

Growing the Learning Disability Nursing Workforce

A pan-London Best Practice Resource for
Employers

February 2025



Document Management

Revision History

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Document Status

This is a controlled document. Whilst this document may be printed any printed copies of the document are not controlled.

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1. FOREWORD

In the 100 years since its inception learning disability nursing has taken a remarkable evolutionary path. As a specialist field of practice, it has made the critical shift from custodial forms of care towards wholesome community engagement, and in doing so, has pioneered the development of both person-centred and rights-based approaches.

The impact and indeed the legacy of learning disability nursing to date, is testament to how adaptable and how flexible this field of nursing remains. However, there are some innate challenges facing the profession and whilst by no means insurmountable, they invite new and creative thinking, and importantly, a degree of concerted action.

By embracing a pan London partnership approach, this resource helpfully provides a wealth of grounded evidence-led solutions. In part, it serves as a roadmap to help answer some of the fundamental questions for colleagues, whilst showcasing some outstanding work being delivered across London.

Similarly, like the aforementioned journey which learning disability nursing has witnessed, the resource places both career and continuing professional development at its core. In doing so, I have no doubt it will serve as a valuable 'one-stop-shop', enabling colleagues to navigate, plan and find solutions.

Importantly, the resource is testament to the commitment learning disability nurses deliver every day in pursuit of overcoming the challenges they face, both professionally and on behalf of the people and families they care for and support. I am delighted therefore to provide the foreword to this practical resource which I am sure will prove invaluable to student learners, clinicians, managers and academics.

David Harling BEM

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National Deputy Director for Learning Disability Nursing

1. Background

Established in 2015, CapitalNurse forms a key part of a pan-London approach to supporting the nursing workforce at all stages of their career journey. The vision is to 'get nursing right for London', ensuring that London has the right number of nurses, with the right skills in the right place, working to deliver excellent nursing wherever it is needed.

The programmes three main objectives are to:

- Create and support a sustainable nursing workforce in London with the two approaches of making study and access to nursing simple and supporting our existing workforce in their goals and desires.
- Provide our nurses with the skills and education to provide consistent high standards of nursing care while reducing unwarranted variation.
- Promote the importance of nursing within our health team and opportunities available to lead.

In early 2020, in response to the NHS Interim People Plan (2019), the ' NHS All-England Plan for Learning Disability Nursing' was introduced. The plan outlined NHS England's commitment to securing a sufficient future workforce of learning disability nurses across the UK to improve care quality for individuals with learning disabilities or autism. At the time of writing, this plan is in the process of being refreshed and is anticipated to be launched in 2025.

London's implementation of the NHS All-England Plan for Learning Disability Nursing included establishment of the CapitalNurse learning disability nursing workforce project group. Consisting of senior learning disability nurses working in collaboration across London's higher education institutions (HEIs), integrated care boards (ICBs), and health and social care organisations; the group had three key areas of focus:

- Inspiring future learning disability nurses
- Recruiting and supporting newly registered learning disability nurses
- Supporting the professional development of registered learning disability nurses

To support meaningful implementation of national and regional plans and the practicalities of engagement at a system/local level, in 2020 the first edition of the CapitalNurse Learning Disability Nursing Workforce Best Practice Guide was developed. Intended as be a pan London resource for HEIs and health and social care providers, it included a library of best practice recommendations for HEIs and

employers that could support/improve the local recruitment and retention of learning disability nurses.

1.1 Purpose of this revision

This revised edition has been updated in alignment with the new NHS Long-Term Workforce Plan (2023) ¹ and is intended to be an additional resource for health and social care organisations employing learning disability nurses in London. It is anticipated to foster stronger networks across the learning disability nursing community and raise the profile of this rewarding profession, whilst serving as a valuable tool to benchmark revised and new workforce initiatives in place to support the recruitment and retention of learning disability nurses in the workforce.

1.2 Who is the guide for

This guide provides essential information tailored to support managers in their efforts to promote learning disability nursing as a fulfilling and vital career. It outlines key initiatives and resources to attract individuals to the profession and demonstrates practical ways managers can inspire and support prospective candidates.

From ambassador roles that showcase the profession to offering work experience opportunities that provide hands-on insights, the initiatives detailed here empower line managers to act as champions for learning disability nursing. By embedding these strategies into their recruitment and engagement efforts, managers can effectively address workforce challenges, support the development of future nurses, and enhance the visibility of the profession. These resources are designed to streamline the process and equip managers with tools to attract, recruit, and retain a motivated and skilled workforce.

2. Introduction

The NHS Long Term Workforce Plan ^[1] estimates that by 2036/37 the mental health nursing and learning disability nursing shortfall in England will grow to more than 17,000 full time equivalents (FTEs). Estimates for required increases in training for learning disability nursing are 92–100% by 2030/31. The NHS Long Term Workforce Plan ambition is to double the training places for learning disability nursing by 2031/32 (to over 1,000 places). To support this ambition, by 2028/29 we aim to

¹ [NHS England » NHS Long Term Workforce Plan](#)

increase training places by 46% for learning disability nursing, with increases of 16% by 2025/26. The NHS 10-year Health Plan and revised Workforce Plan are due to be published in 2025.

The current workforce profile for learning disability nursing is complex due to the range of settings that learning disability nurses work in. As of January 2025, Electronic Staff Records (ESR)² showed there were 300 FTE learning disability nurses employed in London NHS hospital trusts while the estimated number of registered nurse jobs in the adult social care sector, in establishments providing services to people with mental health, learning disabilities and/or autistic people in London was 670.³ The numbers of learning disability nurses employed by NHS Providers has grown in recent years, however, NHS Provider workforce data indicates London has higher turnover and leaver rates than the England average. As of July 2024, London's turnover and leaver rates are 9.6% and 6.4% and the vacancy rate for London is 9.1%.

