



The RCN Wales 2020 Member Survey

What should the next Welsh Government do?

Introduction

In May 2021, the population of Wales will elect a new Welsh Government. It will be responsible for health, social care, education, and all other matters that aren't reserved for Westminster.

In preparation, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) Wales surveyed its members in March 2020 and September-November 2020.

Nursing staff are the face of patient care. They're also the single largest occupational group in health, giving them a unique window into health care in Wales, from urban hospitals to rural communities, prisons to hospices.

This means what affects nursing has repercussions everywhere health care is delivered.

So, what are the biggest challenges facing the nursing profession? What is Wales doing right? What changes are most urgently needed? Are the answers the same across Wales, or does it vary?

We asked what RCN Wales members saw as the highest priorities for the next Welsh Government, for the nursing profession itself and for health and wellbeing in Wales. This is what they said.

Our members think...

- 1 care homes are the most urgent target for the extension of **safe staffing** legislation.
- 2 the Welsh Government and NHS Wales should work to understand and promote the **role of nursing** in tackling COVID-19.
- 3 Wales needs to **educate** more nurses – and work harder to **keep** them.
- 4 to keep its nurses, **NHS Wales** needs a bigger, better-paid workforce.
- 5 to retain nurses in **care homes**, higher pay is important, but so is respect.
- 6 the NHS bursary must be part of any plan to **grow the workforce**, alongside higher pay and widening access to the nursing degree.
- 7 the top **public health** priorities for the next Welsh Government should be facilitating access to mental health services, and physical activity.

Care homes are the most urgent target for the extension of **safe staffing** legislation.



We know low nurse staffing levels are linked with all kinds of patient risks.

Research has shown that wards operating with low levels of nursing staff can increase mortality rates by up to 26% compared with better-staffed wards.ⁱ

So it might seem surprising that, until a few years ago, no health care provider in the UK was under any legal obligation to maintain sufficient nurse staffing levels.

Things changed in Wales when the **Nurse Staffing Levels (Wales) Act 2016** came into force. Under **Section 25B** of that Act, health boards and trusts now have a legal duty to calculate and maintain nurse staffing levels according to a certain methodology.

At present, Section 25B only covers certain adult inpatient settings.

Top Left: If we don't have enough nurses and nursing staff, everyone suffers.

Top Middle: Research shows low nurse staffing levels can increase mortality by up to 26%, and nurses become anxious, demoralised and sick, causing many to leave the NHS.

Top Right: Research has proven safe and effective nurse staffing levels reduce many risks. Healthcare associated infection rates, Falls, Pressure ulcers, Medication errors, Readmissions.

Middle Right: In 2016, after years of RCN campaigning, Wales introduced a safe nurse staffing law.

Bottom Left: Section 25B of The Nurse Staffing Levels (Wales) Act 2016 tells Health Boards how they must calculate and maintain safe staffing levels in adult acute medical and surgical wards.

Bottom Middle: But safe nurse staffing levels are needed everywhere! Children's wards, Mental health wards, Community nursing, Prisons, Care homes.

Bottom Right: In the Senedd elections, all political parties must commit to extending section 25B. Vote for nursing, because nursing saves lives. Coleg Nyrsio Brenhinol Cymru / Royal College of Nursing Wales. VOTE FOR NURSING PLEIDLEISIWCH DROS NYRSIO 2021. Because Nursing Saves Lives. Cofnodir Ffasiol yn Ffasiol.

Children’s inpatient wards will be included by October 2021.

We asked members which setting is the most important sector for Section 25B of the Nurse Staffing Levels (Wales) Act 2016 to be extended to.

Over a third (37% of respondents) say care homes should be next.

Care home nursing is an example of *community nursing*, a term that covers all nursing care except that given in hospital. Over a fifth (23%) of respondents think community nursing is the most important sector for safe staffing, while 16% say community hospitals are most important.

Taken together, over three quarters are concerned about safe staffing in the community and care homes.

Despite both suffering serious staffing shortages, care home nurses and community nurses (District Nursing teams, for example) support each other to care for patients who would otherwise be admitted to hospital.

This has never been truer than during the COVID-19 pandemic, where staff shortages have been compounded by staff absence as they self-isolate for the safety of their patients and colleagues.

Clearly, safe staffing outside hospital settings is a top priority for nursing staff in Wales.

Regional differences

In most regions, concern about safe staffing in care homes eclipsed all other settings. Not in **North Wales**. Here, concern about care homes and mental health inpatient wards stood almost neck-and-neck, at 30.0% and 28.9% respectively.

This could be linked to the high-profile case of the former Tawel Fan older people’s mental health ward at Ysbyty Glan Clwyd in Denbighshire. Low nurse staffing levels were considered a contributing factor in the case.

