

RCN mentorship resources

4. Lifelong learning in practice – achieving practice standards



RCN mentorship resources

Lifelong learning in practice – achieving practice standards is the fourth part of the RCN mentorship resources. The complete list of RCN mentorship resources available is below.

1. An overview of the RCN mentoring framework
2. RCN mentoring relationship standards
3. The RCN mentorship development programme
- 4. Lifelong learning in practice – achieving practice standards**
5. The mentorship contract and toolkit
6. Strengthening working partnerships
7. RCN representatives' practice standards
8. Mentor and mentee relationship standards

RCN mentorship resources

4. Lifelong learning in practice – achieving practice standards

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Introduction

Whether an experienced representative, or one who has recently completed Modules 1 and 2 of the *Learning and development pathway*, RCN mentorship offers a structured way to continue learning through real situations in the workplace setting.

All RCN representatives receive continuous support from a skilled RCN mentor from the day of their accreditation and for the duration of their role as an accredited RCN steward, health and safety representative, or learning representative. Mentorship is provided for all representatives at every stage of their development in their chosen role.

All representatives are offered at least six hours of mentorship support each year as they work towards developing or mapping their learning and experience to the *RCN practice standards*. This process demonstrates competence and enables them to identify further development needs.

RCN representatives may enter the mentorship programme through two routes.

1. Newly accredited representatives completing Modules 1 and 2 of the *RCN representatives' learning and development pathway* develop their competence in the generic and specific skills they need to be effective workplace representatives. By the close of each module, representatives gather and present a portfolio of evidence to show how they have understood and met the learning outcomes for each module mapped against the generic or specific role descriptors (role descriptors can be accessed in the Activist Zone on the RCN website www.rcn.org.uk/support/activist). Representatives are then ready to build on those learning outcomes and work towards gaining further practical experience to meet the required elements of the *Practice standards*. Some elements of the *Practice standards* will be achieved through meeting the learning outcomes of Modules 1 and 2 so it is envisaged that all the standards relevant to the representative's role will be signed off by their mentor within 12 months of completing Module 2. After that the standards can be revisited if the mentor or the mentee (the representative) feels practice skills need updating or refreshing and can act as an aid to assessing further learning needs.
2. The learning and development activities for existing representatives (accredited prior to April 2008 in England, April 2009 in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and April 2010 in Wales) are planned around an identification of their learning and development needs with their mentor through a personal development plan (see *Resource 5: the mentorship contract and toolkit – toolkit document 4*) which will be guided by matching the representatives experience and skills with the *Practice standards*. The development of individualised personal development plans – agreed with the representative – will be key to ensuring that experienced representatives reflect on their knowledge and skills, and gain access to appropriate and meaningful learning and development opportunities.

What are the RCN practice standards?

The *RCN practice standards* are based on nationally recognised occupational standards set by ENTO¹. They set out the standards the RCN representative is required to meet to develop their practice skills. Each standard is divided into a set of elements of competence (see Table 1).

Some of the standards are specific to particular representatives: three apply only to stewards; two to safety representatives, and three to learning representatives. The remaining nine apply to all representatives.

The *RCN practice standards* continue to build on the generic and specific role descriptors that representatives have worked towards in Modules 1 and 2 of the *Learning and development pathways*. At this stage in their development, representatives are achieving competence through practical experiences in the workplace, although there are also learning opportunities available to them through, for example, Module 3 workshops and masterclasses. The six themes that run through the *Learning and development pathway* continue to inform the practice standards How do mentors support representatives' learning and development?

¹ ENTO (formerly the Employment NTO) was formed by a merger in 1997 of Employer Occupational Standards Council and the Occupational Health and Safety Lead Board

Why do we need practice standards?

- **Quality and equity** – standards provide a benchmark of good practice that applies throughout the UK.
- **Enables representatives to fulfil their role** – through experience and through the *Learning and development pathway* (Modules 1 and 2) representatives develop the knowledge and skills they need to meet their role descriptors. The *Practice standards* enable them to build on this work and extend their learning in the workplace.
- **A framework for development** – the standards provide a focus for continuing learning and development and a clear framework for making personal development plans in consultation with the mentor.
- **Makes best use of workplace experience** – the *Practice standards* provide a means of demonstrating how the competence of the representative continues to develop as the representative becomes more experienced in the workplace.
- **Supporting existing representatives in their lifelong learning** – the *Practice standards* inform/build upon the experience of experienced representatives and recognise the knowledge and skills they have acquired to date.