The workforce is aging and the average age of learning disability nurses in NHS providers is 46, with almost a quarter are over the age of 55. There is a similar picture in Local Authorities, where almost half of registered nurses are aged between 40-59. It is therefore important we support the retention of our older, more experienced nurses, as well as recruitment of newly qualified nurses. The number of UCAS applications and the number of learning disability nursing students in London has declined. These challenges mean there is a need to strengthen the recruitment pipeline and support retention of learning disability nurses at all stages of their careers. This brings opportunities for career progression and professional development.

3. Inspiring Future Learning Disability Nurses

The following information is designed to provide employers with valuable insights key messaging points that can be incorporated into promotional materials or discussions to inspire individuals to step into the role, highlighting its unique opportunities, rewards, and potential for growth. By effectively embedding this information into

² Data source: [ESR Workforce \(Staff in Post, Absence, Joiners Leavers Overview\) *Secondary Care* - Secondary Care Workforce Profile](#)

³ Data source Skills For Care [My region](#)

recruitment campaigns or promotional efforts, employers can create compelling narratives that resonate with potential candidates, motivating them to see the role as a fulfilling and impactful career choice.

3.1 The role of the learning disability nurse

A learning disability is a lifelong condition which significantly affects a person's ability to understand new or complex information or learn new skills. Mencap have produced a video where people with a learning disability talk about what learning disability means to them, the video can be found here: [What is a learning disability? | Mencap](#)

Learning disability nurses are specifically trained to support people with a learning disability to maintain positive physical and mental health and, as well as their families and staff teams, to help them live a fulfilling life. They can be involved in supporting people with mental health problems, people that display challenging behaviour and working alongside people who have physical health co-morbidities such as sensory impairments. As part of ongoing revisions to the standards of proficiency which nurses are required to meet, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC)⁴ has strengthened competencies in relation to physical and mental health care. Additionally, a greater emphasis will now be placed upon nurses possessing enhanced communication skills and, for learning disability and mental health nurses, a greater knowledge of physical health needs. Since 2019, several universities have reflected these changes in their curricula.

A Learning Disability nurse provides 'person centred care' which means being an advocate for the person and supporting them and their carers/families, so that their views can be heard. Working in this way allows learning disability nurses to build trust and therapeutic relationships.

Some examples of the key roles include:

- Enabling people with a learning disability to improve and maintain their physical and mental health and wellbeing.
- Enabling people with a learning disability to live their lives as fully and independently as possible.
- Reducing barriers for people with a learning disability when accessing health services.

⁴[Standards for competence for registered nurses - The Nursing and Midwifery Council](#)

- Providing health education adapted to the person's cognitive ability and support them to manage their health, especially for those with long-term conditions.
- Offering help, support and guidance to families, carers.
- Working closely and collaboratively with other health, social work and educational professionals.

3.2 Where can learning disability nurses work

Learning disability nurses can work in a range of children and adult settings which may include:

- Local community learning disability services
- Mental health hospitals
- Primary care
- Education settings
- Children's community teams
- Residential settings
- Acute care hospitals
- There are also roles in commissioning, public health and research.

3.2.1 Out of Hospital

Learning Disability Nurses can work in a range community service offering health and social care support for people in their own homes. This involves being part of a community multidisciplinary team working alongside social workers, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and psychiatrists, but also working in partnership with other organisations such as primary care (GP and community) and charitable services.

3.2.2 Hospitals

Learning Disability Nurses can work in a ward setting delivering care and treatment to a person with a learning disability. These settings can vary in nature but might include Specialist Assessment and Treatment Units, Learning Disability Forensic Wards or Acute Mental Health wards. Learning Disability Nurses will work as part of a wider ward multidisciplinary team to assess and treat the person, also formulate a care plan with them to support their recovery. Some people might be detained in hospital under a UK Mental Health Law known as the Mental Health Act (1983).



4. Attracting and Promoting the Profession

As an employer, you play a crucial role in promoting the learning disability nursing profession and inspiring future talent. Below are key initiatives and resources designed to help you embed these efforts into your team's work and recruitment activities, ensuring that the profession continues to grow and thrive.

4.1 Ambassador Roles

Encouraging team members to take on ambassador roles is a practical way to enhance the visibility of learning disability nursing. Ambassadors represent the profession by participating in activities such as career fairs or school visits, sharing insights about their roles, and inspiring young people to consider a career in nursing.

To support ambassadors, the Nursing Now England initiative provides access to resources and a collaborative network via the Nursing and Midwifery Ambassador Hub this can be found on the [FutureNHS Collaboration Platform](#). Ambassadors can engage in activities that fit their schedule, with just one hour a year often making a significant impact. Managers can support their staff in taking on this role, which not only raises awareness but also fosters pride and engagement within the workforce

Ambassadors within the London region can find opportunities by registering using a Microsoft form found [via this link](#). Local schools and colleges usually require ambassadors to take part in careers fairs, networking or talks about their role. The expectation is that an ambassador will give one hour a year, taking part in sessions in-person or virtual activities from wherever you are, and choose the types of activities that interest you. For employers, supporting staff to be an ambassador can be a good way to inspire the future workforce.

4.2 Work Experience

Offering work experience or volunteering placements is an excellent way to support individuals exploring a career in learning disability nursing. Managers can facilitate placements within their teams or partner with local schools, colleges, or services for individuals with learning disabilities. These opportunities provide valuable insights and help participants determine if this career path aligns with their interests and skills.

The [CapitalNurse Work Experience in Nursing Best Practice Guide](#) offers practical advice for managers, outlining a range of approaches in offering work experience in nursing across different age groups. These include:

- Key considerations and essential information for providing work experience, especially tailored for young people but adaptable for all age groups
- Best practice recommendations for various aspects of the work experience process/journey.
- Guidelines on suitable activities for work experience participants, outlining what they can and cannot do.
- Creative ideas for nursing-related activities that can be included in a work experience insight day program.

Supporting resources such as the [Work Experience Expression of Interest Form](#) and a [Trifold leaflet](#) can also be downloaded and adapted to make it easier for managers to connect with schools and colleges to advertise these opportunities.

