



Support Workers Position Paper

Supporting the training and development of speech and language therapy support workers

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1. Introduction

This document sets out the RCSLT's vision and recommendations for the training and development of the speech and language therapy support workforce.

It highlights our commitment to a competency-based approach for supporting the role of speech and language therapy support workers and the challenges of ensuring safe and competent practice with the reality of limited resource. It addresses key areas for consideration and highlights the need for continually re-visiting the specifics of this emerging role.

This document will be of interest to speech and language therapy support workers, speech and language therapists (SLTs), other healthcare professionals and their professional bodies, service users and their families, service managers and commissioners of services.

Speech and language therapy is a constantly evolving profession within which new roles are developing to fit changing needs and emerging evidence.

Support workers¹ are an increasingly important part of the speech and language therapy workforce, with strong professional values. Working with oversight and supervision from SLTs, they contribute significantly to the dynamic process of evaluation and intervention to achieve better outcomes for service users. It is an evolving role and skillset which compliments that of the SLT.

Some support workers will choose to pursue qualification as an SLT, through traditional training or apprenticeships. Others are committed to a career as a support worker. From entry to senior levels there is aspiration for career progression as a support worker. However, there is a nationally recognised lack of opportunities for such progression.

It is essential that those with communication and swallowing difficulties have confidence in the workforce providing for their needs. However, a key theme that emerged from the RCSLT's 2021 support worker survey was that SLTs reported a lack of time to devote to supporting the development of support workers, noting that training budgets in services gave therapists priority. There is clearly a need for more focused resource and workforce planning.

¹ There are many divergent roles under the umbrella term of speech and language therapy support worker. Further information about the consideration of role titles can be found in the support worker hub on the RCSLT website.

2. Key recommendations

The RCSLT's vision is that services place equal value in the training and development of the support workforce as its registered speech and language therapists.

The RCSLT recommends that:

- speech and language therapy support workers have access to:
 - initial training
 - ongoing continued professional training and development using reflective practice and a competency-based approach
 - formal training opportunities, such as short courses, to supplement learning.
- supervisors and managers use RCSLT resources as a guide to plan continuing professional development (CPD) as they supervise, delegate, and facilitate support workers in that development, whilst ensuring safe practice
- services take the framework and adapt it for individual service use. As such, it is expected that the framework will evolve with feedback.

3. RCSLT resources for support workers

Within the dedicated support worker hub, the RCSLT provides the following resources to support the implementation of this vision and recommendations:

- a competency framework for learning and developing within a role
- a toolkit of associated resources to support implementation of the framework
- career advice and information, including support worker specific case studies spanning services and clinical areas.

Other benefits and resources are available for use of all RCSLT members across the RCSLT website:

- CPD diary
- RCSLT professional development framework 2023
- Clinical and professional guidance and resources
- Competency frameworks for specific clinical areas
- Insurance
- Eligibility for minor grants and awards
- Access to RCSLT professional networking groups (by invitation), e.g. Hubs and CENs
- RCSLT professional networks

Additionally, the RCSLT have made a commitment to continue considering the needs of support workers when developing RCSLT guidance and resources.

4. Context

4.1 The AHP Support Worker Competency, Education and Career Development Framework 2021

NHS England, previously known as Health Education England (HEE), published the [AHP Support Worker Competency, Education and Career Development Framework](#) in 2021. It was developed by King's College London, working with HEE and the Allied Health Professional (AHP) professional bodies. RCSLT was involved in this work throughout and initiated a membership consultation on the draft documentation.

The AHP framework provides guidance on initial training, continuing professional development for AHP support workers, including speech and language therapy support workers. This competency framework is provided as the basis for learning within a role. There is a route for progression in AHP related careers, with clearly identified common and transferable skills across eight learning domains.

When the project was launched in 2019, the intention was to introduce a competency-based approach to support learning and career development relevant to all AHP support workers.

The vision was for a generic, competency-based approach which could link to a skills passport if workers chose to move between different professions. In publishing the final version after national consultation, HEE recognised the difficulties and challenges around career progression in a support worker role i.e., variability in approach to training and limited career progression opportunities. Support workers tend to live locally and are less likely to move for career related reasons. HEE uses the phrase 'grow your own' to reinforce that learning in post is based on the individual needs of the service and the training and development is through in-house, work-based learning or accessing local courses. The competency-based model allowed for a flexible approach to learning with achievement of competencies being the key need.

"Competencies, aligned to service need, should be the basis of job design, a prerequisite upon recruitment, and determine access to education programmes. They should also allow support workers to consider how they might develop within their teams and progress their careers." (HEE, 2021).

