

Education and Career Progression Framework for Fertility Nursing Consensus Statement

CONSENSUS STATEMENT



Acknowledgements

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These organisations had no editorial control over the content of this evaluation report

This document has been designed in collaboration with our members to ensure it meets most accessibility standards. However, if this does not fit your requirements, please contact corporate.communications@rcn.org.uk

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Notes to readers

- The RCN recognises that services are provided by registered nurses and midwives, health care support workers/maternity care support workers, assistant practitioners, nursing associates, nursing and midwifery students, and trainee nursing associates. For ease of reading, the generic terms ‘nurse’, ‘nursing’ and ‘nurses’ are often used throughout this document.
- As a gender diverse society this guidance can be used by and/or applied to people who identify as non-binary, transgender or gender fluid. Equally not all those who become pregnant will identify as women, and where relevant this has been acknowledged.

Background

In 2017, the RCN published *An RCN Education and Career Progression Framework for Fertility Nursing*, the latest edition (2021a) is now available at: rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-education-and-career-progression-framework-for-fertility-nursing-009-926-uk-pub. The purpose of the framework was to outline the skills and knowledge required to develop roles in fertility nursing across the UK.

In 2021, the RCN Fertility Nursing Forum carried out an impact assessment on this career framework to establish its effectiveness and subsequently produced the *Impact Assessment of the Education and Career Progression Framework for Fertility Nursing* (RCN, 2021b) available at: rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/impact-assessment-of-education-and-career-progression-framework-for-fertility-nursing-009-927-uk-pub

A varying picture of the use of the framework emerged. To address the recommendations from the impact assessment, a meeting was held with key stakeholders in 2022 to discuss how the recommendations (see [Appendix](#)) could be implemented more widely. The outcome was the development of this consensus statement to clarify the way forward.

Introduction

The impact assessment on the effectiveness of the framework, in improving access to learning and career development was positive, whilst making some recommendations for improvements. It was clear that although the framework was valued in setting national standards and supporting education and career development, it was not used consistently throughout the sector. Whilst recognising that fertility care is provided across the NHS and independent sector with different staff development models, further work is required to support implementation of the framework.

The project team convened a stakeholder discussion to provide a platform to discuss the differing issues and come to agreement on best ways to consistently implement the standards across the UK. The team considered the recommendations using the themes:

- staffing for safe and effective care
- implementation of the framework
- ultrasound training
- continuing professional development
- political awareness.

Staffing for safe and effective care

Key points

- **Workforce planning is critically important.**
- **Clarity around roles should form part of unit configuration.**
- **Quality service provision must include consideration of staff development and wellbeing.**

Staffing for safe and effective care applies to all health and social care settings, including fertility care, whether delivered in the NHS or the independent sector. Clarity around roles and responsibilities has to form part of the overall strategy for running an effective and safe health care provision. The RCN's *Nursing Workforce Standards* (RCN, 2021c) are designed to support a safe and effective nursing workforce alongside each nation's legislation and can be used to good effect to strengthen the provision of care in a safer environment, where nurses can practice to their full potential.

Acceptable staffing levels should not be based wholly on numbers and requires good workforce planning to ensure different skills and different skill mix, (which may change throughout the day/week/year), to support high quality care. Within this, there needs to be an explicit understanding of the diversity of roles required to provide a complete service.

The RCN supports the use of the *Nursing Workforce Standards* to enhance safer and effective staffing levels.

The standards are set out in three distinct themes, which can be used to constantly assess, agree and support safe and effective staffing levels.

- **Responsibility and accountability:** these four standards outline where the responsibility and accountability lie within an organisation for setting, reviewing and taking decisions and action regarding the nursing workforce.
- **Clinical leadership and safety:** these six standards outline the need for registered nurses with lead clinical professional responsibility for teams, their role in nursing workforce planning and the professional development of that workforce.
- **Health, safety and wellbeing:** these four standards outline the health, safety, dignity, equality and respect values of the nursing workforce to enable them to provide the highest quality of care.

The standards are available at: rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-workforce-standards-uk-pub-009681

There is also a need to consider how accurate workforce data will assist with this process.

