

# **RCSLT assistant practitioner professional framework (APPF)**

## **Section three: moving forward**

### **1. An overarching framework**

RCSLT set up this project group to review the current landscape around training and ongoing support of APs and to then develop the RCSLT APPF for this role in the profession. In the past there have been other projects, although recommendations seem to have been 'forgotten' over time.

And looking wider, in terms of focus on the development of practitioners within their role, there has also been a lack of overarching guidance across the UK.

When HEE began consulting on implementing a new framework for all AHPs (2021), RCSLT responded by gathering opinions and formulating feedback from the perspective of the speech and language therapy profession. The time was right to focus on the role of the AP and to address risks which had developed over time, and thus providing a coherent framework for the future.

Also via this project, another RCSLT objective was to examine how it could offer to strengthen the support and services for this workforce. Appraisal of the status quo and potential changes were based upon:

- The feedback of the project reference group who identified gaps around assistant membership
- Further discussion within the author group about potential changes in how RCSLT supports the AP role.

As the professional body for speech and language therapy, the RCSLT recognises that there is a role in driving standards and practice development around the role of the AP.

### **2. RCSLT support and assistant membership**

The 2020 RCSLT survey (detailed in section one) looked at how more support could be offered to both APs and the clinicians who support them. The majority of APs who responded indicated that they would value more support from RCSLT in connection with their role by:

- providing further guidance on the role of APs
- offering advice on how SLTs can supervise APs
- signposting to training courses specifically designed for APs
- launching a dedicated section on the RCSLT website and to enable peer support.

Generally, APs felt there was little available to them in the current RCSLT membership. The resources and website were felt to be limited in value. There was little awareness of professional indemnity insurance in relation to AP membership (which is available). There were, however, very clear suggestions about how these gaps could be filled.

There was a message from the survey that the professional body needs to have a key role in driving practice development and championing the role of the AP – and this project aims to address this.

It will ensure there is strengthened support through a framework of professional training and development, an updated website (or a dedicated hub of resources and support for APs), which links to the APPF, and support for managers and supervisors in supporting the professional development and career progression of APs.

The APPF, Toolkit and supporting information signify that RCSLT has recognised the need to support and champion the development of this role in the future and should be considered a positive step.

Below is a list of suggestions from the APs who we surveyed, about where the support given by RCSLT could be focused:

- Minor grants being promoted to APs to support with costs of CPD
- APs were part of a field-testing group for the RCSLT CPD diary and it is envisaged that more APs will access this as part of their RCSLT membership
- Re-visit the National Support Worker Study Day (Events)
- Ensure that APs know about indemnity insurance included as part of their RCSLT membership
- APs might consider governance roles on RCSLT Boards, thus encouraging APs to aspire to roles in RCSLT

The project group is keen to develop communication networks between APs and raise the profile of their role on the website, via social media and with signposting to resources. The RCSLT APPF project should be a significant initiative in valuing the future role and contribution of the AP.

More information can be found on membership on the [RCSLT website](#).

### **3. RCSLT insurance for assistant practitioners**

The Survey (2020) reflected a limited awareness of the specific [insurance offer](#) as part of RCSLT membership for APs. If an AP is an associate member then they have indemnity insurance as part of their membership package.

The policy specifies cover if the AP 'is an associate member, engaged in casework which is agreed and supervised by a qualified Speech and Language Therapist'.

Further information on [RCSLT insurance](#).

### **4. Embedding the RCSLT APPF**

The project group is aware that previous Frameworks for both initial training and ongoing CPD (2002, 2009) were not maximised and used by services — while there has been a lack of a consistent approach across the UK.

The [Allied Health Professions' Support Worker Competency, Education, and Career Development Framework](#) (2021) offered a foundation for speech and language therapy and to build on and to create a structured profession specific framework for supporting professional training and development.

The author group intends for this new RCSLT APPF and the accompanying materials to be something which is easy to access, practical to use and which becomes embedded in a consistent approach to supporting and supervising NHS, independent and third sector organisations.

### **5. Research directions**

Some APs are beginning to study and lead research.

The supporting information (cameos - in progress) will contain an example of an inspirational practitioner and her research project.

The project group is an example of how APs are contributing to and having an influential role in influencing practice development alongside SLTs.

Suggestions for the future include research on subjects linked to:

- clinical role/s and impact of APs
- co-researching with SLTs
- comparing approaches to learning and development in the role

- measuring impact of the involvement of APs in therapy care in clinical services and in facilitating and teaching skills in universal/education based roles.

## **6. The future**

In May 2021 several of the AHP professional bodies, including RCSLT, joined together in cross-AHP professional lobbying which highlighted the need for a national commitment to training and development of support workers.

The RCSLT also joined the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) and 13 organisations in 2021 to urge employers to recognise the value of AHP support workers by drafting this [consensus statement](#).

The statement states that AHP support workers must get equitable access to consistent and sustainable funding for education and professional development opportunities to support safe and effective patient care.