5. Supporting Learning Disability Nursing Training Pathways

Managers can help promote clear pathways into learning disability nursing, including undergraduate degrees, postgraduate diplomas, degree apprenticeships, and nursing associate roles. By understanding these routes and entry requirements, you can guide potential candidates and provide tailored advice to those interested in joining the profession

5.1 Routes into Learning Disability Nursing

The NMC currently requires programs of education leading to a registered nurse qualification to include a minimum of 2300 theory and 2300 practice hours. For most

people nurse training will take three years via an undergraduate degree. For those who already have a degree, this may be reduced to two years via a postgraduate diploma or master's degree.

A registered nurse degree apprenticeship⁵ route into learning disability nursing is available and, although this can take longer, this is a paid role within a healthcare setting as part of their workforce planning.

5.1.1 Entry requirements

This varies across universities and depends on the route you take, but you'll usually need:

- 5 GCSEs at grades 9 to 4 (A* to C), including English, maths and a science and
- 2 or 3 A levels, or a level 3 diploma (BTEC diploma or BTEC Extended diploma) or Access to Higher Education Diploma in health, science or nursing.
- if you do not have these qualifications, you can consider completing an Access or Foundation year. These still require maths and English at minimum level 4(C) GCSE or equivalent (Functional skills level 2 in literacy and numeracy). Support to achieve this may be available at your local college.

5.2 Nursing Associates

The nursing associate role was introduced to the nursing family in England in 2017 and is a clinical role that works alongside healthcare support workers, registered nurses, and other members of the multi-professional team. The role was developed to compliment the nursing workforce, in delivering high quality patient centred care and contributes to most aspects of patient care. The nursing associate is a generic role spanning all four fields of nursing (Paediatrics, Adults, Mental Health, and Learning Disabilities) and training programmes prepare the registrant to work in acute hospitals, primary care, community, social care, and other areas. The qualification for this role is a foundation degree, which includes both academic and work-based learning. Training typically takes two years to complete, either as a direct entry student through UCAS or through the employer route as an apprenticeship.

⁵ [NHS apprenticeships | NHS Health Careers](#)

Following completion of a nursing associate programme, it is possible to progress into other careers in healthcare. Most commonly, it is possible to apply for the registered nursing degree programme through the accreditation of prior learning (APL) process. The length of the programme varies according to each Approved Education Institute. Further information about the nursing associate role, resources and case studies can be found at [here](#)

For more information on routes into learning disability nursing, you can sign up for updates on the [Health Careers Website](#)⁶.

Additionally, CapitalNurse has partnered with the London Mayor's Office to create a centralised resource on the [London Mayor's Website](#). This resource offers detailed guidance, videos, and case studies focused on pathways into the nursing profession, with a special emphasis on learning disability nursing.

5.3 Return to Practice (RTP)

For nurses who have not been in clinical practice for some time or NMC registration has expired, the NHS England Return to Practice programme offers support to re-enter clinical practice. Managers can play a vital role by directing former nurses to appropriate resources and offering flexible options for their return, ultimately bringing experienced talent back into the workforce.

The programme was introduced in England in 2014, in recognition that supporting experienced nurses to return to practice is an effective route to strengthen our workforce and bring expertise back into practice. Since then, thousands of nurse returners have been supported via the scheme.

5.3.1 Active Registration

For all nurses with an active nursing registration but are not currently working in clinical practice, they get in touch with the Return to Practice team via email england.returntopractice.wm@nhs.net where they will be connected to a local nursing contact who can offer advice and support. There is also an online training programme on the eLearning for Health platform⁷ to help nurses to gain confidence before returning to the workplace.

⁶ [Nursing careers | Health Careers](#)

⁷ [Back to the Floor - elearning for healthcare](#)

5.3.2 Lapsed registration

For nurses who has lapsed their registered with NMC, there are three ways to return to practice.

1. Readmission
2. Test of Competence
3. Return to practice course

Further information on how nurses can return to practice can be found at [Return to practice: nursing | NHS England | Workforce, training and education](#)

6. International Recruitment

If your organisation is engaged in international recruitment (IR), you can leverage resources developed by the Capital Nurse international recruitment consortium and other national networks to onboard internationally educated learning disability nurses (IELDNs).

6.1 Background

The international recruitment (IR) of Internationally Educated Learning Disability Nurses (IELDNs) was previously uncharted territory for NHS Trusts across the UK which was primarily due to:

- The historic NMC overseas registration process made it difficult to recruit specialist nursing roles onto the register until new changes were introduced in 2020.
- A lack of awareness of the new registration process by candidates and recruitment agencies
- A Smaller pipeline of overseas candidates available to recruit compared to that of adult nurses Many countries outside the UK do not have a recognised learning disability nursing profession or/and a dedicated learning disability nursing training programme

In September 2020 the CapitalNurse International Recruitment Consortium was formed. At the time of publicising this document, it was made up of 30 NHS Trusts across London, working in collaboration with each and sharing the principles to ensure all overseas nurses are recruited ethically, to get the same offer of support

through their recruitment process. The consortium became the first collaborate in the UK to internationally recruit and onboard four overseas nurses onto the NMC learning disability nursing register.

6.2 Supporting resources

To ensure shortlisted candidates possessed transferable skills and experience suitable for the role of a UK-registered Learning Disability Nurse, a variety of recruitment resource materials were developed in collaboration with the London Learning Disability Nursing Lead. These resources are available to all health and social care teams undertaking overseas recruitment. However, if you are considering international recruitment (IR), please contact your London Regional IR Leads who can offer advice and support, by emailing england.cnir@nhs.net.

In addition to this there are national resources and networks in place/set up to provide resources and guidance such as:

- [Future NHS Mental Health and Learning Disability Nursing IR Hub](#)
- [Future NHS Mental Health, Learning Disability and Autism Resource Hub](#)
- [National Learning Disability Nursing Forum](#)

Structured programmes, such as the Learning Disability Nursing OSCE preparation and pastoral care initiatives, provide tailored support to ensure smooth integration and successful NMC registration.

