

Leading with Compassion: Preparing NHS Apprentices for the Real Work of Leadership

Tammie Harwin

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We often say that leadership is caught, not taught — but in the NHS, both are true.

At this year's Council of Deans of Health Autumn Conference, compassionate leadership and how we teach it through education, practice, and example was a key thread running through the presentations and discussions. Leaders from health and higher education shared some inspiring ideas and their own experiences, but it feels clear that as clinical demand rises and funding reduces there are fewer chances for structured leadership development for our healthcare professionals. This gap means how we prepare apprentices for leadership, and the examples we set, matter more than ever.

Why Compassionate Leadership Matters

The Kings Fund (2025) blog '*Compassionate leadership and the 10 Year Health Plan*' explains that compassionate leadership is not simply about being nice. It means creating the kind of environment where people feel safe to speak up, try new ideas, and provide excellent care:

"A compassionate leader takes notice and is present with their colleagues, they listen carefully and take time to understand the issues at hand, they appreciate what it feels like for the other person, and they engage and take action to help address the issues. Basically, they care, and they show it appropriately. This requires courage – leaders must be willing to face difficult truths and engage with the actual and emotional realities of their teams"

Research from the King's Fund and others shows that compassion in leadership leads to better staff engagement, wellbeing, and retention — all crucial for the NHS to achieve its long-term goals. For example outside of the NHS a 2024 Chartered Management Institute report on *Leading with Empathy* found that organisations which actively develop compassionate leadership see up to 20% higher employee satisfaction and retention. **Bailey, S. & West, M. (2022)** tell us there is clear evidence that compassionate leadership results in more engaged and motivated staff with high levels of wellbeing, which in turn results in high-quality care. And a [recent systematic review](#) found that compassionate leadership behaviours correlate strongly with higher staff-wellbeing, reduced turnover and improved service quality, reinforcing the importance of embedding these behaviours in apprenticeships and leadership pathways. **NHS England's Leadership Competency Framework** also highlights empathy, listening and inclusion as core elements of effective healthcare leadership:

“Research tells us that inclusive and compassionate leadership helps create a psychologically safe workplace where staff are more likely to listen and support each other resulting in less bullying and better patient outcomes.”
— NHS England, “Creating a health and wellbeing culture” (2021)

The King's Fund notes in its analysis of the NHS 10-Year Health Plan that compassionate leadership is not just a nice addition; it is essential for the plan's success. The report argues that “moral injury will remain a chronic feature of the NHS landscape” unless compassion is treated as a core operating principle that underpins how staff are led, supported, and valued. The **Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper (2025)** extends this thinking to the wider skills system, stating that *“a culture of leadership within education and training that reflects the values of inclusion, empathy and adaptability — supporting adults to learn whilst in work.”*

All these aligning perspectives go to reinforce that compassion is not just morally right — it is a measurable performance factor, placed firmly within the national leadership and skills agenda and central to the success of any workforce strategy to build resilient, high-performing teams in both health and education.

What We Heard at the Conference

At the conference, **Sue Tranka**, *Chief Nursing Officer for Wales*, described transformational leadership as an act of care, with a focus on wellbeing, belonging, and inclusion as essential parts of the profession.

Beryl Mansell, *Student Leadership and Engagement Lead at Swansea University*, shared how embedding student voice and leadership from early stages of learning helps shape future professionals who lead with empathy and courage. She shared the success of Swansea's **Student Leadership Academy**, which builds on the **Council of Deans of Health's** national framework to provide students with training, coaching and mentoring from business and clinical leaders. The programme gives learners the confidence to practice leadership now, not wait for formal authority — “you can't always influence the leaders we have, but you can influence the leaders we're growing.”.

Paul Rees MBE, *Chief Executive and Registrar of the Nursing and Midwifery Council*, spoke at the conference about *“Building a New NMC”* and the organisation's ongoing Culture Transformation Plan, implemented following an independent review was launched in response to concerns about racism, discrimination and a fear of speaking up within the organisation — issues mirrored across parts of the NHS. The plan calls for stronger, values-based leadership and inclusive cultures that prioritise psychological safety. Compassionate leadership supports exactly that: creating environments where people feel heard, respected, and able to raise concerns without fear.