Education providers and some services are now involved in supporting apprenticeships. However, a national initiative to support the design and delivery of occupation specific education programmes for this crucial workforce would address many of the gaps identified in this project. The AHP Framework gives options for joint learning across AHP support roles. APs may be a small group, but they have a pivotal role in service provision.

Following more generic foundation training there is a need for more focused speech and language therapy related coaching for competencies. The role is diverse with a multitude of job titles and roles under the umbrella of AP. Training and development does, therefore, need to be through work based learning with individual competencies identified for particular posts and achievements tracked with the support of an identified competency coach.

It is evident there needs to be far greater support from the NHS nationally, as the largest employer around career progression. There are routes into pre-registration now, but many APs are happy in this different and complementary role to the registered SLT. They wish to remain and develop within their role and build their career.

## **7. Future professional possibilities**

The scope for this project was wide ranging to become a substantial project. The author group were in effect developing new resources to support practice development rather than re-working previous guidelines.

Despite the wide scope there were areas outside of the influence of this project which will need consideration in the future:

- The wide range of specialist clinical areas meant the project could not produce resources which were specific to a clinical field such as an adult service for stroke. It was anticipated that in future examples specific materials might be added to the webpages
- Pay bandings and career progression opportunities
- Lack of formal opportunities for training (short and longer courses)
- Choices by employers not to invest in development of APs, prioritising continuing professional development of therapists.

As mentioned in section one the lack of consistency in job grading and the lack of opportunities for career progression is outside the remit of RCSLT and this project.

*"RCSLT has set out its position on issues relating to pay and conditions of employment. The RCSLT does not deal directly with issues relating to individual pay and conditions of employment, as it is not a trade union. Trade union matters are dealt with by the unions representing the profession". (RCSLT, 2009)*

This project has aimed to give voice to APs and to their experiences of barriers, frustration about lack of opportunities for development as well as in their commitment to their role.

## **8. Re-shaping a professional landscape**

*"The fundamental requirement of therapists is that they should act from a position of commitment and care about the work they are engaged in." (RCSLT 2002)*

The RCSLT APPF champions the continual development of those competencies that are needed to work confidently within an identified scope of practice with a strong scaffold of support and supervision. The APPF emphasizes the importance of practical professional 'know-how' in a role, for example, competencies linked to interpersonal skills. The quote above highlights that a starting point always needs to be commitment and care about clients and their carers.

The project team have looked closely at the current landscape and what is happening across the UK in the initial training and ongoing professional development of APs. There is more structured support in Scotland with a range of resources to support development in role and there are examples of best practice throughout the UK. However there is little consistency and although the new AHP Framework devised by HEE advocates a 'grow your own' approach to

learning competencies there is a need for greater guidance and supporting resources within speech and language therapy.

In a modern healthcare context it is essential that the knowledge and skills of APs who are not regulated, are planned, tracked and can be referenced against national professional guidelines. Without this assurance about training and development there are risks to both practitioners in services and clients.

As is often the case in the speech and language therapy profession the project group has used practical knowledge combined with evidence based practice about learning to create the APPF. The emphasis is on work based learning combined with an essential strand of supported reflective practice.

This APPF may prove to be short term, filling the gap until more widespread opportunities for training and development are available. It might remain in place and evolve over time. It has been designed to be used practically with minimal resources as there is always the awareness – and with it being a strong theme from the analysis of the survey – that some services struggle to allocate time and resources to support and training of APs.

It is hoped that this project might spark the development of more structured training opportunities. The sudden transformation of both training and service provision since 2020 (due to the pandemic) has shown what can be possible online nationally and might lead to strengthened networking between APs.

The profession can take and shape the professional training and development, building on existing local approaches. However, for career development there needs to be a more coherent and focused national approach across the AHPs. There are many experienced APs in this role who have reached a ceiling in their job grade and cannot progress further due to the limited picture of opportunities. Recruitment tends to be local and currently there may never be an opportunity to apply and progress to a higher banded post.

What is clear is there are many practitioners with a strong commitment to this role as their career. They aspire to progress within the role in speech and language therapy or seek to use their skills in a similar role in a related professional area in health or education. There are other APs who take the role as a stepping stone towards qualification as an SLT. During the course of this project several of the project group commenced training in speech and language therapy either through a traditional university course or apprenticeship.

Within the project reference group there was an incredible range of job roles under the umbrella of AP. These stretched from universal/preventative support in early years settings, to specialist clinical support within head and neck and adult eating, drinking and swallowing (EDS) services. APs have a key role in many independent services as well as in NHS and educational provision. There is a broad spectrum of what are often specialist roles with a specific aspect of

speech and language therapy provision. The web content will be a forum for showcasing this evolving role and will offer a hub of resources for APs and information for those who might be considering this career.

What cannot happen is for the outcomes of this project to be shelved and for the current landscape to remain unchanged. There are risks to safe practice in the current status quo which we have perhaps, as a profession, got so used to that we no longer notice the risks. It is also essential to nurture and strengthen the growth of this evolving section of the speech and language therapy workforce. This RCSLT Framework with its accompanying Toolkit needs to stand out in the landscape, be noticed and practically used.

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