

Nursing and the COVID-19 pandemic



Executive summary and recommendations

The leadership and professionalism shown by nursing staff, and all health and social care workers during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic is testament to their commitment to patient safety.

The nursing profession has been at the forefront of the response to the pandemic, leading innovation and quality of treatment and care. However, it should be noted that this is not only the case in exceptional circumstance. Nursing is fundamental to the delivery of high-quality patient care in all settings at all times. COVID-19 has highlighted this in recent months.

It is time to capture the lessons learned during the first wave of the pandemic.

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) Wales sets out three key priorities for the Welsh Government, NHS Wales and relevant agencies and employers to commit to going forward.

1

Recognise the necessity of nursing and professional nursing advice at a national and local level

2

Ensure timely access to COVID-19 testing, test results and personal protective equipment (PPE)

3

Support the health and wellbeing of nursing staff



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DID YOU KNOW

RCN Wales has called upon the next Welsh Government to Vote for Nursing. Click [HERE](#) to find out about the latest news on the Vote for Nursing 2021 campaign.



Section 1 – Recognise the necessity of nursing and professional nursing advice at a national and local level

Valuing nursing

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic the nursing workforce showed leadership, professionalism and a continued dedication to their patients. The nursing workforce are committed to patient safety at all times in all settings.

Nursing saves lives.

Research conducted by Professor Ann Marie Rafferty found that hospital wards with lower nurse to patient ratios have a 26% higher patient mortality rate¹.

Poor staffing outcomes are also associated with; adverse events after surgery; increased accident rates and patient injuries; increased cross infection rates; and higher rates of pneumonia.

The safety critical role of the nursing workforce should be valued by the Welsh Government, NHS Wales, health boards and employers.

DID YOU KNOW

Research has found that hospital wards with lower nurse to patient ratios have a 26% higher patient mortality rate¹.

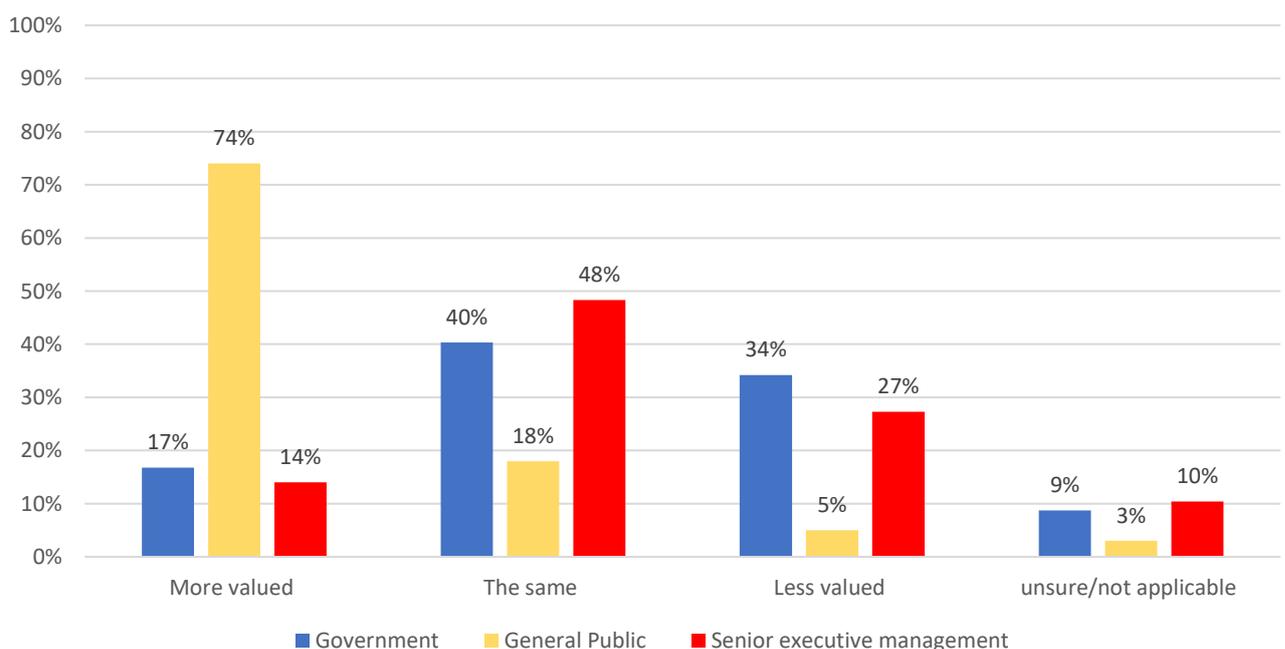
¹ Anne Marie Rafferty, et al. (2007) 'Outcomes of variation in hospital nurse staffing in English hospitals: cross-sectional analysis of survey data and discharge records', PubMed, Available on <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17064706/>, [Accessed 10 November 2020].



