re only as good as the committee we have,” Nikki says. “I’m always amazed by the experience and expertise we find within the forum.”

### Join a forum

Find out more about the RCN Cancer and Breast Care Forum and our other specialist networks: [rcn.org.uk/forums](https://rcn.org.uk/forums)

# Flexible working: how to support members' requests

With more nursing staff seeking flexibility in their working hours, Maggy explains how she's helped members achieve a better work-life balance

NHS nursing staff in England, Scotland and Wales can now request flexible working from their first day of employment. Previously, they had to wait six months before they could request a change to their working pattern.

The changes, which came into force last September, also mean NHS nursing staff in England and Wales can make unlimited applications for flexible working, instead of just one a year, and submit applications without having to justify requests or provide specific reasons.

## New processes

Northern Ireland is expected to follow similar measures, with discussions between employers and trade unions currently ongoing. For staff in Scotland, these specific provisions are under discussion as part of the Once for Scotland workforce policies programme.

In addition, staff can access a process where managers must refer requests that can't be accommodated initially, to ensure all possible solutions are explored.



“Staff might not realise they can ask for a change to their usual working pattern”

“Although this change has come in, many nursing staff don't know about it and may be missing out,” says Maggy Heaton, staff side rep for Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and Chair of the RCN UK Stewards Committee.

“Many traditional 12-hour nursing shifts begin early morning or late evening, which can be a difficult time for nursing staff who might have young children and limited childcare options. They might not realise they can ask for a change to this

## Maggy's top tips

- 1 Make sure you're familiar with your employer's flexible working policy.
- 2 Encourage flexibility on both sides – sometimes members might feel their requests will be turned down, but often managers just need to understand what's required.
- 3 Be sensitive – sometimes staff might have a family issue they're struggling with or may feel something is sensitive to speak about.
- 4 Refer to the updated RCN guidance and make management aware of the changes to flexible working provisions in the NHS if they're unsure.

Maggy Heaton

usual pattern, and often by just speaking to managers, a more flexible request is successful," she says.

### Recruiting and retaining

Poor work-life balance is often given as a key reason for employees wanting to leave the health service. The flexible working agreement is expected to help recruit and retain health care staff at a time when the extra demands of the pandemic have left staff exhausted with many re-evaluating their priorities and considering leaving the profession.

The RCN has updated its guide for reps supporting staff in requesting flexible working, which outlines how reps can be a catalyst for positive change in their workplace. Maggy helped to update the *Working Flexibly to Support a Healthy Work-life Balance* guidance and has negotiated many flexible working requests as part

of her role. She believes the new NHS measures are essential to ensure a modern, progressive nursing workforce.

"For a long time, nursing has been seen as an inflexible profession with early starts and late nights," says Maggy. "But circumstances change and what suits one person, might not suit another."

Maggy suggests nursing staff simply have a conversation about what changes they want to their working hours, making sure they allow plenty of time to discuss and implement changes with their manager.

"I had a member who was a single parent who wanted to start a little later in the morning, due to childcare issues," says Maggy. "It would mean her missing the handover, but working with her manager, we found a way to support her request and get the handover from a colleague when she started."

Maggy suggests there's been a long-standing culture of set shift patterns in the NHS, meaning managers aren't always keen on changes being requested, but the new measures are starting to alter this way of thinking.

Nursing staff should also be reasonable and expect to be flexible too, says Maggy. "A lot of the time, it's very simple to sort," she adds.

Words by Susan Embley

**i** Read the full *Working Flexibly to Support a Healthy Work-life Balance* guidance for RCN reps: [rcn.org.uk/working-flexibly](https://rcn.org.uk/working-flexibly)

# Managing your time

Three active members tell us how they juggle their professional and activist duties, keeping their mental and physical wellbeing front of mind

## Olga Leach-Walters



As well as being a senior nurse on the endoscopy unit, I'm an RCN steward and Vice Chair for the East of England and Midlands Workforce Race Equality Standard group, among other activist roles.

### Olga's top tips

- Enjoy time away from work – I find having a busy social life really helps me stay motivated.
- Turn off IT in the evenings – phone, laptops – watch a film, take a bath and relax.
- Leave your desk – take regular breaks and keep hydrated.

If I couldn't be flexible with my various commitments, I wouldn't be able to do all the activist work I do. I set aside time in my diary to do various tasks, outside of caring for patients. As an RCN rep, I'm able to be flexible when meeting members and attend evening branch meetings, so I can claim that time back through time off in lieu.

My social life gives my mood a boost. I love to watch live Formula 1 and also football, and try to watch it regularly with my son. I'm also a chaplain and involved in my community and church.

*Olga is an endoscopy nurse, Chair of the RCN South Birmingham branch, board member for RCN West Midlands, a steward and also a safety rep.*

## Alyson Bradford



I make sure I plan in advance what my working week will look like and schedule everything in an easily accessible calendar and digital shift planners.

I've been an RCN rep for about a year now and am also involved in the neurodiversity task group for the RCN as I have dyslexia and dyspraxia. I find if I plan, everything is smoother.

I also have two children, so sometimes things don't always go to plan in family life. A lot of my work is in the evenings,

## Ruth Bailey

I manage my job with my RCN duties by setting aside a day a week for work related to the RCN Women's Health Forum projects, phone calls and branch administration. As part of the steering committee for the forum, we can be busy working on projects like developing new RCN guidance.

I really enjoy the work I do for the RCN as I feel it makes a difference and energises me. I learn so

much from being involved, and it makes me better equipped to do my day job.

Time management is key; prioritise what's urgent and timetable everything else. I organise tasks into two-hour chunks – after that time I won't produce anything. If you can't do something, you can always say no, or negotiate a deadline and offer suggestions of when you can do it. Most people are understanding.



I do some form of exercise first thing in the morning, whether swimming or running. It's something for me and I have learned the hard way that if I try and save time by cutting this out, it makes me less productive.

*Advanced nurse practitioner in sexual health, Ruth is the Deputy Chair of the RCN Women's Health Forum and also East Sussex Branch Secretary.*

### Ruth's top tips

- Figure out when you're most productive and set a specific amount of time aside to do one task.
- Try not to have more than three things on your to-do list as it won't all get done and will just feel stressful.
- Make time for your wellness or you'll be forced to make time for your illness. If you don't, you'll just end up stressed and burnt out.

and I get facilities time for my rep work. Although due to pressures within my trust, this can sometimes be difficult to obtain.

Generally, if I know I have rep activities coming up, I put it in our work e-rostering system as facilities time. I don't claim to get it right every time, but managing time well is also about admitting when you don't have the time and not beating yourself up about it.

*Alyson is a registered nurse at an NHS hospice and is an RCN learning rep.*

### Alyson's top tips

- Plan your day and write it down.
- Speak to others and keep updated on what's going on in your workplace.
- Set time aside for activities like going to the gym or walking the dog.

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**For further information on credentialing please visit:  
[rcn.org.uk/credentialing](http://rcn.org.uk/credentialing)**