Implementation of the framework

Key points

Implementation requires:

- **a flexible approach to integrating existing systems**
- **commitment to enhance individual and corporate goals and ambitions**
- **acknowledgement that all nursing staff have a right to career progression, and wellbeing in the workplace.**

The *Education and Career Progression Framework for Fertility Nursing* was developed to enhance all areas of fertility nursing, and the aspiration in the publication was around creating a nationally recognised set of standards for developing practice across a range of identified key skills and knowledge, that would enhance personal development, patient care and be transferable across the sector.

The ambition was to enable all nurses working in fertility care to be able to access and use the model in the framework to plan a career pathway, which meets their needs, the requirements of NMC validation and the needs of the service they are employed within.

Within that, it is recognised that service provision/structures and employment models differ across the NHS and the independent sector. However, having an integrated nationally recognised model will enhance care and encourage nurses to remain in employment, or in the sector where transferable skills can be recognised across different employers.

The evidence gathered by the project team included consideration that there are a wide range of models for staff development in use. However, they do not always take account of the diversity of skills and knowledge required across the fertility care sector, and may focus on individual employers, which support local service provision rather than national provision.

Implementation of a framework can be complex and numerous models exist for managing the process (BMC, 2015). It requires a flexible approach to integrating existing systems, as well as a commitment to enhance individual and corporate goals and ambitions.

It is acknowledged that further implementation of the framework will require commitment and support from fertility units, and their trust/hospital board/Independent sector units to ensure all staff are competent and confident to carry out these roles and have opportunities to progress their skills, knowledge and career pathways.

The RCN supports:

- the right of all nurses to have access to a recognised pathway for their career development, to enhance their education and development for NMC revalidation and remain on the NMC register. This framework provides a nationally recognised, structured approach, which enables professional development, regardless of where nurses are employed, and can be used alongside corporate performance reviews/appraisal systems
- the implementation of the framework, which requires a commitment from both individual nurses, their managers and their employers.

Continuing professional development

Key points

- **Professional development will enhance practice provision.**
- **Continuing development will support individual commitment and retention of staff.**
- **An action plan is required locally to ensure all staff have equitable access to professional development to meet their needs, as well as those of the employer.**

Continuing professional development (CPD) is an essential part of developing practice and in enhancing individual progression. It enables nurses to practice to their best capabilities. The NMC, with whom nurses, midwives and nursing associates are regulated, is clear that keeping up to date enhances practice and professional development (NMC, 2021), as well as being a requirement of remaining on the professional register.

The impact assessment on the framework identified a number of challenges faced by nursing colleagues in accessing appropriate, funded professional education and training. As nursing has moved towards an all-graduate profession, where academic skills, and critical thinking are key parts of nursing practice, opportunities to continue to grow and develop are essential to ensuring quality evidence-based care.

The project team also considered that some nurses will have different aspirations for progression to senior posts and prefer to work in direct clinical practice. However, they all have a responsibility to revalidate and maintain/enhance their skills (NMC, 2021).

For those who do wish to progress to more senior posts, having a clear plan of what is required to progress along a career pathway, supported by managers and employers will be beneficial to the service as a whole. This should include having access to bespoke management education and leadership programmes, as well as support/mentorship schemes.

Access to well organised and well supported CPD opportunities will also enhance retention of staff in an area, and this will in turn, support better team morale and team working.

As a graduate profession, it is critically important for nurses to have access to annual appraisals or the equivalent to ensure they have an opportunity to discuss learning needs and career development.

The RCN supports access to CPD opportunities for all nurses working in fertility care. Equitable funding and support, including backfill for health care professionals in a service, will enhance the overall service.

The *Nursing Workforce Standards* are clear about the rationale for this:

Standard 7

“The time needed for all elements of practice development must be taken into consideration when defining the nursing workforce and calculating the nursing requirements and skill mix within the team.”

- a. *Practice development encompasses clinical supervision, assessment, supervision and teaching, continuing professional development (CPD), revalidation and lifelong learning. Practice development must align to the needs of people who use services.*
- b. *Comprehensive workforce planning should be undertaken and include a workforce learning needs analysis, commissioning and provision of training and education. Facilities for regular professional reflection and clinical supervision should also be in place to support ongoing learning and best practice development.*
- c. *As a minimum, all inductions must include explanation of the governance structure within the team and organisation, and the routes of escalation of nursing issues such as nursing workload, nursing workforce and safety concerns.*

and Standard 10:

“Registered nurses and nursing support workers must be appropriately prepared and work within their scope of practice for the people who use services, their families and the population they are working with.