Yet since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic a significant number of RCN members feel less valued by the Welsh Government and senior executive management in their organisation compared to before the pandemic.

The Royal College of Nursing surveyed 2,011 Welsh nursing members between May and June 2020. The survey found that over a third (34%) of members feel less valued by the Welsh Government compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic. This is the highest rate amongst all UK nations.

F.1 Compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic, do you feel valued more, less or the same by the general public, senior executive management and the government in your part of the British Isles? (June 2020)





27% of respondents also felt less valued by senior executive management in their health organisation.

In comparison 74% of those surveyed that felt more valued by the general public.

Valuing nursing from the Welsh Government

The Welsh Government should recognise the safety critical and vital contribution of nursing staff and ensure that they feel valued for their dedication to patients during these challenging times.

The Royal College of Nursing's *Fair Pay for Nursing* campaign is calling for a 12.5% pay rise for nursing staff employed on the NHS Agenda for Change terms and conditions. A fair, meaningful and early pay rise would greatly change the way nursing feels towards the Welsh Government. To find out more about the RCN *Fair Pay for Nursing* campaign please [click here](#).

Furthermore, *Vote for Nursing*, the RCN Wales manifesto for the Senedd 2021 elections sets out how the next Welsh Government should value and support the nursing workforce. To find out more about *Vote for Nursing* please [click here](#).

DID YOU KNOW

Only 17% of members surveyed felt more valued by the Welsh Government during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is the lowest in the UK. 74% felt more valued by the general public.



Valuing nursing from senior executive management

Senior executive management in the health and social care sector should recognise the vital contribution of all their staff including the nursing workforce and ensure they feel valued for their dedication to their patients.

27% of respondents feel less valued during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A further 48% of responses did not record a change in feeling regarding the level of value they felt from senior executive management. This is a very neutral response. Considering the phenomenal contribution from the nursing workforce during the first wave of COVID-19, RCN Wales expected that senior executive management would strongly value the nursing contribution, and this would be reflected within the survey with more members noting an increase in feeling valued. This has not happened.

RCN Wales encourages senior management to have conversations with the workforce regarding how they can increase the feeling of being valued and supported. This would demonstrate a level of commitment to the workforce.

RCN Wales further encourages senior executive management to ensure they include nursing advice within senior decision-making processes. This should include valuing nursing advice within local health boards and all health and social care structures.



Valuing professional nursing advice

Professional nursing advice is essential to ensuring effective patient outcomes which includes patient safety. The Welsh Government should always seek advice from a range of key stakeholders to inform decisions especially those with clinical knowledge and expertise. It is important that all voices are heard, which would include nurses, physicians, General Practitioners, physiotherapists, pharmacists, and so on. Each individual profession can bring a unique aspect to the conversation.

It is important that nursing advice is involved at all levels of decision making, including but not limited to; the Welsh Government, NHS Wales, Public Health Wales, health boards, hospital wards, community teams, care homes and other sectors.

Communication from the Welsh Government to key stakeholders, including RCN Wales, was initially strained during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. To a certain extent this is understandable as the COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented experience and the Welsh Government had to move quickly to protect the health of the people living in Wales.

However, RCN Wales believes that collaborative working did improve as the COVID-19 pandemic continued and joint statements were released through the Wales Partnership Forum. Collaborative working is crucial for ensuring policy is communicated with the workforce, and that it is appropriate for all settings. For example, if the nursing student workforce or retire nursing workforce are to be mobilised again this would need extensive collaboration to ensure all aspects are considered and communicated.



The Chief Nursing Officer (CNO) is responsible for advising the Welsh Government on nursing matters. The prominent role ensures the nursing voice is heard by the Welsh Government. The CNO performed a vital role during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, in a recent RCN Wales survey, members felt that nursing at a senior level was not sufficiently involved in advising the Welsh Government and NHS Wales during the first wave of the pandemic. Therefore, RCN Wales strongly believes the role of the CNO should be strengthened to improve the confidence of the nursing workforce and public and ensure nursing advice is visible and being heard at a senior level.

