

Royal College of Nursing submission to Skills England review of Level 7 Apprenticeships

With a membership of over half a million registered nurses, midwives, health visitors, nursing students, health care assistants and nurse cadets, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is the voice of nursing across the UK and the largest professional union of nursing staff in the world. RCN members work in a variety of hospital and community settings in the NHS and the independent sector. The RCN promotes patient and nursing interests on a wide range of issues by working with the Government, the UK parliaments and other national and European political institutions, trade unions, professional bodies and voluntary organisations.

The RCN is writing to express our concerns about the potential impact of the proposed changes to level 7 apprenticeship funding on specialist nursing education programmes. This would include vital nursing roles such as District Nursing, Health Visiting, School Nursing, Social Care Nursing, General Practice Nursing and Community Mental Health Nursing, along with leadership roles.¹ The apprenticeship levy allows employers to receive funding for individuals to undertake the academic and specialist practice elements of their specialist qualifications.

Apprenticeships data² shows:

- A steady increase in the number of starts for Level 7 apprenticeships in District Nursing (ST0709) and Specialist Community Public Health Nursing (ST0697) from 2020/21 onwards. The total number of starts across both categories rose from 30 in 2020/21 to 190 in 2023/24, representing a 533% increase.
- The data highlights significant growth in Level 7 apprenticeship completions rising from 350 in 2019/20 to 5,300 in 2023/24, a 1,414% increase.
- Senior Leader apprenticeships dominate, accounting for 86% of all achievements (11,570), while Advanced Clinical Practitioner apprenticeships demonstrated remarkable growth of 2,600% from 2020/21 to 2023/24. These apprenticeships now include social care settings in addition to their long term, and successful deployment in acute and community settings.
- Since 2020/21, a total of 540 individuals have commenced Level 7 apprenticeships, with 310 starting in District Nursing and 230 in Specialist Community Public Health Nursing.
- District Nurses experienced rapid growth in starts, peaking in 2022/23, before declining slightly in 2023/24. Specialist Community Public Health Nurses, on the other hand, demonstrated consistent year-on-year growth, with a particularly sharp 43% increase in 2023/24.

Employers in all types of health and care settings, including those in the independent sector, are already facing significant financial pressures and complex and long-standing workforce shortages, particularly in nursing. NHS workforce data shows that district nurse, health visitor and school nurse numbers have collapsed between 2009 and 2024, falling by 45%, 32% and 31% respectively across the NHS in England.³

¹ [Community nurse specialist practitioner \(NMC 2022\) \(level 7\) - apprenticeship training course](#)

² [Apprenticeships, Academic year 2023/24 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

³ [NHS Workforce Statistics, May 2024 Staff Group, Care Setting and Level.xlsx](#)

The RCN's own projections⁴ show that without a funded intervention by the Government, the number of district nurses will be down 61% by the end of this parliament (2029) compared with 2009. Health visitors are projected to fall by 44% and school nurses by 42%. In total, the workforce across the three specialties is set to halve in size (49.78%), from 18,070 in 2009, to 8,995 in 2029, as demand for services continues to increase.

Many employers depend on the apprenticeship levy to fund leadership, specialist and advanced nursing education and training apprenticeships to develop their workforce and meet the increasingly complex health and care needs of the population. Without access to this funding, we are concerned that some employers, particularly those in social care, primary care and public health, will not be able to afford to support individual nurses to undertake specialist qualifications. This could risk a significant decline in the number of specialist nurses, and nurse leaders, trained via this route, deny nurses the vital opportunity to develop their academic and clinical knowledge, and undermine progress towards the 2023 NHS Long Term Workforce Plan (LTWP).⁵

The NHS LTWP set out ambitions to expand health visiting training places by 74%; district nurses to grow by over 150%; and school nurses to 'nearly double' by 2031/32.⁶ Since the publication of the LTWP the Government has stated its ambition to increase care in the community and move towards a greater focus on prevention – both of which will require a robust and sustainable specialist nursing workforce. In this context, any move that could reduce the supply of specialist community nursing staff must be avoided and action taken to protect and expand the numbers training for these roles.

The RCN seeks assurances from the Government that:

- Any changes to the funding for Level 7 apprenticeships which includes leadership, specialist and advanced nursing courses must be informed by robust impact and equality impact assessments and that the results of these will be publicly available.
- A full public consultation to capture views is undertaken, with specific information about which courses are within scope of the funding changes, and with access to the findings of the impact assessments. This will allow for students, staff, employers and representative bodies to share their views.
- The supply of the specialist and advanced nursing workforce will be protected, with a clear action plan for the level of expansion of training places needed to address the gaps in the workforce and enable the shifts to community and prevention. Data must be published annually on the numbers undertaking the specialist nursing training across England and across all roles and routes and including the central funding available to support this.
- A review of the current apprenticeship levy will cover the existing gap in funding for backfill for safety critical roles which we know has been a significant additional cost for NHS employers.⁷

⁴ [Specialist nurse workforce on track half in size compared with two decades ago, as RCN urges government to intervene on eve of Darzi review | Royal College of Nursing](#)

⁵ NHS Long Term Workforce Plan (2023) [NHS Long Term Workforce Plan](#)

⁶ NHS Long Term Workforce Plan (2023) [NHS Long Term Workforce Plan](#)

⁷ [Oral evidence - Nursing apprenticeships - 5 Jun 2018](#)



If an impact assessment has demonstrated any negative impact on the numbers undertaking training for specialist nursing roles, the RCN would strongly advise that post-registration nursing apprenticeships are exempted from the changes.

We would welcome further opportunities to engage with you on this issue and support you in designing a funding offer which grows this vital part of the workforce, whilst providing employers with all they need to ensure patient care is protected.

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