6.3 Learning Disability Nursing OSCE Programme/ Pastoral Programme

South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust (SLAM) in partnership with CapitalNurse developed and carried out a national pilot of an OSCE preparation programme and pastoral programme, tailored to supporting overseas Learning Disability Nurses to sit the Learning Disability OSCE and to support integration to learning disability nursing practice in the UK.

This programme has been developed for Trusts and/or systems across England to deliver at local level and is dedicated to preparing internationally educated nurses for the NMC Learning Disability Nursing OSCE, equipping them with essential resources vital for passing the examination. Successful completion of the OSCE is a requirement

for obtaining the NMC pin, and this programme aims to provide comprehensive support in achieving that milestone.

The program is structured as a hybrid learning experience, integrating online self-directed study with hands-on, guided practical learning. and spans 3 to 4 weeks, allowing flexibility to accommodate the IEN's learning needs and the availability of resources. It is crucial to consider the IEN's arrival date and the actual exam date while planning their study schedule effectively

The OSCE Workbook is the go-to guide and it covers all OSCE topics and stations systematically. Plus, it includes links and QR codes for extra materials like videos, lectures, quizzes, and activities.

The [NHS Learning Hub](#) hosts the OSCE lectures and extra resources linked to the workbook. For more information on the learning disability nursing OSCE programme and pastoral programme, including accessing the workbook please see Appendix C

6.3.1 Reflective Case Study: Undertaking the Learning Disability OSCE

Introduction

In November 2023, I completed the Learning Disability Nursing Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE), a key assessment in my journey to becoming as an internationally educated nurse to becoming an NMC registered learning disability nurse here in the UK. This reflective case study outlines my preparation for the exam, challenges faced, and the lessons I've learned throughout this process.

OSCE Preparation and Challenges

The Learning Disability Nursing OSCE preparation programme provided foundational support for my studies. At the time I was one of only two internationally educated nurses who had ever taken this exam before, and so I faced the challenge of isolation, with no peers to share the journey or consult for advice. However, this difficulty pushed me to develop self-reliance. I relied heavily on the self-directed learning materials, particularly the instructional videos, which I revisited frequently to reinforce my understanding. The lack of peer support was a challenge I overcame by adopting a problem-solving mindset and proactively

seeking guidance from available resources. This experience fostered independence and adaptability, both of which I have found crucial in my professional development.

The OSCE Experience

The most challenging station for me was the implementation station, where I had to administer medication while communicating with highly skilled actors pretending to be patients; simulating real-life scenarios that tested my ability to explain complex medication instructions in a clear, accessible manner. This added to my anxiety, but I adapted by focusing on essential communication strategies, breaking down medical jargon into simpler language. In contrast, I felt most confident in the planning station, where I developed person-centred care plans. My prior experience of working in an overseas country that did offer health and social care services to people with a learning disability allowed me to tailor care plans to the specific needs, preferences, and goals of individuals with learning disabilities. This experience reaffirmed the importance of holistic, personalised care in my practice.

Key Learning Points

The OSCE helped me refine several critical skills, particularly my ability to remain composed under pressure. The timed nature of the exam required me to think on my feet, prioritise tasks, and maintain clarity in communication. This experience improved my clinical judgment and decision-making abilities, helping me become more efficient in task execution while ensuring patient care remained the priority.

Moreover, the OSCE strengthened my understanding of ethical responsibilities, especially in safeguarding, capacity assessments, and consent. I have since made it a habit to ensure that patients are actively involved in their care decisions, reinforcing the importance of advocacy in Learning Disability nursing

Impact on Professional Practice

This experience has profoundly influenced my practice as a Learning Disability Nurse. I now place greater emphasis on involving patients in care planning and

ensuring that their voices are heard. My awareness of the ethical and legal responsibilities associated with working with vulnerable adults has deepened, and I have become more proactive in seeking consent and safeguarding patients' rights. The independence I developed during the preparation process has carried over into my professional life, where I now seek out continuous learning opportunities to improve my practice. This mindset of ongoing improvement is something I actively encourage in my colleagues as well.

Advice for Future OSCE Candidates

- Practice effective communication and time management.
- Simplify complex information and use non-verbal cues to ensure understanding.
- Role-play scenarios with peers to improve your confidence in breaking down medical language.
- Time management is crucial, so practice timed scenarios and develop strategies for prioritising tasks under pressure.
- Keep yourself informed about current guidelines and best practice in learning disability care and make sure you do the OSCE preparation workshop prior to sitting the exam
- Expect the unexpected and be ready to adapt to challenging scenarios using fundamental nursing principles.

Rain Bonane, Community Learning Disability Nurse, East London NHS Foundation Trust

7. Recruiting and supporting newly qualified learning disability nurses

Here are some helpful tips for both employers and final-year students looking for their first job in the learning disability nursing field.

7.1 For Employers:

- Job Advertisements: Include 'RNLD' in the title of job advertisements suitable for learning disability nurses. Use the 'suitable for newly qualified nurses' badge if appropriate.
- Timing: Advertise roles suitable for newly qualified nurses in coordination with the time students qualify.
- Job Fairs: Ensure representatives attending job fairs (especially those at partner HEIs) are aware of the opportunities for registered learning disability nurses within their organisation.
- HEI and Student Nurse Collaboration: Liaise with HEIs and student nurses to share job vacancies.
- CapitalNurse NQN Employment Offer: Contact your organisation's education or preceptorship lead nurse to discuss the CapitalNurse NQN employment offer.

7.2 For Final-Year Students:

- Job Search Platforms: Most nursing jobs are advertised on NHS jobs and TRACs but as learning disability nurses can work in a range of health and social care settings, encourage final year students to expand their search
- Search Terms: Try multiple search terms like 'RNLD' and 'learning disability nurse' to increase your chances of finding relevant jobs.
- Search Function and Email Alerts: Utilise the search function and set up email alerts to receive notifications about new job openings.
- Geographical Limitations: Avoid limiting your search too close to your home to expand your job opportunities.
- Banding Considerations: Don't limit your search to band 5, as some roles outside the NHS use different banding systems and may not be visible. Consider band 6 roles, especially if you have management experience.
- External Job Boards: Explore the websites of trusts or other organisations you're interested in to find job opportunities.
- Job Fairs: Attend numerous job fairs throughout the year to gain insights into different organisations and network with potential employers.
- Placement Opportunities: During your placement, introduce yourself as a final-year student and take advantage of the networking chances it provides.