Safe and effective care during the pandemic

Nursing saves lives. Research conducted by Professor Ann Marie Rafferty found that wards with lower nurse to patient ratios have a 26% higher patient mortality rate².

The Nurse Staffing Levels (Wales) Act 2016 was the first of its kind in Europe and placed the importance of nursing staffing levels into law. The Nurse Staffing Levels (Wales) Act 2016 protects the patient and empowers the workforce.

Health boards and trusts in Wales have a legal duty to consider the importance of ensuring appropriate nurse staffing levels in all settings.

² Anne Marie Rafferty, et al. (2007) 'Outcomes of variation in hospital nurse staffing in English hospitals: cross-sectional analysis of survey data and discharge records', PubMed, Available on <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17064706/>, [Accessed 10 November 2020].

DID YOU KNOW

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Under Section 25B of the Nurse Staffing Levels (Wales) Act 2016, acute medical and surgical wards must calculate and maintain the level of nursing staff according to a specified methodology.

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, RCN Wales wrote to the CNO to ensure safe and effective care and the Nurse Staffing Levels (Wales) Act 2016 remained a priority.

RCN Wales advocated that even during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic there remained a duty on health boards and trusts to ensure safe and effective care. RCN Wales was deeply concerned at any suggestion that maintaining the calculated nurse staffing levels was an impossible challenge. RCN Wales strongly urged the CNO to ensure efforts to provide safe and effective care remained a top priority.

RCN Wales will continue to ensure safe and effective care remains a priority during any possible future waves of COVID-19.

Infection Prevention and Control (ICP) advice

Infection prevention and control (ICP) is the clinical application of microbiology in practice. The Royal College of Nursing considers this area to be key to quality patient safety.

ICP nurses promote the safety of the patient through providing essential advice and education that aids the prevention and control of infections. ICP nursing advice is diverse.



One day an ICP nurse may focus on increasing awareness for hand hygiene, another day the procurement of personal protective equipment, another blood work analysis and on occasions such as the pandemic, crisis planning.

ICP nursing advice should be accessible in all settings. The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the value of ICP and in particular the role of ICP nursing teams. It is essential that ICP nursing advice is placed at the heart of health and social care.

There should be appropriate ICP nurse advice at every level within the Welsh Government, Public Health Wales, local health boards, local authorities, employers and relevant agencies. RCN Wales recognises the varying aspects of the role of the ICP nurse and the importance of this role in strategic decision-making arenas.

For example, at a Welsh Government and Public Health Wales level strategic ICP nursing advice is required to ensure guidance is appropriate for all settings, for example to reduce and control outbreaks of diarrhoea and vomiting which could be in a hospital or care home setting.

The importance of ICP nursing advice and ICP nurses cannot, and should not, be overlooked. COVID-19 has highlighted the pivotal role however it is important to note that ICP nursing advice is essential at all times, not just during a pandemic. The Welsh Government and NHS Wales need to invest in senior ICP leadership roles in the form of nurse consultants.



Nurse consultants are an extremely senior post. Their role encompasses clinical practice, education, research and clinical leadership. By investing in ICP nurse consultants this would ensure Wales has the resources available to provide expert knowledge, it would also ensure that Wales has the resources available to educate the next generation of ICP nurses.

To invest in ICP nurse consultants is to invest in the whole system and place infection, prevention and control rightfully at the centre of health and social care.



Section 2 - Ensure timely access to testing, testing results and personal protective equipment (PPE)

Timely access to testing for health and social care workers is paramount for their ability to safely care for the Welsh population. Similarly ensuring appropriate and timely access to PPE is crucial for protecting nursing staff and patients.

COVID-19 Testing

In an open RCN Wales survey, 88% of responses noted that timely access to testing was important.

Testing provides the health and care workforce with the knowledge that they can confidently continue to care for patients without exposing them to COVID-19.

Moreover, the quick turnaround of testing results is crucial as it allows individuals self-isolating the knowledge that they either have COVID-19 and have to continue self-isolating or, if their result is negative, they can return to work as soon as possible.

From June 2020, the Welsh Government began a proactive approach to COVID-19 testing in care homes.

DID YOU KNOW

In an open RCN Wales survey 88% of member responses considered access to COVID-19 testing important.