4.2 The benefits of a framework for training and development

In the foreword to the AHP framework, HEE specifies the benefits of access to high quality learning opportunities and clear career progression pathways into and through support worker roles. Services and their users would benefit from

- high-quality care
- continuity of care
- improved staff retention
- reduced waiting lists
- extending workforce capacity
- securing future workforce supply
- increased job satisfaction

Suzanne Rastrick (Chief Allied Health Professions Officer for England) stated:

"too often support workers in both health and social care face barriers to their development, deployment, and career progression. These can include variation in roles, inconsistent delegation of tasks, poorly defined development routes, and lack of access to training and education".

4.3 RCSLT survey 2021

In 2021, the RCSLT undertook a survey of support workers and those supporting and managing support workers to ascertain priority needs and future directions within the profession. The focus was on the role, development, and support of the support worker, while also re-visiting the ways in which RCSLT could strengthen the help it offered to support workers. A similar picture of national risk emerged from both HEE work and the RCSLT survey.

Thematic exploration of the survey responses showed wide variation in initial and ongoing training. There was strong commitment to this role from the support workers and managers who responded to the survey. However, considerable frustration was expressed about a lack of:

- resource (financial envelope and time in services) to support education and development within role in a planned and coherent way; and
- coherent guidance around training and development.

Following the RCSLT survey, a project group was formed in February 2021 to consider how the profession should move forward in supporting the role of support workers. The group comprised of support workers and SLTs from across the four nations and different specialist areas in speech and language therapy. In the background, there was a strong project reference group of 90 practitioners, providing feedback as the project progressed.

Service users nationally have no assurance that support workers have been trained and have competency in their role. Most services do manage to provide good to excellent support and development of support workers from within limited resources. However, it

is nevertheless conceivable that a support worker could be appointed with no prior experience in health, social or educational settings, receive minimal focused training and then undertake delegated work with service users.

4.4 The AHP joint position statement May 2021

In collaboration with 13 other professional organisations, the RCSLT supported in the development of the joint position statement; '[Optimising the contribution of the Allied Health Professions support workforce](#)'. The RCSLT used feedback, from the 2021 survey, about the challenges faced by support workers to inform the joint position statement. The key themes raised included the lack of career progression and the limited support systems and training opportunities available to support workers.

The joint statement calls for all AHP support workers to have equitable access to “consistent and sustainable funding for education and professional development opportunities to support safe and effective patient care” and for “UK-wide career development and progression frameworks for AHP support workers, with universal access to funding for training”. It also highlighted their lack of inclusion in workforce development planning. There was clear agreement that support workers are undervalued and overlooked in terms of learning and development and lack recognition of their contributions.

“Urgent action needs to be taken to ensure all AHP support workers receive due recognition and reward for the critical contribution they make to healthcare, wherever they work.” (CSP chief executive Karen Middleton, May 2021)

5. The RCSLT Support Worker Framework

This framework contains guidelines for the support and development of support workers in role, utilising a competency-based framework which gives a focus for learning and growth in roles through work-based learning.

5.1 Developing the framework

The process of creating a practical, relevant framework for RCSLT began in April 2021 and completed after amendments following national consultation in March 2023.

Innovative work has come out of the group, for example the concept of a competencies coach (supervisor, manager, clinical lead, senior clinician) to be identified to aid a support worker in their learning journey. The two sets of competencies, used to help build professional knowledge and skills, are practical tools for dynamic, tracked learning within a role. The group focused on developing a learning model which was easily accessible with limited resource impact on overstretched services in NHS, independent and educational sectors.

A national model with funded training opportunities may supersede this support worker driven model in the future. As with all position papers, this is about the current position, with a focus on the development and introduction of the framework.

The key outputs and process of the project group took the following sequence:

- To begin with, the project group considered the **context and landscape** across the nations. This included identifying the risks in the current UK wide scenario and recognising the need for a specific framework for learning, training, and development for workers in this role. The 2021 RCSLT survey, plus structured discussions in the project group, formed the basis of the risk appraisal. During this scoping, the group recorded the viewpoints (voices) of support workers and considered realistic options to improve the support given to support workers.
- Subsequently, the scope of the project was agreed, and a plan of action determined - **a new framework for professional training and development for support workers**. The group focused on devising a framework which combined the generic AHP competencies as a foundation, with a further set of specific speech and language therapy related competencies and a toolkit. As well as these resources, a support worker hub was developed to provide guidance and pointers for consistency in the learning approach to mitigate risk in services and ensure safe and effective service provision.
- Finally, issues which were beyond the scope of the framework project & the RCSLT membership offer for support workers, were considered, and documented.