- [Join the nursing community](#) at Skills for Care to make links and find out about opportunities in social care or other non-hospital community services.
- Look at Local Authority websites. If you type in the 'name of a local council/local authority/jobs' this should take you to a page that will then allow you to run a job search.

7.3 CapitalNurse Newly Qualified Nurse Employment Offer

As a line manager, you can access the [CapitalNurse NQN Employment Offer Toolkit](#), a pan-London resource designed to streamline the recruitment, onboarding, and early career support of newly qualified nurses (NQNs) across all nursing fields, including learning disability nursing.

This toolkit provides step-by-step guidance on recruiting and supporting NQNs, ensuring a positive transition from student to practitioner. Key features include:

- A flexible framework for students, NQNs, education institutions, and employers.
- Best practice case studies for recruitment processes.
- A self-assessment benchmarking tool for employers to evaluate their approach.
- A Student Guide with practical tips for navigating the employment journey.
- Resources to support interview preparation and onboarding.

By embedding these resources into your recruitment processes, you can create a consistent and supportive experience for NQNs, enhancing retention and career satisfaction.

7.4 Early Careers: Preceptorship & Beyond

The [national preceptorship framework for nursing](#) national preceptorship framework for nursing⁸ sets national standards for preceptorship for nurses and establishes a framework for good practice that can be adopted across all regions in England.

The first two years of practice are critical for a newly registered nurse's development. As a line manager, you can ensure that your team members benefit from high-quality preceptorship programs tailored to their needs. The [literature review conducted by](#)

⁸ [NHS England » National preceptorship framework for nursing](#)

[Middlesex University](#)⁹ confirms the impact of early careers and preceptorship programmes on recruitment and retention of nurses in the first two years post registration.

The [CapitalNurse Preceptorship Framework](#) provides best practices and resources to support newly registered nurses during this transition, including:

- A [12 month Preceptorship Model](#) designed to build confidence and competence.
- A [Beyond Preceptorship Framework](#) for ongoing development during the first 12-24 months.
- A [Team-based Preceptorship](#) model that promotes multidisciplinary support, fostering collaboration and holistic care in learning disability nursing.
- An [Accelerated Preceptorship Guide](#) for experienced practitioners entering new roles.

7.4.1 Case Study on Supporting Learning Disability Nurses During Preceptorship

Context

Learning disability nursing, like any other branch of nursing, is governed by the same high standards set by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). To meet these standards, it is essential for newly registered learning disability nurses to have access to high-quality preceptorship. This support is crucial in building their confidence and competence during the first year of practice, through ongoing professional development (CPD).

⁹ [Preceptorship-review-corrected-refs.pdf](#)

Approach

Trust leads and educators are encouraged to leverage available resources to develop robust preceptorship frameworks tailored to their organisational values. CapitalNurse has created comprehensive guidance and tools that are freely accessible, including self-assessments and reflection exercises. These tools can enrich and personalize preceptorship programmes, particularly when aligned with the CapitalNurse Career Framework and CapitalNurse Preceptorship Framework.

Implementation

Our study days are designed around these frameworks and focus on themes that are relevant to all newly registered practitioners (NRPs), not just learning disability nurses. By addressing common challenges faced by all NRPs, we aim to provide a safe environment for open dialogue and shared learning. Guided reflections and discussions during these sessions have proven invaluable in fostering solution-focused thinking and enhancing critical problem-solving skills.

Key Success Factors

Two main aspects have contributed to the success of our preceptorship programme:

- a) Continuous Feedback and Adaptation: Our programme is dynamic, evolving based on feedback, comments, and suggestions from attendees. This responsiveness ensures the programme remains relevant and effective.
- b) Regular, Direct Communication: We emphasize the importance of consistent face-to-face interactions and telephone conversations, which help establish strong, supportive relationships.

Reflections

Reflecting on the role of a learning disability nurse, there is no single competency or skill that defines overall competence. The diversity of the role supports the need for ongoing reflection and adaptation of tools to bridge the gap between theory, policy,

and practice. This reflective approach helps learning disability nurses apply their knowledge effectively in real-world settings.

Conclusion

Our tailored preceptorship approach has fostered a supportive environment for NRPs, equipping them with the confidence and skills needed for their roles. By using a flexible, feedback-driven framework and emphasizing the importance of direct communication, we have created a strong foundation for professional growth and development in learning disability nursing.

Joe Lynch, Preceptorship Lead, Whittington Health NHS Trust

8. Supporting Career Progression and Leadership in Learning Disability Nursing

London has the lowest proportion of Band 5 nurses, with more in higher bandings. The impact of this is that nurses of all fields working in London NHS organisations can progress to a Band 6 role sooner than those in other areas of England. The average for all Registered Nurses in London is that 18% progress to band 6 roles within 3 years.

NHS ESR data from July 2024, shows 15% of learning disability nurses in London are working at band 5, 43% are working at band 6, and 25% at band 7. Data between 2020 and 2024 shows that 25% of Registered Learning Disability Nurses have progressed to a band 6 role within 3 years of starting at band 5. The progression for registered learning disability nurses to band 6 is one of the fastest compared with other fields of nursing.

This demonstrates the career progression opportunities for learning disability nurses in London, however, the speed of this progression emphasises the need to ensure that learning disability nurses receive preceptorship during their first year of practice and are supported to gain the capabilities they need to progress into more senior roles, through continued professional development.

As an employer you can encourage you can provide structured support an offer access to tools that can help build confidence and prepare for new opportunities by sharing the following initiatives:

8.1 Career Story Toolkit for Early Career Nurses

CapitalNurse has developed a digital [Career Story Toolkit](#) designed to support early career nurses (domestically trained and IENs) in their professional journey. The aim is to aid independent skill development, boost understanding and confidence, and help nurses apply for roles confidently and successfully.