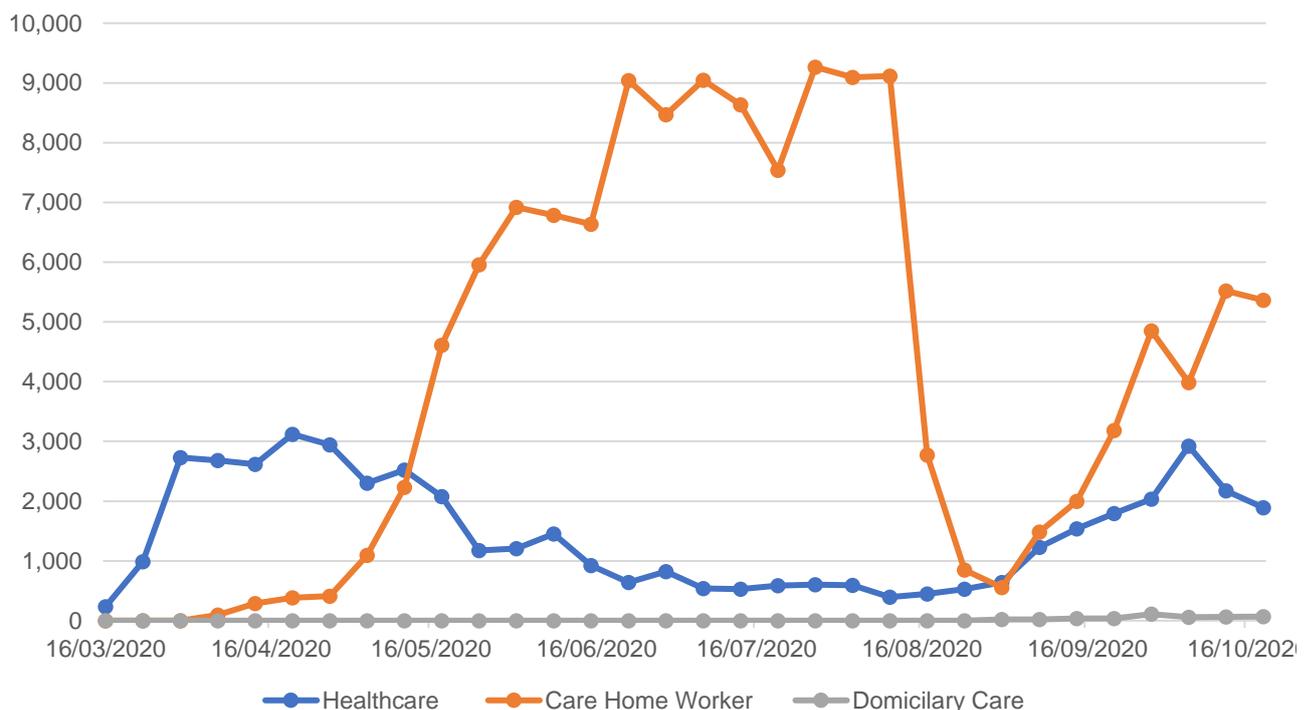


On 15 June 2020 weekly testing of staff in all care homes in Wales was introduced. This was extended until the 9 August 2020 before moving toward fortnightly testing, with the exception of Betsi Cadwaladr who remained on a schedule of weekly testing.

The initial fortnightly testing programme lasted a period of eight weeks. On the 29 September 2020, the Minister for Health and Social Services announced that the fortnightly testing of staff, with or without symptoms, remained a priority. This was based on advice from SAGE and TAG.

Figure 2 highlights the testing of health, care home and domiciliary testing.

F2. Number of Healthcare, Care home and Domiciliary workers tested for COVID-19 between w/c 16 March - 28 September 2020 (weekly, Welsh Gov data)





It is evidenced by the orange line that testing for care home workers has been sporadic and took two months to align with healthcare workers. Only after the announcement of a proactive testing programme for care home workers did health and care testing converge. The drastic decline in testing from the 10th August – 31st August in care homes has not been explained by the Welsh Government as testing should have occurred every two weeks.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

In an open RCN Wales survey, 89% of responses noted that it was important that the Welsh Government should invest in a comprehensive PPE programme with a sustainable stockpile. Of which, over a quarter (25%) of respondents recorded that it was the *most* important option. Shown on Figure 3.

There were various challenges early on in the pandemic surrounding the lack of suitable and sustainable PPE.

