

MID CHESHIRE HOSPITALS NHS FOUNDATION TRUST

REGISTERED NURSE DEGREE APPRENTICESHIP (RNDA) CASE STUDY

Mid Cheshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (MCHFT) manages Leighton Hospital in Crewe, Victoria Infirmary in Northwich, and Elmhurst Intermediate Care Centre in Winsford. It employs more than 4,500 members of staff, has around 540 hospital beds, and provides a range of services including A&E, maternity, outpatients, therapies, and children's health. The Trust is also part of Central Cheshire Integrated Care Partnership (CCICP), a local health partnership that provides a range of community health services for people across South Cheshire and Vale Royal.

Choosing the RNDA programme

Our journey to creating a Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship programme started with a significant piece of work analysing workforce trends and developing forecasts, particularly in nursing. This required close collaboration between the HR workforce team and Finance to interrogate the data effectively and develop five-year projections regarding new recruits, staff retiring, attrition, and bank and agency spend. This analysis enabled us to understand the current position of the Trust and the most likely five-year forward positions. Understanding our data, regional workforce trends and what is happening in terms of staff movement was very important as a starting point.

What we did next

Through the workforce analysis we found that, registered nurse recruitment was lagging behind retirees and leavers by an average of 20 WTEs per year. This gap was widening year on year, to retain a steady state, the Trust would need to recruit an extra 20 RNs per year. However this leavers data included staff who were gaining promotions and although leaving their current role, were staying within the organisation and developing their careers which is a very positive picture for us.

The data created the driver for the Trust to develop options to recruit an extra 20 Registered Nurses every year for at least the next three years. One obvious possibility was apprenticeships. Our Trust has been very supportive of apprenticeships from the beginning. We knew that our location outside a university town would mean we would need to find a way to 'grow our own' future workforce. We currently have staff undertaking a wide range of apprenticeships including finance, radiography, leadership and business admin among many others. We agreed that the Registered Nurse Degree apprenticeship should be investigated in detail, which resulted in engagement with HEIs to consider what programmes were available and ready to use. Keele University had a three-year full-time programme which had received NMC approval and was ready to go.

However, the finances needed to be worked through in depth. Apprenticeships are an expensive option for the Trust; candidates would be employed for three years to do a job that they are not yet qualified to do, so the challenge became how to gain buy in from the Trust and Trust board for apprenticeships being a viable investment opportunity.

“The trust board have been very supportive of this scheme for a variety of reasons. The first is the importance of using this educational route to enable people to qualify and join the organisation and secondly our strategy to grow our own future workforce.”

- Julie Tunney, Director of Nursing and Quality

A business case was developed which included the workforce data, forward planning scenarios and projections including bank and agency spend. It was important to demonstrate how the five-year cost to the Trust could ensure the Registered Nurse workforce gap was plugged and allowed the ‘bigger picture’ to be highlighted; the cost of bridging the workforce gap vs the cost to train Registered Nurse Degree Apprentices. Essentially, investing in the Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship saved money in the long run and opened a new route for existing staff and school leavers to begin their careers in nursing. It also provided us with a future nursing workforce supply, taken from our local population.

Within the business case development process, other options were considered and analysed. However, we agreed apprenticeships offered the best option available to effectively bridge the workforce gap and reduce bank and agency spend, which remains costly and potentially unsustainable.

Advice for others

It is vital that decision makers have the longer-term vision and belief in the talent and potential of their workforce; our business case demonstrated that returns on the investment would take around six years to kick in. This required the board to focus on the five to ten-year timescale. The most influential and useful allies included the Head of Finance, who helped with the cost calculations and projections which were required and the Heads of Nursing who would support the apprentices throughout their training. Colleagues in workforce were also vital contributors to the development of the business case as they were able to bring ESR data and analysis in terms of recruitment and attrition trends and data. Operational data was also extremely useful; in identifying how many more patients were utilising Trust services year on year. This allowed projections regarding additional capacity required to manage the increased service demand which gave further support to the need for additional registered nurses. The financial and workforce data are what built the business case.

The organisation has a positive workplace culture; people who train with the Trust want to work here. Senior leaders at the Trust are very focused on and supportive of career development and have a long-term aim to make our Trust the best place to work. One of the benefits of the Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship is the great opportunity it gives to develop staff from various roles in the organisation. The Trust started with an offer of twenty places for the Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship in both the first and second year of the project. Both times, the Trust received more than 100 applications from internal staff as well as staff from outside of the organisation and school leavers from all over the country.

“It is fantastic that the Trust is able to offer such a great opportunity to our internal staff who aspire to be nurses and also to attract so many external candidates from the local area. My ambition is for Mid Cheshire Hospitals to have a self-sustaining supply of registered nurses, who are supported and engaged throughout their studies, and who want to come and work for us as the best place to work.”

- Heather Barnett, Director of Workforce and OD

Challenges

The Trust took the decision to pay the apprenticeship minimum wage, with the promise of a permanent position once they had completed their apprenticeship and were registered with the NMC. The workforce planning undertaken identified future vacancies which enabled the Trust to confidently offer permanent roles to those completing the Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship in the future. All apprentices were also eligible to join the Trust bank from day one so that they could earn additional money and also gain further experience; all the apprentices did join the Bank and have been able to focus their bank work in areas where they were keen to gain further experience.

There is inevitably challenge to this type of project and the Board, of course, has a duty to fully interrogate any new plan to ensure it will achieve a positive outcome and is financially viable. Ultimately Trusts must balance the books. We found no resistance in terms of people liking the idea and the Trust Board agreed the concept in principle very quickly. However, the finances had to work and the cost be justified and there was concern about how to make it work financially. The great thing about the funding offer recently released from Health Education England (HEE) is that this conversation just got significantly easier as a chunk of the cost can be supported by HEE.

Plans going forward

We are on-boarding our second cohort at present for October 2020 induction and these candidates are looking forward to becoming Registered Nurses in summer 2023. It is exciting to watch them grow and develop into the next generation of Ward Managers, Matrons and maybe even Directors of Nursing. We are hugely proud of our apprentices, they are already part of the Mid Cheshire Hospitals story and will be writing the next chapter very soon.



Mid Cheshire Hospitals RNDAs in Uniform with the academic team from Keele

Mid Cheshire Hospitals RNDAs on the first day of induction with the Director of Workforce and OD, the Director of Nursing and Quality and the Practice Education Team.