It features four concise videos with insights from a trained career coach providing expert guidance for each of the videos, and is designed for flexible use, nurses can explore the content at their own pace throughout the recruitment process.

The four focused themes can be summarised as:

- [Knowing Yourself](#)
 - Understand personal values and strengths
 - Identify and map out ideal career paths
- [Making Your Application](#)
 - Find the right job opportunities
 - Navigate the application process
 - Craft strong and compelling applications
- [Preparing for Interview](#)
 - Anticipate common interview questions
 - Prepare effective and impactful responses
 - Present oneself with confidence
- [Interview and Beyond](#)
 - Make a lasting impression during interviews
 - Handle post-interview follow-ups
 - Reflect on experiences to foster continuous improvement

8.2 Capability Mapping and Self-Assessment

A selection of person specifications for learning disability roles at bands 5, 6, 7 in a range of clinical settings were reviewed, to identify the key capabilities required for career progression. A tool has been created that will enable individuals to keep a record of their competencies and record specific skills and activities they have developed. This can be found in Appendix D: Capability Mapping and Self-Assessment Tool

8.3 Standards for Education and Practice

The Queen's Nursing Institute (QNI) developed a resource to support community learning disability nurses including standards for education and practice. More information can be found at: [Standards of Education and Practice – The Queen's Nursing Institute](#)

8.4 Rotational Roles

CapitalNurse has developed best practice guidelines and template documents for a range of different rotational roles. A rotational post could be used to support nurses who wanted to develop the skills needed for senior roles, especially those in the community acute liaison settings. The guidance and templates are available at: [Rotations | NHS England | Workforce, training and education](#)

8.5 Clinical Academic Careers

The National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) offer training programmes for the full range of health and care professions to undertake research and develop research capabilities, including internships, fellowships, pre and post-doctoral level studies. More information can be found at [Research career funding programmes | NIHR](#)

8.6 Advanced Clinical Practitioners

The [Multi-professional framework for advanced practice in England - Advanced Practice](#) was launched in 2017 and provides clear standards and core capabilities for health and care professionals who want to work in advanced clinical practice roles.

Skills for Health has developed core capabilities frameworks for supporting autistic people and/or people with a learning disability, which are relevant to those working in any sector and all staff working across health and social care. For further details visit: [skills for health](#)

8.7 Bitesize Case Studies to Support Professional Development

Secretarial skills: In our community team we encourage the band 5 nurses to learn useful skills by getting them to rotate responsibility for chairing and taking minutes in our nurses meeting. These are skills they will be expected to use in more senior roles and it's good to have this development opportunity in a supportive environment with their peers.

James Davies, Head of Nursing Integrated Care Service Line, West London NHS Trust

Responding to complaints: Responding to complaints, be it in relation to others or your team's practice, is an unfortunate but necessary part of the nursing leadership role. As a team lead, I would support nursing staff through this process and, in doing so, helped them to appreciate that reflecting on clinical practice, acknowledging stress or inconvenience to others and mapping out a meaningful, structured response are core leadership skills.

Robin Betts, Clinical Service Manager, East London NHS Foundation Trust

Clinical skills: Depending on their work setting there is a range of specific clinical skills that nurses may need to develop on. For example:

- health facilitation and clinical assessment
- functional analysis
- positive behavior support
- crisis management and risk Assessment
- adapted mental state examination
- intensive interaction
- gentle teaching skills development

Karina Marshall-Tate, Consultant Nurse Learning Disabilities South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust

8.8 Access to Leadership Networks

To support learning disability nurses' opportunities and encouragement should be given to develop these capabilities with support in preparation for their progression to a more senior role. This can be done by identifying areas for continued professional development, giving your nurses access to coaching and mentorship and encourage them to access the Learning Disability Nursing Forums in London.

There are several forums for learning disability nurses in London including: community nurse forum, acute liaison nurse network and a learning disability nurse leadership network, to find out more about the forums, including how to access the forums please contact the NHS England, London, Learning Disability, Autism and SEND team england.ldateamlondon@nhs.net.

The [National Learning Disability Nursing Forum](#) has all the latest information and serves as a communication resource developed to support learning disability nurses everywhere; as well as those interested in pursuing a career in this unique and highly rewarding branch of nursing

9. Leadership Resources

Leadership development for learning disability nurses is a critical focus across health and social care organisations, as they hold a niche and specialised set of skills and have a deep understanding of the social and healthcare barriers faced by those they serve. To meet these challenges effectively, leadership development tailored specifically to learning disability nursing is essential.

Learning disability nursing roles require strong leadership skills, including empathy, resilience, advanced communication, and strategic thinking. Depending on the environment, their leadership also involves advocating for system-level changes, reducing stigma, and influencing policies that can improve care quality and accessibility for those with learning disabilities. Building these skills requires targeted leadership development programs that align with the specific demands of the field.

9.1 NHS Leadership Academy

The NHS Leadership Academy offers a range of programs tailored to different levels of leadership within healthcare. The main landing website includes a practical checklist that guides users to a customised selection of recommended programs and bite-sized learning materials based on specific leadership development areas.

Accredited leadership programmes are available for learning disability nurses working at all levels, this includes foundational courses for first-time leaders (Edward Jenner), programs for emerging and mid-level leaders (Mary Seacole, Rosalind Franklin), and advanced leadership tracks for senior leaders (Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, Nye Bevan).

In particular the [Edward Jenner Programme](#) can be customised for learning disability nurses. These programs help develop critical skills in areas such as self-awareness, team leadership, and healthcare advocacy, setting up a structured pathway for nurses who wish to pursue leadership without moving away from the clinical aspects of their role.

The NHS Leadership Academy also have access to various of forums and inclusivity-focused courses. These include:

- Coaching and Mentoring
- Career Resource Portal
- Bitesize learning materials
- E-Learning for Healthcare Management and Leadership Skills programme
- Leadership tools such as healthcare leadership model (hlm) self-assessment tool and 360 Degree Feedback Tool, Action Learning Sets and information how to set up a community of practice network

For more information, please visit the [NHS Leadership Academy](#).