5.2 Core competencies

The HEE AHP Support Worker Competency, Education, and Career Development Framework provides the core competencies for speech and language therapy support workers building a firm foundation in this support role.

Specifically, the framework builds on the foundations of the [HEE AHP Support Worker Competency, Education and Career Development Framework](#) and [NHS Scotland Support Worker HCSW Learning Framework](#) (4 Pillars of Practice)

It creates a framework to support the professional training and development of support workers in speech and language therapy. The Pillars of Practice (Scotland) and the Domains (AHP Support Worker Education and Competency Framework, HEE) are both designed to provide a foundation set of generic, professional competencies. The HEE competencies are the foundational core competencies of the RCSLT framework. HEE makes it clear that there is expectation that the framework would be adapted to be real and relevant to different professions.

The profile of competencies is designed to be adapted for the wide range of job roles undertaken by this workforce: from the support worker working with families promoting the skills needed for early language and communication development, to the support worker working with an adult adapting to changed communication following head and neck surgery. The evolving role of support workers is wide ranging in the skillsets required and deserving of a professional framework for initial and ongoing training and development.

5.3 Clinical competencies

The RCSLT project group considered the HEE generic framework and whether this fully met the needs of support workers in speech and language therapy. The consensus was that there was a need to extend this with competencies which related more specifically to the needs in speech and language therapy.

There was a demand for additional speech and language therapy profession specific competencies for this role. This set of competencies was developed by the project group and called clinical competencies.

These are specifically focused on knowledge and skills common across the different specialisms in speech and language therapy. (*The term clinical is used in the widest possible sense to include competencies needed by those working in educational and universal as well as health focused services*).

This set of competencies is designed to be adapted for the wide range of job roles undertaken by this workforce.

The project group identified a common set of skills across specialist fields of speech and language therapy to provide a tool with relevance to a wide range of support workers. These are the clinical support competencies to help ensure support workers are successful in their role.

The clinical competencies are more specific skills linked to job roles in speech and language therapy services. The approach is more dynamically related to competencies needed in an individual job. The clinical competencies can form the basis of a conversation about what is required in a role and how current skill levels of the postholder meets those needs. The specific competencies are identified, and a development plan agreed. Alongside this, the level of support and supervision needed for safe, effective delegated practice is discussed and agreed.

The evolving role and skillset required of support workers is wide ranging and deserving of a professional framework for initial and ongoing training and development.

5.4 Recognition of competency proficiency

The toolkit includes a competency recognition sign off sheet, for both the core and clinical competencies, to formally recognise and record the existing knowledge and skills of those who have achieved equivalency in competencies to the core or clinical competencies i.e. there is no requirement for a practitioner to 'work through' these competencies as the standard is already reached.

There is also a sign off sheet for support workers to use with their supervisors as they work through and achieve core and clinical competencies.

6. Proposed learning model

The RCSLT recommends formalising a competency driven approach to training and professional development for support workers.

Once employed in a role, it is recommended that all support workers are supported in developing job specific competencies. Formal training opportunities, such as short courses, can supplement learning. However, it is recommended that there is predominantly an emphasis on work-based learning, using reflective practice to embed skills.

The RCSLT survey showed a landscape of services finding it difficult to identify time to train their support workers. A job-based competency approach, with an identified competency coach guiding development in the role, will mitigate risk. Beginning with a discussion of the competencies required for success in the job role, and identification of the learning areas, ensures learning is well guided and appropriate.

7. Is regulation ahead?

There is no current agenda for regulation and registration of support workers across the AHPs. This has been discussed in the past, for example in an RCSLT support worker position paper in 2009 where it was felt that regulation was on the horizon. This did not prove to be the case.

8. Looking forward

This framework is a starting point. It has been devised at a point in the history of the speech and language therapy profession where there is increasing recognition of an evolving complimentary role of support workers, working with and alongside the SLT, supporting the needs of people with communication and eating, drinking, and swallowing difficulties.

It is the RCSLT's vision that the framework and toolkit will be used as a practical tool in speech

and language therapy services, becoming established practice for supporting learning and development. It is expected that the framework will evolve with feedback. Services should take the framework and adapt it for individual service use. The provision of this competency framework will help reduce risk and ensure safe and supported delegation for support workers working in designated care pathways.

The future for this professional role in the speech and language therapy workforce is exciting. In the current economic context, the need for robust accountability and delivery of cost-effective, safe services is key to further development.

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The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) is the professional body for speech and language therapists in the UK. As well as providing leadership and setting professional standards, the RCSLT facilitates and promotes research into the field of speech and language therapy, promotes better education and training of speech and language therapists, and provides its members and the public with information about speech and language therapy.

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