Leadership Development in a Changing Funding Landscape

The **NHS England Management and Leadership Development Plan (2025)** recognises the importance of sustained, structured investment in leadership at every level. It warns:

“Longer term, there is a risk to continuity of leadership and management development offers unless functions are sustained.”
— NHS England, 2025

That warning feels particularly relevant now, with the withdrawal of levy-funded Level 7 leadership apprenticeships for over 21's, programmes that once provided accessible, work-based routes for aspiring and current NHS leaders. This growing gap in structured funded development opportunities could lead to a significant

loss of continuity in leadership development, with potential impacts on recruitment, retention, and job satisfaction among emerging leaders and the wider workforce. Research conducted by the Social Market Foundation, in partnership with CMI, cites that over one in four NHS managers and leaders (27%) said senior leadership in their healthcare organisations was “ineffective” at ensuring their organisation was successful.

At the same time, the NHS 10-Year Health Plan sets out ambitious goals for leadership reform, calling for “*a culture where everyone feels empowered to lead, supported to learn, and accountable for improvement.*” That vision cannot be realised without accessible, funded routes for leadership development at every level.

This makes it even more important that compassionate leadership is intentionally woven into existing apprenticeship routes, but also modular learning, and short courses.

In addition to the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE), the White Paper signals the emergence of ‘apprenticeship units’ (funded via the new Apprenticeship and Skills Levy from April 2026) which potentially can become ‘stackable’ modules creating a new funded route for flexible, work-integrated training — offering apprentices and employers fresh and potentially more manageable pathways into leadership and skilled roles.

“Learners should be able to access shorter, stackable units and micro-credentials that build over time into higher qualifications.” (White Paper, p. 18)

While Universities are already moving to innovate and fill that space — doing this in a strategic way with their employer partners (as the White Paper urges the sector to do) will prove difficult while the implementation detail and sector focuses (where does Health fit?) are still vague at this late stage.

Where Apprenticeships Come In

UVAC’s focus is always on practice — how the programmes we design genuinely prepare people for the realities of the workplace and in this case working within the NHS. This fits with the King’s Fund’s view that leadership in the 10-Year Plan should be shared and part of everyday roles, not just reserved for senior positions or specific job titles — that principle sits at the heart of apprenticeship learning: leadership that is modelled, practised, and shared through work, not learned in isolation.

Apprenticeships, particularly at Levels 6 and 7, such as the Advanced Clinical Practitioner (ACP) and District Nurse routes, provide a unique opportunity to develop leadership through work-integrated practical learning. These pathways require learners to evidence capability across the four pillars of practice — clinical, education, research, and leadership. Compassion sits at the heart of that leadership pillar.

Through reflective supervision, coaching, and assessment, apprentices learn that leadership isn’t defined by job title - it’s defined by relationships. Educators can bring this to life through role-play scenarios that build empathy and confidence in handling real leadership challenges, reflective journaling that helps apprentices explore how compassion shapes their decisions and professional identity and integrating peer feedback that strengthens communication and reinforces a supportive learning culture. Similarly compassionate leadership is often assessed through reflective portfolios and supervisor feedback, giving apprentices structured opportunities to evidence growth and helping educators continually refine their approach.

Universities are also innovating to extend this learning beyond individual programmes. The Student Leadership Academy at Swansea University, for example, provides students inter-professional leadership coaching, mentoring from senior clinical and business leaders, and opportunities to collaborate across-disciplines. It shows how higher

education can nurture future NHS leaders early — long before they hold formal authority — giving them the skills, confidence and empathy to lead teams and influence change from day one.

Together, these initiatives show that education, regulation and practice are converging around the same goal - building a workforce led by empathy, openness and integrity. A sentiment reflected in the Skills White Paper:

"The culture of leadership within education and training must reflect the values of inclusion, empathy and adaptability — supporting adults to learn whilst in work." (White Paper, p. 33)

The UVAC Perspective: Sustaining Compassionate Leadership Through Innovation

UVAC's position is clear: apprenticeships are not just about skills — they're about culture.

They bridge education and employment, shaping how people lead and learn in practice.

At a time when traditional leadership development funding is constrained, work-based routes like the ACP and District Nurse apprenticeships, and modular learning supported by the LLE, and new flexible levy approach, can offer a sustainable way forward. So apprenticeships and flexible learning routes now carry a greater responsibility than ever — to grow not just skilled practitioners, but compassionate, courageous leaders.

Through careful curriculum planning and working with employer partners Universities can develop compassionate, reflective leaders who can navigate complexity and change while keeping people at the centre of care.