When do the RCN practice standards need to be met?

These are standards that representatives work on during their first year as an accredited representative, but they remain relevant for the entire period of time that the representative remains accredited in their place of work. The mentor and the representative should discuss and agree when it is appropriate to revisit and review the standards and to identify ongoing development needs – for example, when it's thought appropriate for the representative to update their skills through Module 3 workshops and masterclasses or further workplace development.

While the *RCN Practice standards* are relevant from the moment a representative is accredited, it is not until they achieve a certain level of expertise that the *Practice standards* are formally used to guide the representative's development. Representatives who have completed Modules 1 and 2 of the *Learning and development pathway* – or who have substantial workplace experience – are likely to be meeting some elements of competence already. Representatives are not expected to repeat work that has been demonstrated previously; instead the standards are intended to *build on* knowledge and skills and to show how the representative is continuing to learn within the workplace.

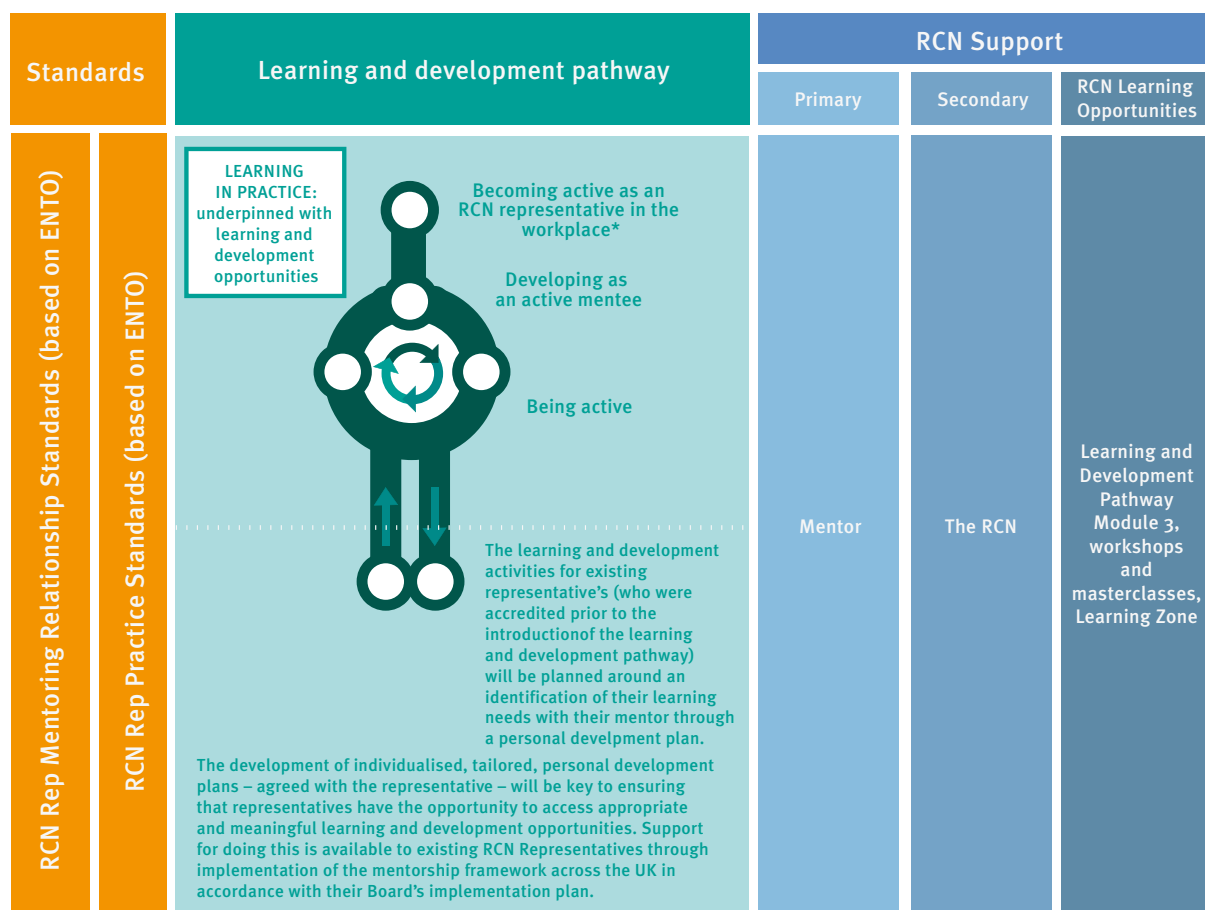
In addition representatives who are only undertaking a specific workplace role will not be expected to demonstrate that he/she has met elements of a standard that is not required in their role. For example, a steward who represents RCN members at a partnership forum or joint staff side committee but does not represent members who are facing conduct, capability or employment issues will be required to meet *Practice standard 11: represent, advise and negotiate on matters related to organisational change including employment rights*, but will not be expected to demonstrate competency in *Practice standard 10a: represent members through conduct, capability and employment issues* or *Practice standard 10b: apply RCN case management process*. These competency requirements would, however, be reviewed if the representative wants to extend his/her role to include casework.