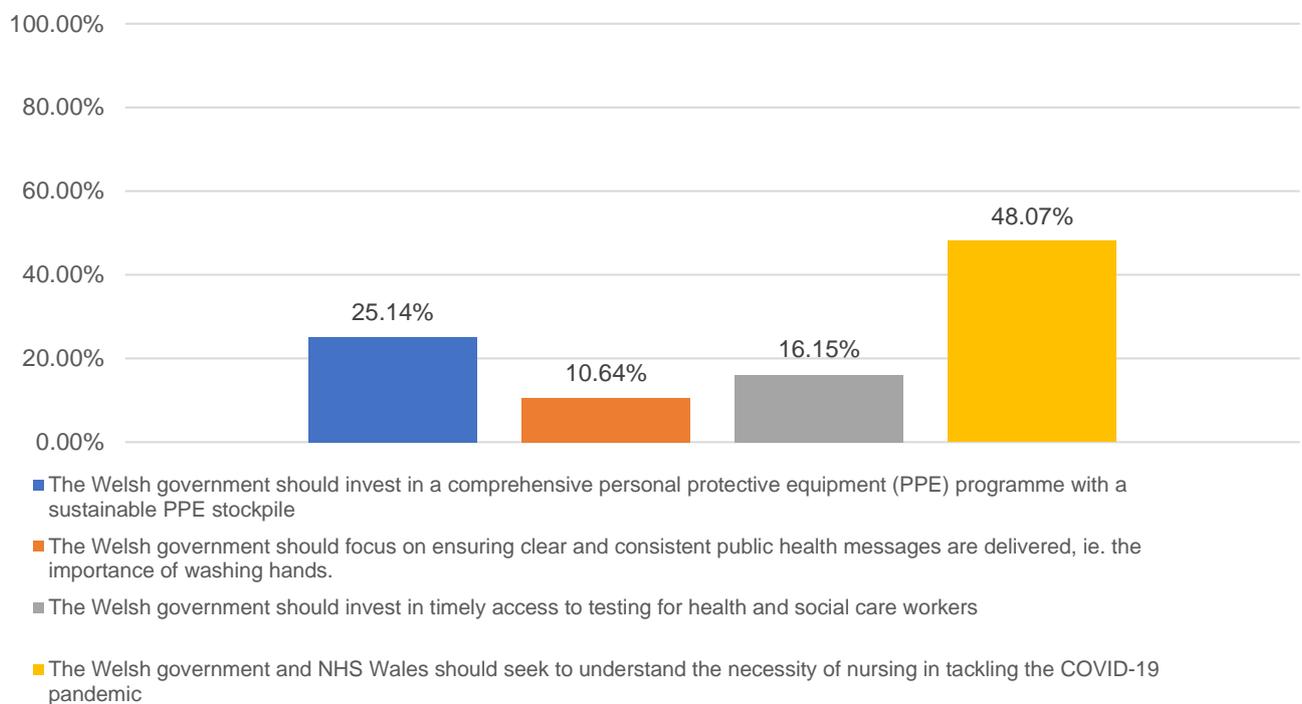
In April and May 2020, RCN ran two surveys regarding PPE. Its top finding was that members were anxious regarding the supply of PPE with 74% of respondents having raised concerned about PPE to their employer (May 2020) and 64% of respondents felt pressured to care for a patient without adequate PPE (May 2020).

DID YOU KNOW

RCN Wales ran two surveys in April and May 2020. The top findings were that 74% of respondents having raised concerned about PPE to their employer (May 2020) and 64% of respondents felt pressured to care for a patient without adequate PPE (May 2020).



F3 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 (OPEN October 2020)



There are three clear areas of concern regarding PPE, including supply, distribution and communication. Supply and distribution of PPE and to ensure all clinical areas including care homes and communities are not left in deficit should remain a primary concern of the Welsh Government,

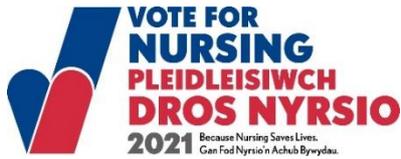
To reduce anxieties regarding the supply and distribution of PPE it is important there is clear communication with the workforce. This further highlights the importance of stakeholder engagement.



RCN Wales can play a vital role by disseminating information to members which in turn would ease anxiety and ensure them of the sustainable supply and distribution of PPE. Staff wellbeing and protection should be of equal importance to patient safety.

