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PARTNERING FOR WELLBEING AND ENABLING RECOVERY

Annex 3: Mental Health Nursing Staff Survey Report



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1.0 Introduction

In 2025, the Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council (NIPEC) undertook a regional review of mental health nursing with the objective of informing the development of a new Mental Health Nursing Model for Northern Ireland. A key component of this review involved capturing the views and experiences of mental health nurses across a range of practice settings to better understand the realities of contemporary practice and identify priorities for future service development.

Central to this work was the recognition that mental health nurses are uniquely positioned to provide valuable insight into the strengths, challenges, and opportunities within current service provision. Their experience of delivering care across diverse environments offers a critical understanding of service demands, workforce pressures, professional development requirements, and the evolving needs of individuals, families, and communities accessing mental health services. Mental health nurses represent a critical component of the health system, holding unique experiential knowledge of clinical practice, service pressures, and patient needs.

2.0 Background and Purpose

The review was undertaken to explore mental health nurses' perspectives on the realities of contemporary practice, the workforce supports required to sustain and develop the profession, and priorities for the future delivery of mental health care. By capturing the collective knowledge and experience of mental health nursing staff, the review provides a robust evidence base to inform the development of a sustainable, person-centred, and future-focused Mental Health Nursing Model capable of responding to both current and emerging population health needs.

To support this objective, the regional survey was designed to engage mental health nursing staff working across a diverse range of settings, including; primary care, hospital, community, specialist services, and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), adult and older peoples' mental health services. The findings contribute to the co-production of recommendations that reflect the priorities, challenges, and aspirations of the profession, while informing the strategic direction of mental health nursing in Northern Ireland.

Meaningful engagement with the workforce is fundamental to the development of an effective and evidence-informed care model. Mental health nurses possess unique experiential knowledge regarding the factors that facilitate high-quality care, the barriers that impede service delivery, and the changes required to improve outcomes for service users. Consequently, the survey findings provide a critical insight into the operational realities of mental health nursing practice and helps to identify areas



requiring strategic attention. These include workforce pressures associated with resource limitations, high workload, increasing clinical complexity, and rising service demand; workforce development priorities such as psychological therapies, neurodiversity, leadership, pharmacology, and physical health; barriers to continuing professional development; and the role of technology, prevention, early intervention, and inter-agency collaboration within future service models.

The survey explored key domains:

- Workload and wellbeing;
- Understand workforce pressures and operational challenges;
- Identify priority areas for professional development;
- Barriers to Continuous Professional Development (CPD);
- Perspectives on digital innovation and service delivery; and
- Design and implementation of a new Mental Health Nursing Model.

3.0 Methodology

A survey instrument (Appendix 1) was developed through consultation with an expert panel comprising of senior nurses and academic professionals. This collaborative approach ensured the questionnaire was relevant, comprehensive, and addressed key areas pertinent to contemporary clinical practice. The Mental Health Nursing Staff Survey was undertaken between June 2025 and September 2025.

The survey consisted of a structured 15-item questionnaire, incorporating a combination of Likert scale responses, multiple choice questions and free text comments. The questionnaire was administered electronically using Microsoft Forms, facilitating efficient data collection, while maintaining anonymous participation. The survey was distributed to all mental health nursing cohorts, across a range of settings and promoted through relevant social media platforms to maximise participation and engagement.

This mixed-methods approach enabled quantitative statistical data to be captured, analysed descriptively, while qualitative free text responses were reviewed thematically to identify recurring patterns, strengths, and areas for development.

4.0 Response Profile

A total of 333 mental health nursing staff responded to the survey, representing a diverse range of practice settings across the lifespan (n=333). Based on sample size calculations undertaken by an academic statistician, this level of response meets the requirements for a statistically representative sample of the target population.

Consequently, the findings may be considered generalisable to the wider mental health nursing workforce, within the limitations of the study.

5.0 Survey Thematic Findings

The Mental Health Nursing Staff Survey findings were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's¹ 6-phase model of thematic analysis. This method is used in identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning and themes within qualitative data. According to Braun and Clarke (2021)² this offers a flexible, step by step approach which allows an exploration of respondents' experiences, while emphasising transparency, reflexivity and theoretical clarity.

The analysis revealed a number of interconnected themes that collectively illuminate the complexities of contemporary mental health nursing practice and the challenges facing the workforce. These themes extend beyond discrete operational issues, highlighting the dynamic relationship between workforce capacity, organisational culture, professional development, service demand, and care delivery.

- **Theme 1: Workforce sustainability and staff wellbeing** emerged as the most dominant theme indicating workload and wellbeing are under significant strain with respondents reporting substantial workload pressures, staffing shortages, increasing clinical complexity, and risks to workforce retention. These factors were associated with personal stress, feelings of burnout, which in turn raised concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of service delivery.
- **Theme 2: Leadership, culture, and organisational support** were identified as key determinants of mental health nursing staff experience. Participants highlighted the importance of having visible and supportive leadership, effective communication, protected time for clinical supervision and reflective practice opportunities, and strengthening organisational cultures that value and support staff wellbeing.
- **Theme 3: Enhanced workforce development and professional learning** emerged as a significant priority for respondents. Participants demonstrated a strong commitment to advancing their knowledge, skills, and professional practice; however, access to education and continuing professional development (CPD) was frequently reported as constrained by competing

¹ Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021) *One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive)thematic analysis?* Qualitative Research in Psychology, 18(3), pp. 328-352.

² Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021) *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. London: Sage.



service demands. Key barriers included workload pressures, staffing shortages, limited protected learning time, funding constraints, and perceived inequities in access to development opportunities. Workforce development is recognised as a critical enabler of service improvement; however, achieving this requires sustained organisational commitment to protected learning time, and alignment between educational provision, workforce priorities, and population mental health needs.

- **Theme 4: service capacity, delivery, and innovation** highlighted the demand for mental health services was described as exceeding service capacity, driving reactive rather than preventative care and contributing to service fragmentation, long waiting times, and reduced access to therapeutic interventions. While digital technologies were recognised as offering opportunities to enhance efficiency, accessibility, and clinical decision-making, participants emphasised the need to ensure that technological innovation complements rather than compromises therapeutic relationships and person-centred care.

The findings suggest that many of the pressures experienced by mental health nursing staff are systemic in nature and require strategic, integrated responses to support workforce sustainability and enable the delivery of effective, person-centred mental health trauma-informed care. There is a strong commitment among mental health nurses to ongoing professional development and service improvement. However, organisational and operational constraints and barriers have significant implications for workforce sustainability, succession planning, and the capacity of services to respond effectively to increasingly complex mental health needs.

Respondents identified several priority areas for development, including psychological therapies, neurodiversity, leadership, pharmacology, physical health, and public mental health. These priorities closely reflect evolving population health needs and contemporary service demands, emphasising the importance of strategically aligned workforce development. Expanding access to equitable and protected learning opportunities will be critical to enhancing workforce capability, supporting career progression, and ensuring the profession remains equipped to meet future challenges.

Participants also articulated a clear vision for a future model of care founded on prevention, early intervention, integration, and recovery-oriented practice. There was strong support for approaches that promote public mental health, strengthen community and interagency partnerships, and address the wider social determinants of mental health. Collectively, these perspectives reflect a desire to move beyond reactive models of care towards more preventative, person-centred, and population-based approaches.

6.0 Summary of Key Findings and Areas for Development

In summary, the survey findings indicate that the future development of mental health nursing in Northern Ireland should be underpinned by a whole-system approach that recognises the interdependence of workforce wellbeing, effective leadership, professional development, service capacity, digital innovation, and preventative models of care. Participants emphasised the importance of early intervention across educational settings, community services, and primary care, supported by targeted public health messaging and initiatives aimed at reducing stigma. There was strong support for the expansion of psychoeducational programmes, parenting support initiatives, trauma-informed approaches, and interventions that address lifestyle factors, physical health, and the wider social determinants of mental wellbeing. Respondents also highlighted the value of assertive outreach models in preventing clinical deterioration, reducing avoidable admissions, and promoting continuity of care.

Staff Survey key messages are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Staff Survey Key Messages and Opportunities for Development

Staff Survey Key Messages and Opportunities for Development
Increased workload pressures.
Reduced workforce capacity.
Increased acuity and complexity of clinical presentations.
Challenges with providing therapeutic clinical care interventions.
A need for enhanced training and professional development, particularly in psychological therapies, therapeutic modalities and neurodivergence.

7.0 Conclusion

The Staff Survey provides clear insights into the priorities and experiences of the mental health nursing workforce across Northern Ireland, highlighting both the key challenges and the most significant opportunities for advancing the mental health nursing profession. Responding to these priorities provides an opportunity to strengthen workforce resilience, enhance the quality and accessibility of mental health services and support the delivery of safe, effective person-centred care. This



highlights the importance of sustained investment in the workforce to support workforce sustainability, leadership, education, professional support and service innovation to ensure nurses are equipped to meet changing population mental health needs.

Overall, the findings provide a strong foundation for a coordinated, system wide action to support a skilled, valued and future-ready mental health nursing workforce and to strengthen the outcomes for communities and the people it serves.

Mental Health Staff Survey Questionnaire 2025
Q 1. What is your NMC Registration?
Q 2. What is your highest level of education?
Q3. How many years of post-registration practice in mental health nursing have you acquired?
Q 4. Who is your current employer?
Q 5. What is your current practice setting?
Q6. What is your area of current practice e.g. primary care, hospital, community, specialist services?
Q7. Please rate the following statements?
○ I feel comfortable with my workload
○ My workload is manageable
○ I don't feel stressed due to the amount of work I have
○ I have enough time to complete my work
Q8. Do you agree that you have an opportunity to influence decisions and the direction of professional mental health nursing care/service development within your area of practice?
Q 9. What are the biggest challenges in your workload?
Q10. Thinking about the people you care for, how is your current practice supported by evidence-based learning and development?
Q 11. In which of the following areas do you feel you would benefit from further training or development?
Q 12. What are the main obstacles, if any, preventing you from engaging in professional development activities?
Q 13. How do you see technology impacting on the future of mental health nursing?
Q 14. What strategies could be implemented to promote preventative mental healthcare within your practice setting?
Q15. What do you consider are the priority elements of a future, evidence-based mental health nursing model?



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