

## **Royal College of Nursing response to Health and Social Care Select Committee Prevention Inquiry: call for proposals**

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) welcomes the Committee's inquiry into prevention. We have identified three areas, all which relate to the nursing profession within prevention, that require scrutiny by the Committee, although this list is not exhaustive.

### **Workforce**

The role of nursing in delivering prevention is vital – all nursing roles across all services and settings have public health responsibilities and opportunities to prevent illness and improve health and wellbeing and nursing has unique opportunities to deliver prevention in a diverse range of settings homes, schools, social care, and prisons. Public health nursing staff with specialist knowledge, training and skills play a vital role in prevention services including health visiting, school nursing, occupational health, smoking cessation, weight management and sexual and reproductive health.

Delivering effective prevention will depend on having the right health and care nursing workforce, sufficiently staffed, trained, resourced, supported and mobilised, both now and in the future. Currently there is a lack of data-driven workforce planning to ensure that there are enough staff to meet demand for health and care services or to prevent avoidable ill health and address health inequalities. There are record NHS nursing vacancies in England, and trends in the public health nursing workforce in England give serious cause for concern. For example, the number of health visitors is 28.2% lower compared to September 2009 and the number of school nurses has fallen by 33.6% compared to September 2009.<sup>i</sup>

The ongoing health and care workforce crisis is a major risk to the prevention agenda, resulting in vital nursing roles being unfilled or in some cases unsuitably covered, services chronically understaffed, resulting in care left undone and undermining availability, quality, safety and effectiveness. Furthermore, staff shortages constrain the time, capacity and opportunities for nursing staff to deliver vital prevention advice and interventions and/or undertake training and learning that will support and embed prevention more widely in their work.

Workforce – and nursing workforce planning specifically, should therefore be a key area of focus for the Committee.

### **Public health funding and resource**

Despite successive governments committing to prevention, since 2015 funding for public health services and interventions in England has been cut significantly. This includes cuts to the public health grant for local authorities of 24% since 2015/16, with the cuts disproportionately affecting those living in

The Health Foundation has estimated that restoring the public health grant to its historical real-terms per person value – and accounting for both cost pressures and demand levels – would require an additional £1.5bn a year in 2022/23 price terms by 2024/25.<sup>iii</sup>

Funding/resourcing for prevention and public health, whether this is sufficient to meet population demand and as a share of overall health spending should be a key focus of the inquiry.

### **Leadership, strategy and accountability**

The inquiry should investigate the leadership, strategy and accountability in place to support action on prevention and what gaps exist in this area. For example, as part of significant changes to the public health system in England which came into force in 2021, the Government announced that the new Office for Health Improvement and Disparities would inform a cross-government agenda on prevention and a new Government Ministerial board on prevention.<sup>iv</sup> The inquiry should investigate what progress has been made on this commitment, to what extent prevention is being addressed across government and whether the need for an overarching strategy for prevention and health inequalities which focuses on the social determinants of health. The inquiry should also investigate the extent to which nursing leadership is embedded and enabled across the health and care system to drive and deliver prevention.

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<sup>i</sup> NHS Digital (2023)

2. Available at: [NHS Workforce Statistics - October 2022 \(Including selected provisional statistics for November 2022\) - NDRS \(digital.nhs.uk\)](#)

<sup>ii</sup> Health Foundation (2022)

Available at: [Public health underspend starves England's most deprived areas of vital services](#)

<sup>iii</sup> Health Foundation (2022)

. Available at:

[Public health grant](#)

<sup>iv</sup> DHSC (2021)

Available at: [Transforming the public health system: reforming the public health system for the challenges of our times - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)