

Mental health and learning disability nursing in the NHS

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What is mental health and learning disability nursing?

Mental health nursing and learning disability nursing are specialised fields that provide care and support to individuals with mental health issues and learning disabilities. They play a crucial role in delivering patient care in the NHS.

It involves a wide variety of roles working in different health and social care settings, and nurses can be trained as nursing associates, registered nurses and advanced practitioners. These roles include psychiatric and outpatient wards, specialist units within hospitals and community services.

They provide holistic, person-centred care to patients experiencing a range of difficulties, emotional distress, mental illness or a learning disability. They help patients understand their situation and overcome their mental health problems, and build effective relationships with people who use mental health services to help them live independent and fulfilling lives.

More information about specific mental health and learning disability nursing careers can be found on the [Health Careers](#) website or the NHS Careers [mental health](#) and [learning disability](#) nursing web pages.

"I believe that being a mental health nurse is extraordinary and a privilege. I still remember the names and faces of service users who have made themselves vulnerable with me. Sharing intimate stories from their lives to me; a stranger who has met them in their home and on the wards, when they are at their most vulnerable."

Jane Padmore, Executive Director of Quality and Safety (Chief Nurse) at Hertfordshire Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust.

In an episode of the Health on the Line podcast, Jane also shares the joy and fulfilment of working for people with a learning disability. She also explores how reimagining the workforce, making better use of the voluntary sector and deepening understanding of the learning disability, autism and neurodiversity can go a long way.

Resources

NHS England have produced a series of case studies that share the real-life experiences of people who are working towards becoming or working as mental health nurses in the NHS.

NHS England have also published a number of case studies on the experiences of learning disability nurses in the NHS. This video from the North East and Cumbria learning disability network explores careers in learning disability nursing.

Attracting more people into mental health and learning disability nursing

The Laying Foundations: Attitudes and access to mental health nurse education report, published by Nuffield Trust and commissioned by NHS Employers and the Mental Health Network, explores how employers can attract more people from a broad range of backgrounds to study mental health nursing.

The report highlights strategies to attract and access to mental health nursing education:

- **Promote realistic understanding.** Ensure a more accurate and realistic portrayal of the mental health nursing role, career options, work settings and the people mental health nurses care for.
- **Enhance societal status.** Invest in improving the societal status of mental health nursing and challenge stereotypes associated with the role.
- **Facilitate positive experience.** Provide access to positive personal experiences and exposure to mental health services and staff. This includes sharing best practice through education and work experience.
- **University engagement.** Encourage universities to actively promote the support and requirements for studying to become a mental health nurse.
- **Communication and accessibility.** Urgently improve communication regarding the cost-of-living grants across different settings and ensure

there is a full range of routes into mental health nursing.

Since the original report, steps towards closing the gap between mental and physical health services have taken place, however many people still cannot access services or face long waits for treatment. Addressing workforce challenges in mental health services will be crucial to improving this situation. This follow up report, commissioned and supported by NHS Confederation's Mental Health Network, looks at the single largest profession within the mental health workforce: nurses. We start by outlining the scale of the mental health nursing workforce and highlight trends in recruitment and retention.

Further information

NHS England, in partnership with Plymouth Marjon University, has funded and created an innovative postgraduate programme to attract more people to pursue a career in learning disability nursing. Learn more about the ASPIRE programme, [visit NHS England's website](#).

Training and deploying mental health and learning disability nurses

There are currently four main routes to becoming a mental health and learning disability nurse:

- university nursing degree
- post-graduate nursing degree
- nurse degree apprenticeship
- nursing associate apprenticeship top up.

This infographic sets out all the different routes available for organisations to train nurses and any costs to employers.

Case studies

Lincolnshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust

The trust offers apprenticeships to support mental health nursing supply to support traditional routes in nursing. This was part of its strategic approach to attract and recruit well-trained and competent staff into the nursing workforce as the traditional supply routes alone, were not providing

the numbers of qualified staff the trust required. They adopted this 'grow your own' approach for nurse degree apprenticeships and nursing associate apprenticeships to prioritise developing its existing staff.

Devon Partnership NHS Trust

Planned placements from a university take place every year, but Devon Partnership lead the way in offering additional learning virtually. This was a result of the trust wanting to offer students good access to learning even when working from home, which supported the ways of working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Read how Devon Partnership NHS Trust piloted [remote virtual learning](#) for students to enhance placement experience.

Learning disability nursing continuing professional development (CPD) award programme

A flexible programme of CPD is available for learning disability nurses through the [learning disability nursing CPD award](#). It can be used as both a refresher course for fundamental information and a training plan for advancement to different levels of skill.

The curriculum, which is aligned to the core capabilities framework for supporting people with a learning disability, creates a qualification in specialism for nurses as a pathway for professional growth in their speciality area.

Retaining your mental health and learning disability nurses

NHS England produced the [mental health nurse's handbook](#), a resource for mental health and learning disability nurses across England and their employers. The handbook offers practical tips on supporting preceptorship programmes and supervision conversations to help organisations retain their highly skilled mental health and learning disability nursing workforce.

NHS England have also published [Commitment and Growth](#): advancing mental health nursing now and for the future, which focuses on identifying the key issues faced by the profession, and offers system-wide recommendations to address them.

NHS England's healthcare support worker ([HCSW](#)) programme encourages trusts to recruit, retain and develop HCSWs in mental health settings. This [video](#) explores the day in the life of a HCSW in a mental health setting.

It is vital to create more development opportunities for the mental health and learning disability nursing workforce, to attract more people into the profession and to retain existing staff. [This article by the Nursing Times](#)

explores how introducing the professional nurse educator (PNE) role can be key to tackling issues in mental health care.

Clinical staff who receive support from PNEs report feeling more secure making decisions, as well as improved confidence and wellbeing. The PNE role offers qualified mental health and learning disability nurses who are interested in education the opportunity to develop their career in the NHS while supporting their colleagues to grow and improve.

This [webinar recording](#) is an opportunity to hear from employers who have been using the nursing associate role in community and mental health settings and learn about the value they can bring to these services.

Read [this case study by the NHS Confederation's Mental Health Network](#). It focuses on Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust, a low-secure child and adolescent mental health unit that provides care for young people between the ages of 13 and 18. The case study highlights how the trust has made sure that its staff are trained to provide care for complex mental health needs, and that it provides the best quality training and development of its nursing staff.

Useful resources

Learning Disability Compendium for Nursing

The Learning Disability Compendium for Nursing was developed to support schools, colleges, and universities looking to improve the appeal of their Learning Disability Nursing degree-level courses.

Mental Health Nurses' Forum

The purpose of this forum is to give mental health nurses a place to interact, learn more about each another, and discuss how to improve patient care.

It also serves as a space to inspire and educate others who might want to enter the field.

Learning Disability Nurses' Forum

The National Learning Disability Nurses' Forum offers the most up-to-date information on learning disability nursing.

It allows learning disability nurses to communicate with peers worldwide, as well as providing advice to those interested in a career in this area of

nursing.

Mental health nursing FutureNHS collaboration platform

The mental health nursing FutureNHS collaboration platform, hosted by NHS England, allows mental health nursing staff across England to share learning and best practice examples, as well as to find opportunities for networking and collaborative, system-wide working.

NHS Confederation's Aspiring Mental Health Nurse Director Forum

The NHS Confederation's aspiring nurse director forum is a professional development course for mental health nurses looking to take the next step in their career.