How will the standards be met?

RCN mentors and representatives work together in a mentoring relationship to achieve specified elements of competence which are reviewed on a yearly basis. *The Mentorship contract* documents the representative's understanding of the mentoring process, the mentorship standards, and the agreed frequency and level of support.

Representatives who have completed Modules 1 and 2 are familiar with the learning cycle that is repeated in each module. This process continues as a mentorship cycle (see Figure 1) that guides the representative's development as they set goals and action plans with their mentors to achieve competence in the workplace, measured against the *Practice standards*.

Figure 1 How the mentorship cycle supports the achievement of practice standards



- **Becoming active** – agreeing how the mentor and mentee (the representative) will work together; establishing the ground rules, boundaries, accountability, expectations and the nature of the relationship. Both parties discuss experience to date and the learning outcomes that have been achieved, along with the process for gathering and reviewing the evidence for their portfolio.
- **Developing as an active mentee** – the mentee establishes objectives and goals, approach and priorities and discusses with their mentor which practice standards and elements of competence are a priority for the representative's development, what evidence will need to be collected and how.
- **Being active** – the mentee (representative) develops an action plan based on the elements of competence they have chosen to work towards and, where appropriate, identifies support for learning-in-practice in the workplace. The mentor checks the plan is realistic and achievable, and provides a balance of challenge and support. The mentee puts their plan into action in the workplace.
- **Staying active** – both parties review, give and receive feedback, evaluate and prepare to start the process again. This is an important stage of consolidating learning. The mentor signs off any standards that the mentee has provided evidence for. The cycle repeats as the mentee identifies new areas for development, which may include considering attending a Module 3 workshop or masterclass.

After the mentorship contract is agreed, the representative decides on an action plan to develop an element or several elements of competence. At this stage the representative also needs to think about what evidence they can collect that will show what they did, how they did it, what happened, and what they learned.

Newly accredited representatives (post 2008 in England, April 2009 in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and April 2010 in Wales) will already have begun a portfolio as part of their work for Modules 1 and 2. The learning-in-practice phase marks a new chapter in that portfolio, although it may build on work that has begun in the earlier phases.

Experienced representatives who are working with a mentor will discuss with their mentor the best way to gather and present their evidence of competence.

The *Practice standards* provide tangible benchmarks for discussion and for practical action. The RCN mentor encourages the representative to reflect on their evidence and to think about what it means for their current and future practice. The mentor and the representative should decide together how the representative will do this. Usually this will involve the representative reviewing their evidence, recording their reflections and using this as a basis for discussion at the meeting with their mentor.

Putting the action plan into practice is quite straightforward and although the detail will be different for each representative, the following examples are helpful in understanding the process and how it enables representatives to evidence their learning against the *Practice standards*.

Case study 1:

Demonstrating competence of a practice standard: learning representative

Miriam is a learning representative in a care home. She has completed Modules 1 and 2 of the *Learning and development pathway* and is now working with her mentor, an assistant officer in her area. They establish a working contract together and arrange how and when they will continue to meet. During her mentoring session, Miriam decides to develop her action plan around the *RCN Practice standard 15: “Creating a climate that promotes learning”*.