DID YOU KNOW

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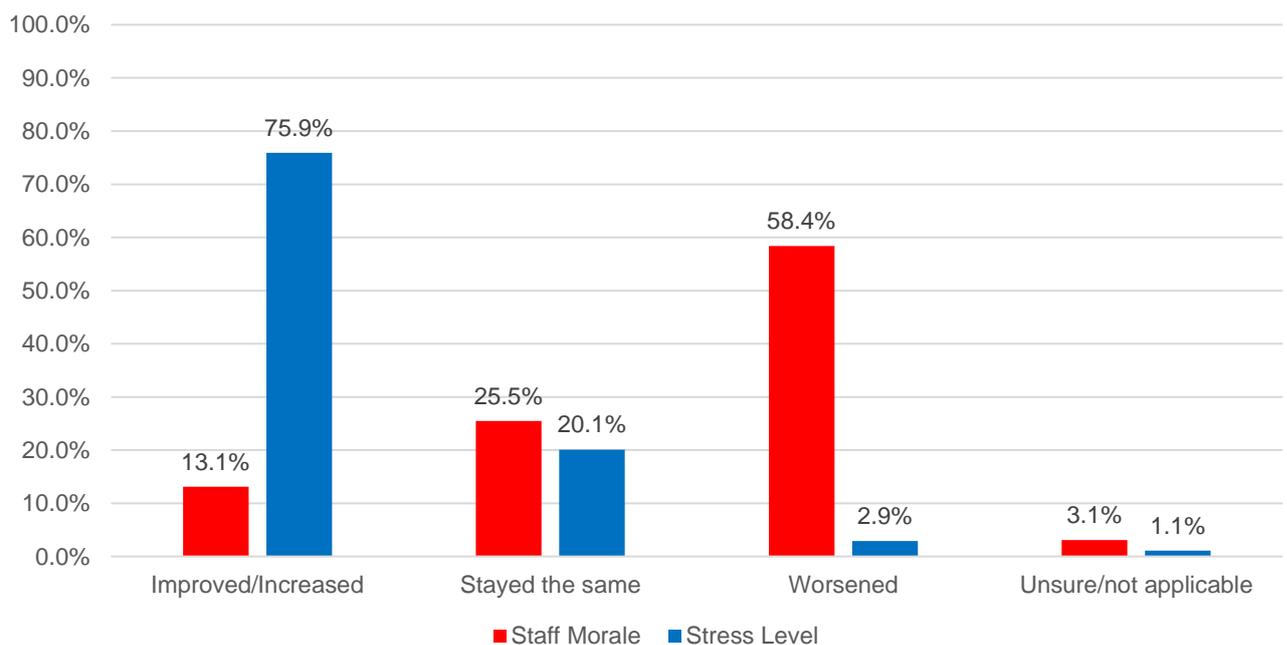


Section 3 - Support the health and wellbeing of nursing staff

Nurses and nursing staff have been on the forefront of the COVID-19 pandemic in every aspect of health and social care, with many feeling tired and burned out.

A recent survey of 2,011 RCN Wales members (June 2020) found that the level of stress among respondents had increased, whilst the level of staff morale had decreased.

F.4 Compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic, has your stress level and staff morale increased/improved, decreased or stayed the same? (June 2020)