Partnership between universities, employers, and professional bodies is key. Across England, several institutions are already demonstrating what this looks like in practice.

Leeds Beckett University already embedded compassionate leadership as a key skill for their advanced clinicians. For example, their ACP Apprenticeship weaves leadership and professional reflection through every stage of the programme - learners are supported to explore leadership through compassion, collaboration and ethical practice with extensive workplace learning and supervision to support the application of these principles in real clinical contexts. On their District Nursing, Health Visiting and School Nursing apprenticeships they deliver a module where they ask students to consider their compassionate leadership skills. Here well-established change management theory is merged with the newer concepts of compassionate leadership in developing therapeutic relationships with both clients, families and staff within teams.

"We role model compassionate leadership through utilising expertise from employer partners and also the use of our lived experience expert. Together, we aim to teach and support our learners by fostering the essential skills for compassion within our module. As a recently practising clinician, I truly believe that compassion is at the very heart of optimum and fulfilling care delivery. Community nursing necessitates an approach which is honest and open and is built on self-awareness and emotional intelligence. I am extremely proud to deliver teaching which is co-produced, real, and promotes the very best of humanity."

- Louise Parker, Senior Lecturer District Nurse SPQ, Leeds Beckett University

Louise also shared the importance of ensuring the same behaviours are modeled in education – one District Nurse apprentice commented in their E-Portfolio *'I observed kindness and compassion from the university staff in the form of reassuring words and offers of help and support, the reassurance from university staff showed that similar to nurses, educators also aim to treat individuals with kindness, respect, and compassion, individuals benefit from an enthusiastic and inclusive role model. This made me feel proud to be an effective ambassador and positive influence on the nursing profession'*

By embedding leadership development into programme design, through mentorship, reflective assessment, compassionate supervision and applied projects, universities can ensure that every apprentice leaves not only qualified but also capable of leading with empathy and integrity. Using flexible programmes, micro-credentials and work-integrated learning, providers can embed leadership development within everyday professional practice. These models help sustain leadership capacity in the NHS while keeping education accessible for those unable to step away from work or self-fund traditional postgraduate routes. At a time when the NHS Leadership Plan warns of fragile continuity, apprenticeships and modular learning offer something rare: *stability and reach*.

Call to Action

Consider your healthcare curriculums - how well do they prepare our future NHS leaders?

What more can we do to embed work-integrated learning and authentic assessment that build the skills, empathy and confidence needed for compassionate leadership?

How can universities and employers collaborate more closely to create shared learning opportunities - from clinical placements to reflective coaching - that connect leadership theory to real-world care?

Could your organisation, like Swansea's Student Leadership Academy, explore a student or apprentice leadership programme supported by local NHS partners or employer sponsors to nurture leadership potential early?

With new opportunities emerging through apprenticeship levy flexibility and modular learning routes, providers and employers partners have the chance to rethink how leadership is grown and sustained across the system.

Compassionate leadership starts long before people reach senior roles. The question for all of us is how we make sure it starts - and thrives - in the way we teach, assess and work together.

For those interested here are my references and some further reading:

National Policy Frameworks

- **Department for Education (2025).** [Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper](#).
- **NHS England (2025).** NHS 10-Year Health Plan. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/10-year-health-plan-for-england-fit-for-the-future>
- **NHS England (2025).** [Management and Leadership Development Plan](#).
- **Wonkhe (2025).** [Apprenticeship Units and the Lifelong Learning Entitlement](#).

Research and Evidence on Compassionate Leadership

- **King's Fund (2025).** [Compassionate leadership and the 10-Year Health Plan: addressing moral injury](#).
- **King's Fund (2025).** [Clinical leadership and the 10-Year Health Plan](#).
- Ramachandran, S., Balasubramanian, S., James, W. F., & Masaed, T. A. (2023). [Whither compassionate leadership? A systematic review](#).

- BMJ Leader: [Leadership in the NHS, Roger Kline](#) and quoted from NHS England, "Creating a health and wellbeing culture" (2021)
- **Bailey, S. & West, M. (2022).** [What is compassionate leadership?](#) The King's Fund
- **NMC (2024).** [Culture Review and Transformation Plan](#).

Practice and Education Examples

- **Swansea University (2025).** [Student Leadership Academy](#).
- **Leeds Beckett University (2025) ??**
- **Bournemouth University (2025).** [Advanced Clinical Practice Apprenticeship](#).

LinkedIn Soundbites /SM shorter versions