As part of her plan to achieve this, she approaches the member of staff who leads on the independent sector, who is delivering some record keeping workshops in local care homes to see if Miriam can join her, pick up some tips to improve her presentation skills and – supported by the member of staff – facilitate part of the workshop. This, Miriam hopes, will enable her to achieve the elements of competence around developing a good relationship with learners and supporting learners in an inclusive way. By reflecting on the session, and with the endorsement of the member of staff present, Miriam is able to provide evidence that she has achieved competence in several elements of the standard and arranges to meet with her mentor so that the elements can be signed off.

Case study 2:

Demonstrating competence of a practice standard: health and safety representative

Jack is a health and safety representative who works in mental health. He has successfully completed Module 1 and Module 2 of the Learning and development pathway. His mentor is an RCN officer in his region. During his mentoring session, Jack expresses a keen interest in undertaking a safety inspection in his department as there are a number of health and safety issues which he thinks urgently need to be addressed. Together, they agree that Jack's initial focus will be *RCN Practice standard 12: "Undertake safety inspections to promote a healthy and safe work environment for members"*.

On completion of Module 1, Jack had approached a more experienced health and safety representative in his organisation to introduce himself and discuss his development plans within his role. Following a discussion with his mentor an agreement was reached that the health and safety representative would be an appropriate person to offer support and guidance with undertaking the agreed actions. Jack approached him again to ask for some support in carrying out an inspection, consulting with staff and reviewing the existing policies with a view to making some recommendations to improve safety in his department through the health and safety committee.

Jack keeps a reflective log of the work that he undertakes and asks the health and safety representative to give feedback on his activities and his reflection. On completion of his work, he arranges a meeting with his mentor to discuss the elements of the standard which can be signed off.

Case study 3:

Demonstrating competence of a practice standard: steward

Gloria is a steward who works on a surgical ward in an acute hospital. Having completed Module 1 of the Learning and development pathway, her mentor, an officer in the region, identifies an opportunity for Gloria to shadow an assistant officer who is supporting an RCN member facing disciplinary action. By shadowing the assistant officer, Gloria is able to reflect on her experience and identify many of the elements in *RCN Practice standard 10a: "Represent members through conduct, capability and employment issues"*.

After completing Module 2, Gloria meets with her mentor and they agree that, under the supervision of an officer or an assistant officer, Gloria will take on a case at the earliest opportunity so that she can put what she has learned into practice.

Shortly afterwards a suitable case arises, which is to be opened by an assistant officer. Gloria, with the continuing support and guidance of the assistant officer, is able to represent the RCN member. By doing this, Gloria is able to demonstrate her skill in collecting and collating the evidence relating to the case, preparing and presenting the evidence and representing the member through the disciplinary process.

The assistant officer endorses the evidence that Gloria has prepared through her reflection on her experience and the case file she has produced while representing the member. This allows Gloria's mentor to sign off the related elements in the Practice standard 10a as well as elements of practice standard 10b: *"Apply case management process"*.

Gloria now feels confident to represent members and to undertake her role as a representative, supporting members through the disciplinary process. A further discussion with her mentor focuses on how to extend Gloria's areas of experience and expertise regarding future casework.