9.2 Foundations of Nursing Studies (FoNS) Learning Disability Aspiring Leaders Fellowship

Organisations such as the FoNS have developed initiatives specifically for learning disability nurses. This is an exciting development opportunity for aspiring leaders and early career frontline registered learning disability nurses. Structured around the FoNS Creating Caring Cultures model this programme supports participants to begin their leadership journey by creating opportunities and space for reflection, discovery and learning.

The programme equips participants with the skills and confidence to develop into the facilitative leaders of the future. It includes mentorship and coaching support at a local and regional/national level as well as personal development planning and enables participants to realise their leadership aspirations and develop leadership capacity within organisations.

For more information about this program and other available options, please visit the [FoNS Learning Disability Aspiring Leaders Fellowship Page](#)

9.3 Reflective Case Study: My journey to a Consultant Learning Disability Nurse

Beginnings in Healthcare

I've been a Registered Learning Disability Nurse since 2011, but my journey began earlier, as I started my career in 2003 as a healthcare assistant. This foundational experience was invaluable, helping me know what to expect when I later entered the nursing profession. Originally, I had studied art at college and worked as a healthcare assistant in the evenings and on weekends, supporting residents in their daily lives. I soon realized I looked forward to my healthcare shifts more than college, so I decided to make healthcare my full-time focus. My experiences in the community showed me the positive impact learning disability nurses could have, and I knew this was my path.

Entering the Nursing Profession

To pursue nursing, I completed an NVQ in Care, which, combined with my healthcare assistant experience, qualified me to enter a nursing program. I was thrilled to study nursing at university and looked forward to the flexibility the profession offered. After qualifying, I gained experience in respite and brain injury services in Yorkshire, then moved to London to explore new opportunities. I've worked in various roles and settings, from community to inpatient and acute liaison services. I always advise colleagues to embrace new experiences, as each role offers valuable insights into the diverse needs of people with learning disabilities and the systems that support them.

Advancing Through Diverse Roles

Learning disability nursing has opened doors to many senior roles, including safeguarding and working within a university's nursing department. I also earned a master's degree, expanding my skills and perspectives in supporting individuals with learning disabilities. With such variety in roles within the field, it can be challenging to choose a specific path, but my current role as a consultant nurse allows me to blend clinical practice with strategic leadership. This hybrid approach

keeps me connected with patients while allowing me to make broader changes within the system.

Embracing Leadership and Community

Building relationships with both service users and colleagues is central to my role, underscoring the importance of a strong community of practice. In my work, I actively support colleagues' development through shared learning, supervision, and professional networks. This collaborative approach lets me think creatively to engage people with learning disabilities, helping us work together to achieve meaningful change for a wider audience.

Tim Buck, Consultant Nurse, East London NHS Foundation Trust

10. Summary

By embedding these resources into your team's culture and operations, you can actively support the recruitment, development, and retention of learning disability nurses. Your leadership and commitment to fostering professional growth will help create a thriving workforce, driving meaningful change in the field of learning disability nursing.

11. Acknowledgements

11.1 Second Edition (2025)

This second edition was developed following the same methodological process but with a focus group to provide insights and feedback to the authors, ensuring the guidebook remains current and based on target audience.

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11.2 First edition (2021)

The first edition was developed by a registered senior learning disability nurse using the CapitalNurse methodology process; involving extensive stakeholder engagement exercises to develop and ratify content. These are as followed

- Carol Blues, Surrey and Borders NHS Trust

- Mark Bradley, Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust
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- Ruwani Trabelsi, South London and Maudsley NHS Trust

12. Appendices

12.1 Appendix A: Myth Busting Learning Disability Nursing

Myth: Learning disability nursing doesn't pay well:

The current starting salary for newly registered learning disability nurses working in the NHS at band 5 at the time of writing is just over £34K in outer London and nearly £36K in inner London. There are many opportunities in London to progress into more senior roles as your career develops and your salary increases as you progress into higher banded roles in line with the Agenda for Change PayScale. This PayScale is set annually by the Department of Health and Social Care, therefore please refer to the latest guidance. ¹ [Pay scales for 2024/25 | NHS Employers](#)

Myth: I'll get into debt:

Lots of people worry about whether university is affordable, but it is important to know that you don't have to pay money upfront and the amount you eventually pay back will depend on how much you earn. In this respect, loan repayment is more like a tax than a commercial loan.

You will repay 9% of any income you earn each year above £25,000. If your income drops below £25,000 or you take a break from work, you will not pay back the loan again until you are again earning over the threshold amount.

Loans are paid back automatically out of your pay packet, so you don't have to worry about missing repayments. The loan gets written off 30 years after you become eligible to repay, so if you are a mature student there is a fair chance that you will never have to repay the full amount <https://thefundingclinic.org.uk/undergraduate/>

Money Saving Expert Martin Lewis has published some good advice on student loans which explains the system well:
www.moneysavingexpert.com/students/student-loans-tuition-fees-changes.

You may also wish to refer to individual university websites for details of university student support services.

Student Minds is a student mental health charity, and their website provides resources to learn and talk about the cost-of-living crisis and its impact on student mental health: <https://www.studentminds.org.uk/cost-of-living.html>

In addition, the UK Government website has information for students about what living cost funding is available (including student finance for 2024 to 2025 and 2023 to 2024) for those living in England: [Understanding student living costs - GOV.UK](#)

Myth: I'm not eligible for a loan because I already have a degree:

Most students cannot take out a second student loan, but the Government has made a special exception for healthcare students. If you already have a degree, you can take out a second loan on the same terms as other students.

The same basic repayment arrangement will apply even when you have two loans so you will not pay back more than 9% of your income over £25,000. The repayment amount is simply split proportionally according to the outstanding balance of each loan. Again, any remaining loan amount will be written off after 30 years.