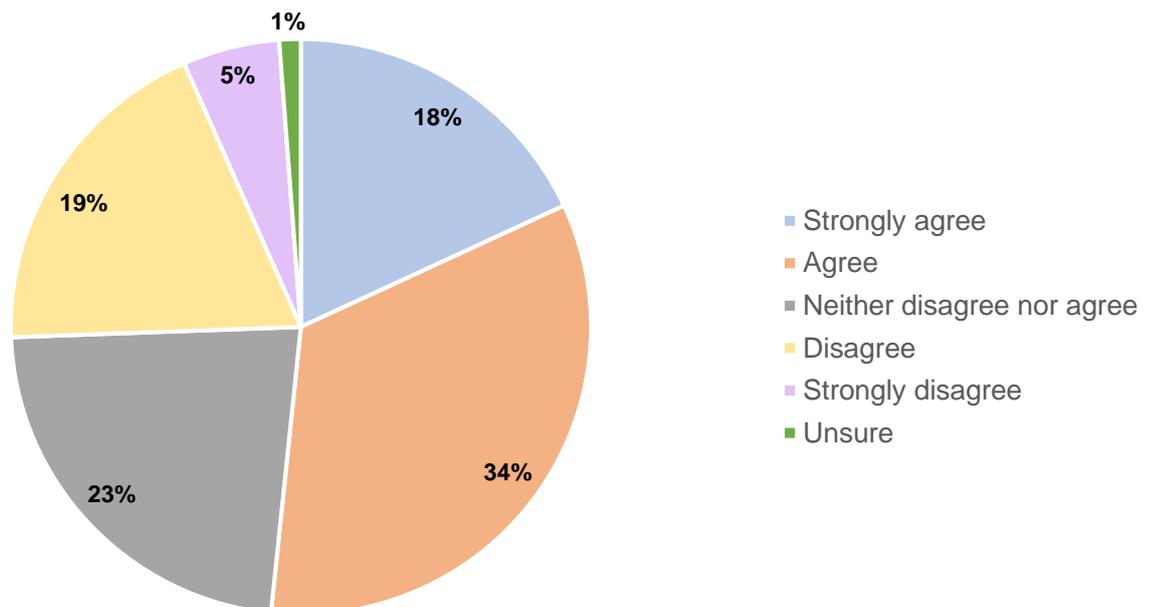


Three quarters of members surveyed (75.9%) reported experiencing an increase in stress levels, whilst over half (58%) voiced that staff morale had worsened.

The combination of stress and reduced morale is not conducive to a happy work environment and may lead to a worsening of the workforce shortage as nursing staff consider leaving the profession.

Furthermore, F.5 highlights members are worried about their mental health. Over half (52%) are concerned about their mental health. This is extremely worrying.

F.5 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? I am worried about my mental health (June 2020)





Nursing is safety critical profession and crucial to the health and wellbeing of the nation; this has been proven throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The strain on nurses and nursing staff's mental health could have a devastating impact on retaining the workforce and add to existing workforce shortages. This would reduce the health and social care sector's ability to ensure safe and effective staffing levels.

The Welsh Government, NHS Wales, and relevant agencies and employers should ensure that measures are in place to support the mental health and wellbeing of nurses and nursing staff. This includes enabling staff to take breaks at work, supporting their annual leave requests and by offering greater flexibility to working patterns to prevent long shifts or excess hours being worked. All these options lead to greater satisfaction and improved work life balance.

Support Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) nursing staff

There is evidence that COVID-19 is having a disproportionately impact on the Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) community. The majority of the health or social care workers in the UK who have sadly died during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic are from BAME backgrounds.

The Royal College of Nursing has conducted various surveys that are rich in labour market information, specifically relating to BAME nurses and nursing staff.

DID YOU KNOW

In an RCN survey (June 2020), Over half (52%) are concerned about their mental health. This is extremely worrying.



The 2017 RCN Employment Survey

- A higher proportion of BAME nursing staff than white nursing staff work full-time (79 per cent compared with 69%) – a finding that has changed little in the past 10 years.
- Black African/Caribbean nursing staff were much more likely to have gone to work when feeling unwell more than five times (36%), compared with white nursing staff (12%), mixed or other ethnicity (20%), or Asian respondents (24%).

The 2019 RCN Employment Survey

- BAME nursing staff are more likely to work additional hours and far less likely to be employed in higher pay grades.
- 65% of black respondents and 61% of Asian respondents are the main or primary breadwinner in their household in contrast to 55% of white respondents.
- 48% of Asian respondents and 47% of black respondents had experienced bullying from colleagues, compared to 38% of white respondents

RCN (UK-wide) April 2020 PPE Survey

- 40% of BAME respondents said they had not received PPE training compared to just 31% of white respondents.
- Only 43% of respondents from BAME backgrounds said they had enough eye and face protection equipment, compared to 66% of white nursing staff

DID YOU KNOW

Only 43% of respondents from BAME backgrounds said they had enough eye and face protection equipment, compared to 66% of white nursing staff



- Nearly a quarter of BAME nursing staff said they had no confidence that their employer is doing enough to protect them from COVID-19, compared to only 11% of white respondents

This contextual information regarding BAME staff is pertinent to the COVID-19 pandemic because it indicates multiple pressures, which may result in greater exposure of BAME staff to risk and/or exposure.

RCN Wales is concerned that structural discrimination and institutional bias has created workplace conditions that increase risk for BAME staff.

Having interacted with the Welsh Government and NHS Wales on numerous occasions to assist in the development of the BAME risk assessment tool, RCN Wales are pleased at the steps taken to reduce the risk of COVID-19 on BAME staff. However, it is important that any health and social care policy developments going forward aim to eradicate structural discrimination and create equity amongst the health and social care workforce.