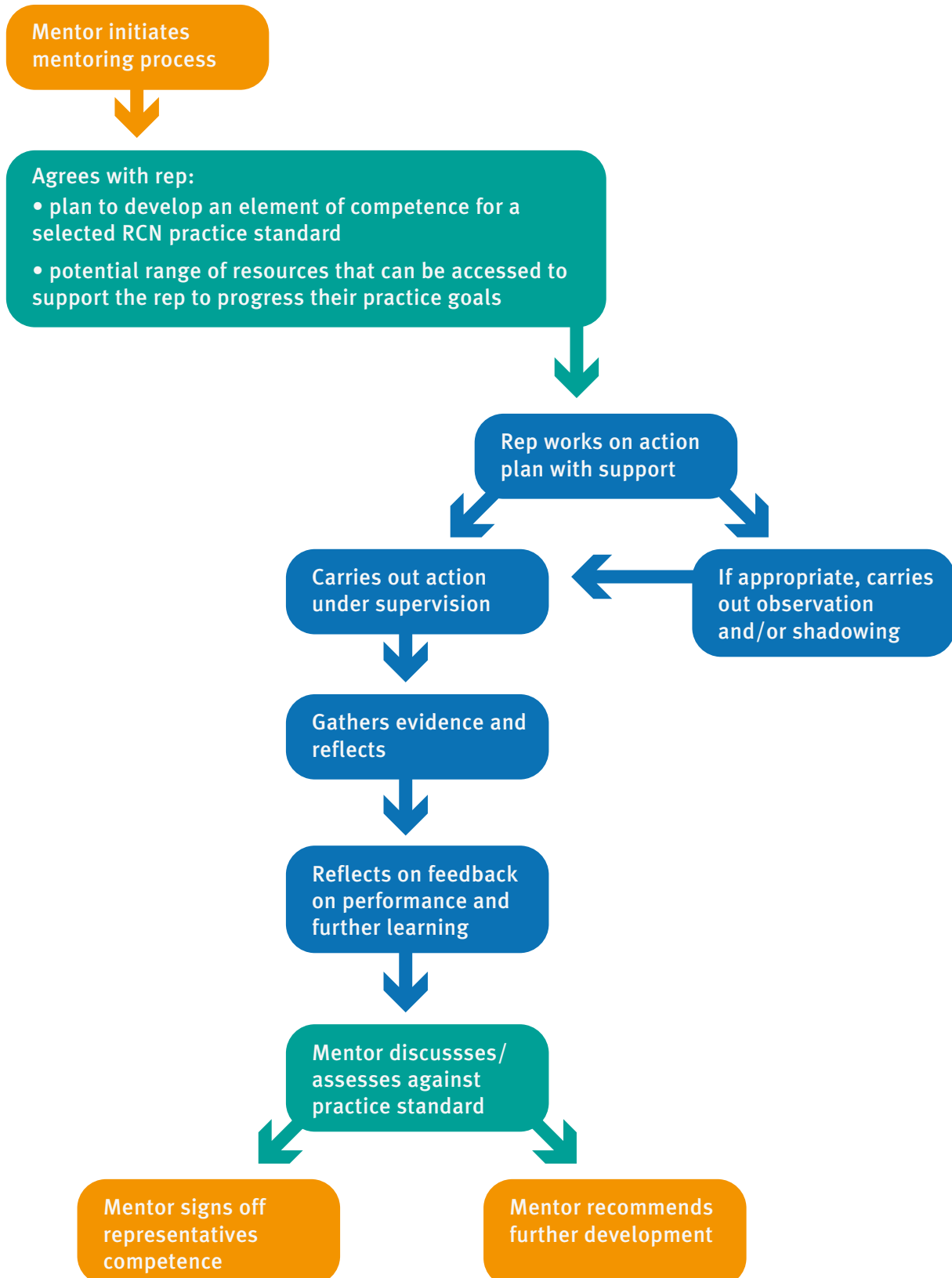
Gathering evidence to demonstrate competence against the practice standards may involve people other than the representative's mentor. For example, an inexperienced representative may wish to 'shadow' a more experienced representative or a member of RCN staff to gain an insight into an element of their role. However, final responsibility for signing off competencies lies with the RCN mentor.

Once a representative has demonstrated competence in one standard, the cycle of learning and mentoring begins again. There is no end point of 'mastery' over the standards and further learning, but rather a cycle of continuing improvement. Keeping up-to-date is a challenge for all of us in the changing landscape of health care and workplace relations. So, even experienced representatives who can demonstrate impressive evidence to show they have achieved some or all of the *Practice standards* will still have more to learn.

The RCN website www.rcn.org.uk contains further case studies of new and existing representatives who have experienced mentorship and mapped their skills against the Practice standards.

Figure 2 illustrates the process in its entirety – from the initial mentorship meeting to the signoff of the *Practice standard*. Mentorship Resource 5: the mentorship contract and toolkit contains all the documentation the mentor and the representative will need to complete each stage of the mentorship process.

Figure 2 How the mentor and a range of resources can support a representative to progress their practice goals



Summary of practice standards

The table below provides an overview of the *Practice standards* and all the elements which need to be met before the mentor can sign off competency. It may be that the representative is able to gather sufficient evidence to demonstrate competency across the whole standard, but if this is not the case then the mentor is able to sign off each element as appropriate.

