

Growing Wales' rural health and care workforce: Spotlighting Powys' Workforce Futures programme

Overview

Workforce pressures are among the biggest challenges facing the NHS and social care sector, and they are felt particularly acutely in rural communities. Limited transport infrastructure, a shortage of local training pathways, and other structural barriers can make a career in health and care feel out of reach for many people living in these areas. Yet this challenge also represents a significant opportunity: roles across the NHS and social care offer stable employment that can strengthen local economies and help address the entrenched inequalities rural communities so often face.

This case study explores how partners in Powys - the most sparsely populated county in Wales - have come together to tackle this challenge and realise the full potential of the NHS and social care sector as vital anchor institutions in rural settings.

Background and challenges

Like many rural areas, Powys faces significant workforce planning challenges linked to its geography. The region covers a large geographic area with dispersed populations and multiple community hospitals, all of which must be supported by a relatively small workforce.

These challenges are compounded by:

- Poor public transport infrastructure
- A limited local supply of qualified professionals
- An ageing population
- The absence of a university within the county

As a result, Powys experiences persistent workforce shortages across several key professions, including social care workers (particularly in children's services), doctors and medical staff, nursing and domiciliary care roles. Many services rely heavily on agency staff, which is not sustainable in the long term.

Additionally, a significant proportion of the current workforce is approaching retirement age. While this does not fully determine future workforce levels, it presents a clear risk to service continuity.

In response, local partners recognised a need to design a workforce model to address this; one that is sustainable, place-based, rooted in the evidence on which interventions are most effective within rural communities.

Strategic context

The Health and Care Strategy for Powys (A Healthy, Caring Powys 2017–27) was the first integrated regional health and care strategy in Wales. Developed collaboratively with local communities, it promotes a holistic, system-wide approach to meeting health and care needs through stronger partnership working.

The strategy sets out a clear ambition:

To develop Powys as a region that offers exemplary health and care in a rural setting, delivered by an engaged and valued workforce working seamlessly across organisational boundaries.

The Workforce Futures Programme is a partnership initiative between Powys Teaching Health Board, Powys County Council, and the Powys Association of Voluntary Organisations. It acts as a key enabler of the regional Health and Care strategy, focusing on building a sustainable workforce that can meet current and future needs.

A core part of this programme has been The Academy Career and Education Enterprise scheme (ACEES). Designed and delivered through the Health, Care and Social Care Academy, the scheme aims to introduce school-aged children to the wide range of careers available within health and social care, particularly within the NHS.

Programme development and approach

The ACEES programme aligns closely with the broader Building a Future Workforce strategy by focusing on early intervention, education, and local talent development.

The Pilot Phase

The programme began with a pilot in a sixth form setting, designed to complement existing Year 12 and Year 13 curricula. Its purpose was to enrich students' learning by connecting academic study with real-world health and care careers.

A key objective was to address outward migration among young people. With no district general hospital or university in Powys, many young people leave the area for education and do not return. The pilot aimed to demonstrate viable and rewarding local career pathways.

Findings from the pilot showed that:

- Students retained knowledge more effectively through practical, hands-on learning experiences
- Engagement with a range of professionals improved understanding of the breadth of roles available
- Awareness increased not just of traditional roles (e.g. doctors and nurses), but of the hundreds of alternative career pathways within the sector

The Whole-School approach

Building on the success of the pilot, ACEES has since expanded across Powys, using a whole-school model targeting students aged 11–18.

This approach focuses on:

- Raising awareness of health and social care careers early
- Showcasing diverse entry routes, including apprenticeships
- Embedding consistent engagement across multiple year groups

Students are introduced to the fact that there are over 450 roles within health and social care, helping to broaden aspirations and challenge stereotypes.

Enhanced programme

In addition to the whole-school model, the ACEES programme developed an enhanced programme for post-16 learners studying for a health, medical science or social care qualifications

The intention was to spend time with smaller groups to try and hook them into local health and social care sector careers. These sessions were delivered in schools during February and March and included a simulation experience, taught sessions, practical skills and training on how to become a dementia friend. Focussed Careers Festivals held during the same period were also positively received by learners and teachers to enable learners to have contact with a range of health and social care professionals.

Impact

This blended whole school, and immersive approach enabled the scheme to increase engagement to over 5,750 learners between October 2024 and April 2025.

Key findings in the evaluation included:

- 25% of learners attending the whole school approach (phases 1-4) were interested in finding out about a career in health and social care.
- 33% of students answered they would be likely to choose health care and social care related subjects or qualifications.
- 56% were likely to be interested in going into a career in health and social care and this is more than double from last year showing a year-on-year increase in interest in the health and social care sector.

Key learnings

1. Partnership working

A major strength of ACEES is its cross-sector collaboration. Partnerships between health services, local government, education providers, and the voluntary sector enable:

- Coordinated delivery across schools and communities
- Alignment between education pathways and workforce needs
- Efficient use of shared resources and expertise

This ensures workforce development is embedded across the system rather than delivered in isolation.

2. Early engagement is critical

Engaging young people before key career decisions are made helps to:

- Challenge perceptions of health and care roles
- Increase awareness of local opportunities
- Build confidence and aspiration

A whole-school approach ensures sustained engagement over time.

3. Place-based approaches improve retention

Focusing on individuals with existing connections to the area supports long-term workforce sustainability. Retention in rural areas is closely linked not just to skills, but to people's sense of belonging and connection to place.

4. Experiential learning adds value

Hands-on experiences and direct interaction with professionals:

- Improve knowledge retention
- Make career pathways more tangible
- Increase engagement and motivation

5. Rural-specific learning

Delivering the programme in a rural context has highlighted several unique insights:

- Local identity matters: Young people are more likely to stay if they can see meaningful careers within their own communities
- Access barriers require innovation: Limited transport and dispersed populations mean delivery must be flexible and locally adapted
- Visibility of opportunity is crucial: Many students are unaware of the scale and diversity of roles available locally

Looking ahead

The ACEES programme demonstrates a scalable and transferable model for rural workforce development.

As it continues to evolve, there are opportunities to:

- Embed the programme across all schools in Powys
- Strengthen partnerships with higher education and training providers beyond the region
- Evaluate long-term impacts on recruitment, retention, and workforce sustainability

More broadly, ACEES offers valuable insights for other rural regions facing similar workforce challenges. It highlights the importance of locally driven, system-wide approaches that invest in communities and build workforce capacity from within.

As the first programme of its kind in Wales to operate at this scale and breadth, ACEES is being shared as a model of best practice across national and regional forums, including the Rural Health Conference, Regional Skills Partnership, and Social Care Wales Workforce Development Programme.

By developing its own talent pipeline, Powys is not only addressing immediate workforce pressures but also building a resilient, future-ready health and care system.