Support students

Nursing students stepped up to provide vital support during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nursing students have now returned to their studies to continue their education as not to disrupt and/or delay the supply to the workforce of highly skilled and degree educated nurses.

DID YOU KNOW

There was a difference in experience regarding access to PPE during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example 43% of respondents from BAME backgrounds said they had enough eye and face protection equipment, compared to 66% of white nursing staff.



Going forward all pre-registration nursing students in Wales must maintain supernumerary status when they are in clinical placement during future waves of COVID-19. RCN Wales does not expect students to be used to increase workforce supply by way of paid clinical placements.

If student nurses are counted as part of the workforce, it will mean that they will be used as support staff and unable to fully develop the skills, knowledge and competencies necessary to deliver safe and effective care. It may also elongate their education programme which could be damaging to the health and social care sector as there is already a shortage of registered nurses. There is a clear risk that without supernumerary status for learning, in the long-term patient care will be compromised and would potentially put students in a vulnerable position.

Supernumerary status means that students are not counted as part of the substantive workforce numbers and are not salaried. It does not mean that they cannot receive grants or other payments to support them while they are learning as part of their clinical placement.

Invest and support the care homes workforce

Registered nurses working in care homes are key to the delivery of safe, high quality care and to supporting improved health and wellbeing outcomes for residents of care homes throughout Wales.



As autonomous practitioners, registered nurses use their clinical skills to recognise and anticipate problems, take action when a person's condition is deteriorating and avoiding unnecessary hospital admissions. Registered nurses are key to managing acute illness, making decisions around the management of long-term conditions, and delivering complex interventions in emergency or crisis situations. They also help to support the seamless transition from hospital back into the care home.

However, RCN Wales knows from information gathered by Social Care Wales that there are only 1,545 registered nurses employed by commissioned care providers in Wales.³

Despite their importance, the nursing workforce in care homes is often undervalued, unpaid and overstretched. As a result there is limited access to this vital knowledge and expertise especially regarding infection, prevention and control.

COVID-19 highlighted the existing chronic inequalities in the care home sector.

The already strained care home workforce worked tirelessly during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the most vulnerable individuals were protected. The workforce continued to provide complex packages of care and comfort when family members could not visit.

DID YOU KNOW

RCN Wales knows from information gathered by Social Care Wales that there are only 1,545 registered nurses employed by commissioned care providers in Wales. This figure is critically low and needs urgent attention.

³ Social Care Wales, 2018, Social Care Wales - workforce profile 2018: Commissioned Care Provider Services, https://socialcare.wales/cms_assets/file-uploads/SCWWDP_commissioned-services_2018_eng_Final.pdf



The dedication of the workforce should be acknowledged and commended.

Despite their tremendous commitment there was difficulties in access to PPE and testing in the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. RCN Wales does acknowledge these difficulties do transcend across other health and social care arenas, however the care home workforce did not receive the same high-quality PPE at the same time as the healthcare workforce.

The Welsh Government announced a £500 bonus for those working in the social care sector. The *Social Care Workforce Special Payment Scheme* announced by the Welsh Government provides eligible individuals with a one-off flat rate payment of £500. The scheme was a result of the dedication of staff during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. However RCN Wales expects the Welsh Government to ensure that this scheme is extended so that the additional effort and goodwill of staff is recognised.

The Welsh Government should work to end the chronic inequalities experienced by the care home workforce.



Summary

This report has highlighted a number of key challenges facing the nursing workforce, many of which have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the COVID-19 pandemic gains ground once more, and we go into a long and difficult winter, the contribution of nursing staff is more vital now than ever. Nursing is a safety-critical profession, and we cannot rely on a bare minimum number of nursing staff and the goodwill of the nursing workforce, urgent action must be taken to tackle the workforce shortages.

The nursing workforce deserve to feel valued for their contribution to the COVID-19 response. It is time to learn from the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure that the workforce is supported through the current wave and any possible future waves of COVID-19.

RCN Wales has sets out three key priorities for the Welsh Government, NHS Wales and relevant agencies and employers to commit to going forward:

1. Recognise the necessity of nursing advice and input at all levels including strategic national planning.
2. Ensuring timely access to COVID-19 testing, test results and PPE.
3. Supporting the health and wellbeing of the nursing workforce.



About the Royal College of Nursing (RCN)

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.