A full set of the *Practice standards* is available in Resource 7: RCN representatives practice standards and can be viewed on the RCN website www.rcn.org.uk. Signoff copies for representatives to retain as a record of their achievements are included in Resource 5: the mentorship contract and toolkit – toolkit document 6.

Practice Standard	Practice standard title	Element of competence
P1	Provide information and advice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Obtain, provide and interpret information about RCN services 2. Present information to groups of members 3. Support and advise members on matters of personal concern 4. Be responsive to external factors influencing information and advice services
P2	Support and promote RCN campaigns	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Contribute to activities and campaigns 2. Be responsive to external factors influencing policy-making
P3	Support partnership working	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Contribute to the development of the local partnership strategy 2. Contribute to participative structures and processes 3. Be responsive to external factors influencing participative structures
P4	Assess and understand risk	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Contribute to the identification and control of organisational risks 2. Contribute to the monitoring and reviewing of risk assessments 3. Be responsive to external factors influencing risk assessment
P5	Support and promote collective agreements	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promote the employment relations benefits of collective agreements to employers and members 2. Support and assist the development of structures and procedures for collective agreements 3. Contribute to the negotiation of collective agreements with employers 4. Be responsive to external factors influencing collective agreements

Practice Standard	Practice standard title	Element of competence
P6	Represent members and negotiate on behalf of members equally, promoting good diversity practices	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promote the elimination of discrimination 2. Promote good practice within organisations 3. Be responsive to external factors influencing equality, diversity and human rights
P7	Contribute to the recruitment and retention of RCN members and representatives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop a recruitment and retention strategy 2. Prepare and present promotional information to potential members 3. Maintain contact with and information about members 4. Identify and recruit potential representatives in the workplace 5. Be responsive to external factors influencing recruitment and selection
P8	Find, use and manage information	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify why information is needed 2. Identify what information is needed 3. Plan a search and finding information 4. Evaluate how the information meets the need 5. Use information and knowledge ethically, inclusively and legally 6. Manage information 7. Create new information or knowledge
P9	Maintain accurate records	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recognise the function of good/accurate record keeping 2. Ensure that records are of a consistently high quality 3. Be responsive to external factors influencing the quality of record keeping
P10A	Represent members through conduct, capability and employment issues	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Advise on the validity and credibility of cases 2. Prepare cases for presentation and representation 3. Present the case to employers' representatives and employers 4. Be responsive to external factors influencing the presentation of cases

Practice Standard	Practice standard title	Element of competence
P10B	Apply RCN case management process	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Utilise RCN policies/procedures to manage casework effectively 2. Open and maintain RCN case files
P11	Represent, advise and negotiate on matters related to organisational change including employment rights	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Obtain information to support workplace negotiations 2. Advise on the conduct and strategy of negotiations 3. Advise and contribute to negotiating teams 4. Finalise and record workplace agreements 5. Be responsive to external factors influencing workplace negotiations
P12	Undertake safety inspections and promote a healthy and safe work environment for members	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Help to develop strategies for representing health and safety issues at work 2. Obtain information about health and safety and advise members 3. Participate in risk assessment process 4. Investigate health and safety concerns and incidents 5. Encourage others to support health and safety procedures 6. Be responsive to external factors influencing health and safety representation
P13	Negotiate on behalf of members and support representation of members on matters relating to health and safety	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Present changes to employers 2. Participate in negotiations and representation within the workplace 3. Be responsive to external factors influencing health and safety negotiations
P14	Promote and support member learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promote the value of learning to those within the workplace 2. Negotiate on behalf of members and support members on learning matters 3. Promote the value of learning within RCN networks and structures 4. Support local and national policies, initiatives and campaigns which promote learning 5. Be responsive to external factors influencing learning and the workplace

Practice Standard	Practice standard title	Element of competence
P15	Create a climate that promotes learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Develop a good relationship with learners in the workplace2. Support learners in the workplace3. Promote anti-discriminatory practice4. Be responsive to external factors influencing the learning environment
P16	Respond to changes in learning and development	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Understand the way people learn2. Develop learning and training methods3. Be responsive to external factors influencing human resource development



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