More detailed information can be found at: [Understanding student living costs - GOV.UK](#)

If you already have a degree you may be able to qualify as a healthcare professional through a fast-track postgraduate degree route [Undergraduate university-based degree routes – The Funding Clinic](#)

In addition, in December 2019 the government introduced a non-repayable payment of £5,000 per year for all nursing students from September 2020. Those studying learning disability nursing will receive an additional £1,000 and additional funding will be available in some circumstances. Further details on who can access the support can be found at: [Training Grant | NHSBSA](#)

CapitalNurse has also developed a helpful Cost of Living Guide aimed for nurses, midwives and AHPs in London and has a one stop shop for advice and support in relation to the rising costs. You can download this cost-of-living guide by visiting the [CapitalNurse FutureNHS Platform](#)

Myth: There are not enough jobs for learning disability nurses:

Learning disability nurses began in large hospital settings of the early 20th century, as the health and social care sector has evolved so has learning disability nursing. We know that there is a shift in learning disability nurses working in health-based settings due to the move to more community provision, however, it is not known if

the numbers of learning disability nurses working in social care settings have increased in line with this. Positively, new roles are developing such as the acute learning disability nursing roles, which now exist within most acute hospitals across London. Learning disability nursing is the smallest field of the four fields of nursing in the UK, which can lead to the role being misunderstood, and under-valued.

However, learning disability nurses are a valuable part of the NHS workforce, we know about the health inequalities faced by people with a learning disability through the Learning from Lives and Deaths programme (LeDeR),¹⁰ and that between 25 and 40% of people with a learning disability also experience mental health problems¹¹.

Evidence in LeDeR reviews shows us that learning disability nurses play a pivotal role in promoting the health and wellbeing of people with a learning disability supporting equity in access to health and social care upholding their human rights, and that learning disability nurses improves people's outcomes and experience. People with a learning disability are living longer, presenting with more complex health needs, the knowledge and skills of learning disability nurses are needed more than ever.

12.2 Appendix B: Promoting Learning Disability Nursing

CapitalNurse Learning Disability Nursing

[Our work | NHS England | Workforce, training and education](#)

International recruitment information on becoming a learning disability nurse in the UK:

[Learning disability nurse | London City Hall](#)

RCN - website (stories)

- [Becoming a learning disability nurse | Learning Disability Nursing Forum | Royal College of Nursing](#)
- [Become a nurse | Royal College of Nurse | Royal College of Nursing](#)

¹⁰ [LeDeR - Home](#)

¹¹ [People with learning disabilities: statistics | Mental Health Foundation](#)

- [Careers in Learning Disability Nursing](#) 

Information on student loans

[The Funding Clinic – Funding information for studying nursing, midwifery and the allied health professions](#)

Nursing and Midwifery Ambassadors

- [We are the NHS | Local and international recruitment | Campaigns | Campaign Resource Centre](#)
- [FutureNHS Collaboration Platform - FutureNHS Collaboration Platform](#) (login required)

Inspiring futures (NHS England)

- [Volunteers - Inspiring The Future](#) (login required)

12.3 Appendix D: Accessing the Learning Disability Distant Learning OSCE and Pastoral Programme

To access the essential materials, follow these simple steps:

1. Create an Account with the Learning Hub:
 - Go to the Learning Hub website: learninghub.nhs.uk
 - Click on the "Sign Up" or "Create an Account" button.
 - Fill in your details, including your NHS email address and a secure password.
 - Verify your email address to activate your account.
2. Search for Learning Disability OSCE:
 - Once your account is activated, log in to the Learning Hub.
 - Use the search bar at the top of the page.
 - Type "Learning Disability OSCE" or "Learning Disability Distance Learning Programme" into the search bar and press Enter.
 - Browse through the search results to find the specific Learning Disability OSCE programme.

3. Download the OSCE Workbook:

- After locating the Learning Disability OSCE programme, navigate to the resources section.
- Look for the OSCE Workbook or related study materials.
- Click on the download button next to the workbook to save it to your device.

Ensure you have the necessary software (such as Adobe Acrobat Reader) to open and study the downloaded workbook.

Important Note

This resource is based on information available from the NMC at the time of its publication. It is the shared responsibility of the Trust and IENs to stay updated with the latest resources and guidelines to ensure the best possible preparation for the OSCE. Contact: NurseEducationTeam@slam.nhs.uk

12.4 Appendix E: Capability Mapping and Self-Assessment Tool

	Band 5/Newly Registered Nurse	Date	Band 6/ Approx. 1-2 years post registering	Date	Band 7/ Approx. 2-4 years post registering	Date
Core	Communicates verbally and in writing with colleagues and service users and their families about their own work		Communicates complex and sensitive information and liaises with external stakeholders		Presents ideas with clarity and in a persuasive and influential style to multiple stakeholders	
Clinical Practice	Assesses, plans, delivers, records and evaluates nursing care and risk assessment strategies		Provides quality nursing care that is responsive to service users' needs, without close supervision		Uses specialist assessment tools and develops nursing complex integrated care plans	
	Has an awareness of core clinical nursing skills and approaches and applies them appropriately within planned care		Able to select the correct clinical nursing skills and approaches and incorporate them in to planned care		Able to provide specialist advice and support to others using clinical skills and approaches in complex situations	
	Supports therapeutic and recreational groups, activities, initiatives and projects		Facilitates or leads therapeutic and recreational groups and activities, and projects		Co-ordinates therapeutic and recreational groups and activities, and projects	



CapitalNurse our Learning Disability Nursing Workforce: A pan London good practice resource

	Participates in service user meetings i.e. Care (Education) and Treatment Reviews/ Care Programme Approach/ Continuing Health Care		Represents service user at meetings i.e. Care (Education) and Treatment Reviews/ Care Programme Approach/ or lead on Continuing Health Care assessments		Acts as duty senior/clinical lead i.e. managing referrals rota, coordinates Continuing Health Care assessments	
	Has an awareness of safeguarding processes for adults and children and reports concerns or incidents using appropriate systems		Supports others to follow safeguarding processes for adults and children and report concerns or incidents		Acts as safeguarding investigator / enquiry officer and handles health and safety incident reports, complaints and Learning Disabilities Mortality Review (LeDeR) review completion	