Region	Care homes	Mental health inpatient wards
North Wales	30.0%	28.9%
All other regions (average)	40.0%	20.0%

The Welsh Government and NHS Wales should work to understand and promote the **role of nursing** in tackling COVID-19

Few health and social care workers will remember anything quite like the COVID-19 pandemic. Their commitment to patient safety, like their leadership and professionalism, has been second to none.

But if you're on social media, you may have noticed a pattern: nurses frustrated at seeing their profession discussed, on the news and in press conferences, without a nurse in sight!

In fact, nursing advice has been needed at the highest levels of government – but **most respondents (92%) don't see this reflected in government statements and press conferences.**

To improve the morale of hard-working nursing staff, it's crucial that the nursing profession and its advice are visible in Welsh Government and NHS Wales



statements, on a par with medical colleagues.

We asked our members how the Welsh Government should best prepare for future waves of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Almost half (48%) feel the Welsh Government and NHS Wales should work on their grasp of the necessity of nursing in tackling COVID-19.

A quarter (25%) believe the Welsh Government should invest in a comprehensive personal protective equipment (PPE) programme, following the experience in the early days of the pandemic when RCN members raised frequent concerns over often sporadic access to PPE.

Wales needs to **educate** more nurses – and work harder to **keep** them.

Wales urgently needs more nurses.

Thanks to excellent healthcare, more people in Wales are living longer. But few of us stay perfectly healthy forever.

The number of patients treated and treatments delivered in hospitals each day has risen sharply in recent years, and so has bed occupancy. The number of nurses employed by NHS Wales, on the other hand, hasn't much changed since at least 2010.

In other words, **the nursing workload is growing.**

Say it takes a given number of nursing staff to care for a person with a broken hip. It takes a *greater* number of nursing staff with a *greater* level of knowledge and skill to care for that person if they are also physically frail and living with dementia, diabetes, a heart condition, or respiratory illness.

Even more so if they are being cared for at home – which generally keeps people more active and safer from



infection. Living alone or in poor housing complicates things further.

The simple truth is that the overall number of nurses employed by NHS Wales doesn't reflect patient need.

We asked our members what the Welsh Government should do to grow the nursing workforce. They came back with two very clear answers.

Almost all agreed the Welsh Government must work much harder both to **retain existing NHS nursing staff (96% of respondents), and to **increase** the number of nursing students (95%).**

How should the Welsh Government do this? As it turns out, it depends on the sector – and a little on where you are in Wales.

To keep its nurses, **NHS Wales** needs a bigger, better-paid workforce.

In a 2019 RCN survey,ⁱⁱ 76% of nurses reported working overtime at least once a week. Nobody likes working overtime. But when your employer systematically relies on the *majority of its employees* to do so – for free, week after week, year after year – there’s a problem.

We asked our members the single most important thing the Welsh Government could do to keep nursing staff working for the NHS.

For 44% of respondents, **higher pay** is the answer.

The RCN [is calling for a 12.5% raise](#) for nursing staff on NHS Agenda for Change contracts.



It’s hard to overstate the pressure on nursing staff. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, we estimated there were at least 1,612 vacant registered nurse posts in NHS Wales. In July 2020, we found 30% of RCN members were working even longer hours than before the pandemic.

Two-fifths (41%) say the most important thing is to **grow the workforce to ease pressure** on staff.

Regional differences

In **South Wales West**, the need for more staff was the top answer, chosen by 49% of respondents – more than in any other region.

In every other region, the top answer was higher pay, especially in **South Wales East** where it was indicated by 53.3% of respondents.

Which one option do you think is the most important to encourage nurses and nursing staff in the NHS to keep working in the NHS? (RCN Wales, 2020)
550 responses



To retain nurses in **care homes**, higher pay is important, but so is respect.

Keeping people healthy in a care home is a lot easier when you have a registered nurse around, yet Social Care Wales has found commissioned care providers employ just 1,545 registered nurses across Wales. As the population ages, demand for these essential staff will only grow, but we're losing them – and we can't afford to.

We asked our members what needs to change for nurses to choose to remain in the care home sector.

Again, the top answer is **higher pay**, with 38% of respondents ranking it most important.