This includes access to CPD, education, support and development to ensure the nursing workforce has the knowledge, skills and competencies required to deliver evidence based, safe, person-centred care that is of a high-quality. As a minimum this needs to include:

- *safeguarding*
- *mental capacity*
- *consent*
- *record keeping*
- *basic life support*
- *competency frameworks specific to the area of specialty*
- *the principles of accountability and delegation*
- *raising concerns*
- *health and safety related training including moving and handling, infection prevention and control and fire training.*

The registered nurse lead will ensure that: individuals appointed to the nursing workforce, including those in management roles, are allocated a period of supernumerary induction / preceptorship.

Individuals with no previous experience should have a preceptorship period which includes structured induction and close supervision until specialty competence and confidence are achieved for more senior/experienced staff taking on additional or different roles, a preceptorship period is still needed until competence and confidence are achieved.

Fostering leadership capability is integral to all members of the nursing workforce throughout their career to embed a psychologically safe culture and strengthen the nursing voice.”

Nursing Workforce Standards (RCN, 2021c)

Ultrasound scanning

Key points

- **Ultrasound scanning is an advanced skill.**
- **A postgraduate certificate in ultrasound is recommended in terms of clinical expertise, ability to analyse and synthesise information, and for clinical governance.**
- **National standards for education in ultrasound scanning are required to protect patients and nurses.**

The use of ultrasound in fertility care is a key advanced skill, consequently nurses are well placed to develop competency in ultrasound, which can improve continuity of care, patient experience and safety. When considering barriers to developing skills in ultrasound, discussions focused upon level of education required for this advanced skill, unit staffing and skill mix, funding, protected time for learning and appropriate mentors/supervisors.

It is acknowledged by the project team that some nurses will be practicing ultrasound skills, having completed an initial education different to the recommendations below. As with any developing skill, it is the responsibility of the individual registrant to ensure they are competent and confident to practice at a contemporary level to meet current and future service requirements, however employers also have a responsibility to ensure opportunities are provided to ensure those skills are maintained and enhanced to meet current requirements.

The RCN supports:

- a postgraduate certificate in ultrasound is recommended in terms of clinical expertise, ability to analyse and synthesise information, and for clinical governance. The ultrasound course should be accredited by the Consortium for the Accreditation of Sonographic Education (CASE), or equivalent. Nurse sonographer roles should be identified in staffing reviews and ensure that there are specific roles to be trained into
- some nurses (who have not accessed level 7 education previously) may require access to level 7 study assistance to access HEI courses
- protected time and funding should be standard to aid learning
- the learner should work with a clinical mentor* who can provide feedback, support and can assess their competence and development. It will also be useful to liaise with radiology/ultrasound colleagues and doctors for support
- every unit should have a comprehensive peer review system in place, so that once qualified, practice is continually assessed, in line with the NMC Code (NMC, 2018), and have access to ongoing mentorship and support, and regular clinical review of cases
- a need for nationally recognised guidelines for nurses training and maintaining their skills in USS for the purposes of fertility care/practice. The framework identified the skills required around this area of practice, and this needs enhancing to give clear guidance around the overall requirements, for example accessing education courses, practice placement, mentors, peer review and ongoing support post qualifying

- the RCN is planning a collaborative project for 2023, to consider how national standards can be agreed and utilised effectively.

* Coaching and Mentoring (NHS Leadership Academy, 2022) leadershipacademy.nhs.uk/career-development/coaching-register

* CASE Validation and Accreditation Handbook case-uk.org/handbook page 45 which clearly outlines the role and requirements of a mentor.

Political awareness

Key points

- **Nursing is a political issue which affects all nurses and patients.**
- **Nurses need to understand the impact of political decisions on care provision and their role in practice.**
- **Political awareness should be the business of every health care professional.**

Nursing is a political issue, because it affects employment, practice, service provision, and careers. It is especially relevant to the care provided to patients, which is affected by the decisions made by governments. Political factors can also have a substantial impact on the work nurses carry out, including the potential influences on the wider society, consequently it is important for nurses to be politically aware.

As the largest group of health care providers in the UK, nurses are in a unique and powerful position to serve as advocates for patients, communities, and the nursing profession, by understanding how they can exert influence on, and lobby for better health care provision and policies.