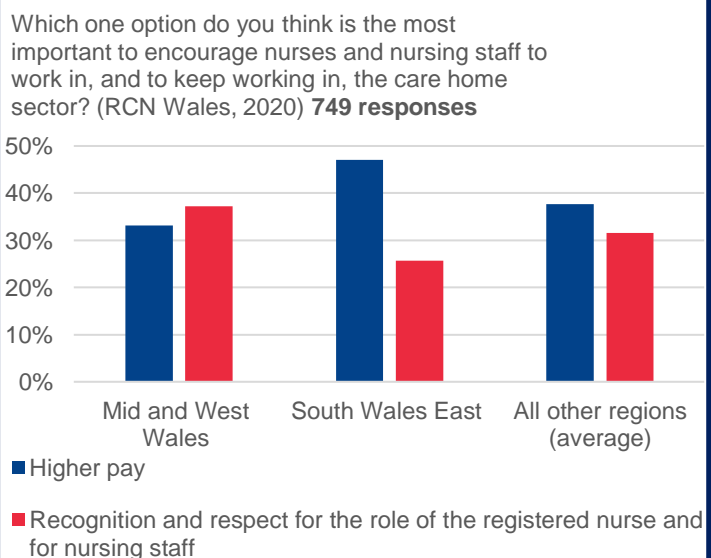
As well as routine management of long-term conditions, care home nurses can prevent people being hospitalised unnecessarily by acting the moment a person's condition begins to deteriorate. They also help people transition from hospital back into the care home.

For 32%, **recognition and respect** for the role of care home nursing staff is what would encourage people to stay.

Regional differences

In **Mid & West Wales**, recognition and respect for the role of the registered nurse and nursing staff came out on top, with 37.2%.

Meanwhile, again, the number of respondents marking higher pay as most important was especially high in **South Wales East**.



The NHS bursary must be part of any plan to **grow the workforce**, alongside higher pay and widening access to the nursing degree.



We've discussed how our members view the problem of retaining nurses. What about education and recruitment?

Becoming a registered nurse takes time. Becoming an *experienced* registered nurse takes even longer. The first step is a demanding undergraduate degree consisting of 2,300 hours of study and 2,300 hours of unpaid clinical practice. The programme leaves little room for part-time work. But the degree is essential for developing the key clinical and intellectual skills nurses need.

We asked how the Welsh Government could best encourage more people to become registered nurses.

Almost one-third (31%) agree NHS Wales must continue to offer a **non-repayable bursary** to nursing students.

But if we are serious about attracting *more* people to the nursing profession, it can't stop there.

For 29% of respondents, **paying nurses more** is the single most important step employers could take to grow the workforce.

At the same time, not everyone wants to focus entirely on higher education for three years – and not everyone can. Some health boards in Wales already offer a limited number of nursing degree apprenticeships to people *already* employed as health care assistants, allowing them earn the degree as they work.

For 28%, the answer is a national **apprenticeship** programme to help people enter the nursing profession.

The longer we wait, the harder it will be to do something about it – and the longer it will take.

The top **public health** priorities for the next Welsh Government should be facilitating access to mental health services, and physical activity.



Not all illness is avoidable. But by helping people live healthier lives, we can *reduce* avoidable illness and unnecessary hospital admissions.

We asked our members what they thought the next Welsh Government needed to focus on to promote public health.

Improving access to mental health services ranked highest, followed by physical activity – ranking higher, even, than addressing alcohol and substance misuse.

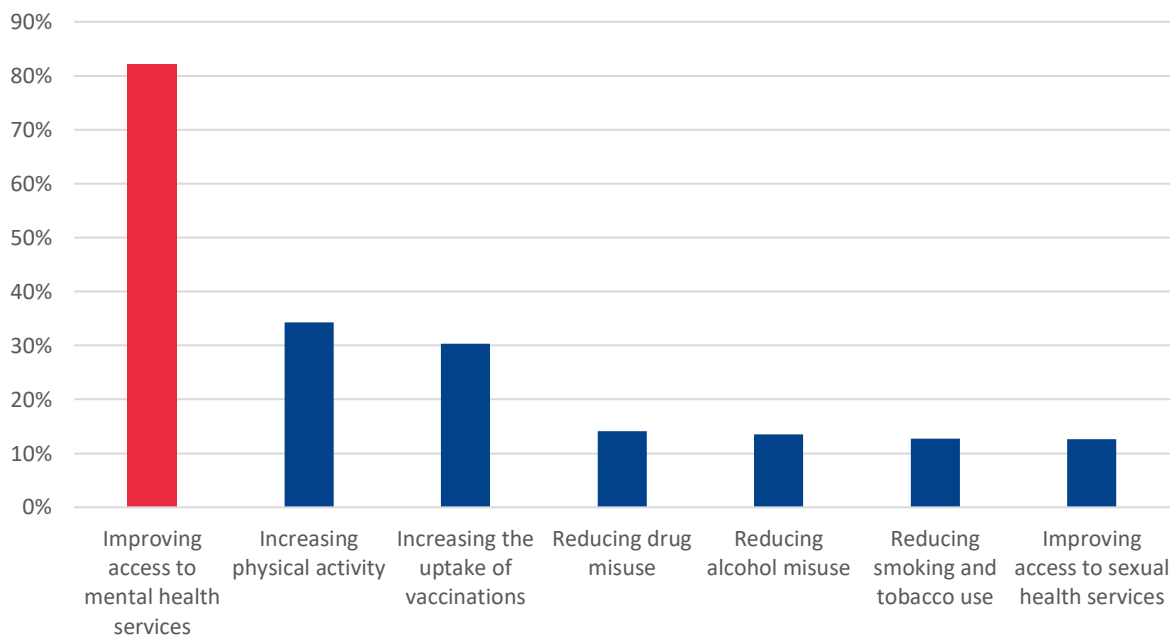
Most people want to be healthy! But people are individuals. By making it easier for everyone to behave in ways

that promote *their* health – whether it's investing in a bike-to-work scheme, or accessible public toilets to make green spaces accessible to everyone – we can have a society that's healthier, happier and more equal.

We believe nursing should be at the heart of minimising the impact of illness, promoting health, and helping people to function at work and at play.

The next Welsh Government must invest in improving access to psychological therapies, increase the numbers of mental health nursing students, and ensure everyone has equal access to opportunities to better their mental and physical health.

Question: Please look at the following areas of public health policy and rank them in order of importance for the next Welsh Government, from 1 (most important) to 7 (least important). (RCN Wales, 2020). **723 reponses.**



About the Royal College of Nursing

The RCN is the world's largest professional organisation and trade union of nurses, representing around 435,000 nurses, midwives, health visitors, healthcare support workers and nursing students, including over 26,000 members in Wales. RCN members work in both the independent sector and the NHS. Around two-thirds of our members are based in the community.

The RCN is a UK-wide organisation, with its own National Boards for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Annex: Methodology

The RCN Wales 2020 member survey ran twice: once in March 2020 and again in September-November 2020.

Owing to the unprecedented pressure on the workforce from the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the survey received only 193 responses in March. As these pressures began to ease slightly, RCN Wales re-ran the survey from 1 September 2020 until 30 November 2020. It received 560 useable responses.

The results from the two surveys have been merged, giving a total of 753 responses.

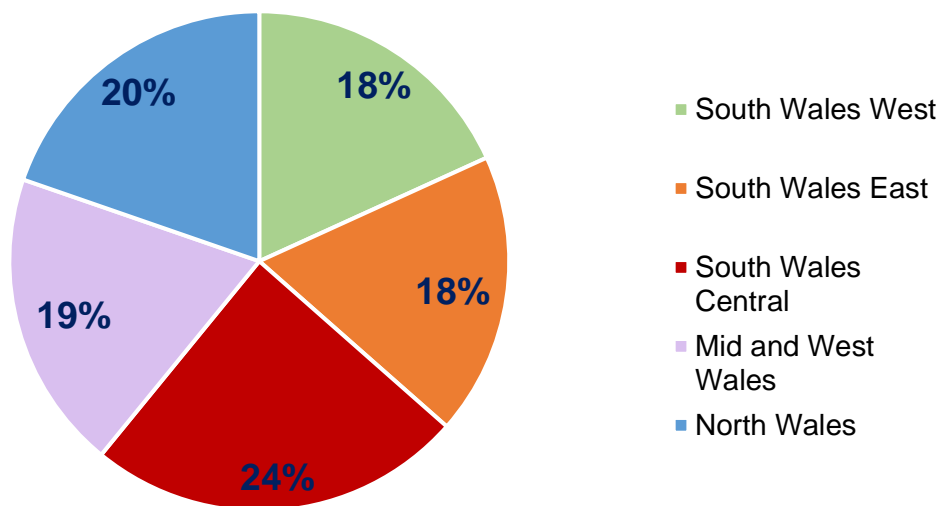
Respondents were required to provide their RCN membership number. This was used for two purposes:

- to ensure respondents were RCN members,
- to exclude duplicate responses.

Once a member had completed the survey once, any further attempts were rejected. This includes members who completed the survey in March and then attempted again in autumn. The usable responses therefore represent the views of 753 unique RCN Wales members.

The data was then anonymised before human analysis.

Regional Breakdown (RCN Wales, 2020)
Total response rate: 753



ⁱ Rafferty, AM., Clarke, SP., Coles, J., Ball, J., James, P., McKee, M., & Aiken, LH. (2007). Outcomes of variation in hospital nurse staffing in English hospitals: cross-sectional analysis of survey data and discharge records. *Int J Nurs Stud*, 44(2), 175-82. Available at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17064706/>

ⁱⁱ Royal College of Nursing. (2019). *Employment Survey 2019*. London: Royal College of Nursing. Available at <https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-007927>