The RCN supports the need for all nurses to have the skills to influence practice and become more aware of the politics that might impact and/or control that provision by:

- becoming more involved in the activities of professional organisations, so that nurses are seen and heard in health policy debates
- being more aware of the landscape around service commissioning and who to refer to, to ensure services are provided to meet the needs of those in their care
- work alongside organisations and individuals who champion similar causes to highlight the needs of women (and their partners) experiencing fertility care
- engage with elected officials and service commissioners to raise local issues or concerns with those who can influence change
- advocate for patients by facilitating open dialogue to ensure their voices are at the centre of service evaluation, provision, and future developments
- build strong working relationships with other local units, to improve care pathways through primary care services, emergency care, and gynaecology and maternity
- publish evidence-based papers, and/or become research active to strengthen the role in enhancing health care and improving patient outcomes
- talk about political issues with colleagues to encourage them to become more politically perceptive.

Conclusions

The impact assessment demonstrated that the standards were valued in enhancing professional development and service provision. However, they were not being used consistently throughout the UK. In this publication, the project team has considered how improvements can be made by identifying the areas that can most influence positive change and enhance practice both for registrants and for patients, specifically focusing on the following areas.

Focus is on:	Key points	Further actions required
Staffing for safe and effective care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workforce planning is critically important. • Clarity around roles should form part of unit configuration. • Quality service provision must include consideration of staff development and wellbeing. 	Integration and implementation of the RCN <i>Nursing Workforce Standards</i> to workforce planning will enhance safer and effective staffing levels.
Implementation of the framework	<p>Implementation requires:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a flexible approach to integrating existing systems • commitment to enhance individual and corporate goals and ambitions • acknowledgement that all nursing staff have a right to career progression, and wellbeing in the workplace. 	<p>Managers and employers should consider how the implementation of the framework, which requires a commitment from both individual nurses, their managers and their employers, could enhance overall staffing and career progression for nurses, as well as enhancing care provision.</p> <p>RCN to convert appendices in PDF so they have fillable fields for ease of use.</p>
Continuing professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development will enhance practice provision. • Continuing development will support individual commitment and retention of staff. • An action plan is required locally to ensure all staff have equitable access to professional development to meet their needs, as well as those of the employer. 	<p>Managers and employers to demonstrate commitment to the positive value of CPD for patient safety and care, and individual development.</p> <p>Local visible action plans developed with nursing staff to enhance opportunities for CPD.</p> <p>Employers to ensure equitable access to CPD for all staff.</p>
Ultrasound training	<p>Ultrasound scanning is an advanced skill.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A postgraduate certificate in ultrasound is required in terms of clinical expertise, ability to analyse and synthesise information, and clinical governance. • National standards for education in ultrasound scanning are required to protect patients and nurses. 	<p>A postgraduate certificate in ultrasound is recommended in terms of clinical expertise, ability to analyse and synthesise information, and for clinical governance.</p> <p>The forum project group is planning a collaborative project to consider how national standards can be agreed and utilised effectively.</p>
Political awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nursing is a political issue, which affects all nurses and patients. • Nurses need to understand the impact of political decisions on care provision, and their role in practice. • Political awareness should be the business of every health care professional. 	All nurses, managers, leaders and employers need to have the skills to influence practice and become more aware of the politics that might impact and/or control that provision.

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Appendix

The conclusion of the *Impact Assessment of the Education and Career Progression Framework for Fertility Nursing* project led to key recommendations.

1. The RCN believes that the *Education and Career Progression Framework for Fertility Nursing* enables career progression and development and will continue to promote greater use, in the belief that nurses need ongoing opportunities to better understand how to progress their careers.
2. The RCN believes that there is a need for improved access for fertility nurses to CPD, opportunities, especially that which leads to master's level education. This will include creating a better understanding of the need for graduate and postgraduate education and how that can improve and enhance career progression.
3. The RCN recommends that a roundtable discussion be held with key stakeholders, led by RCN, to include BFS, SING, HFEA and other relevant organisations, to consider how the framework could be embedded with employers nationally.
4. The RCN recommends that the framework be integrated to generic tools, with a goal towards national usage, which could be considered as part of a roundtable discussion on increasing the use of the framework.
5. There is a need for more formal courses in ultrasound education, accredited by the Consortium for the Accreditation of Sonographic Education (CASE), which should include a commitment to access to practice placements for registered nurses.
6. The RCN is to consider the option of creating the framework as an online interactive tool, which could be used as part of self and service development.

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