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# Career Framework for Stroke Nurses Evaluation Report

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# Executive summary

The aim of this evaluation project was to explore stroke nurses' perspectives on the value and impact of the RCN's UK Career Framework for Stroke Nurses. Specifically, it sought to identify perceived benefits, limitations, and areas for development.

A total of 84 respondents completed the survey. Most respondents were based in England (n=59, 73%), with further representation from Scotland (n=13, 16%), Northern Ireland (n=5, 6%), Wales (n=3, 4%), and one respondent from outside the UK. Recruitment involved contacting approximately 280 nurses through the National Stroke Nursing Forum general contact list, supplemented by wider dissemination via the RCN Neuroscience Forum's social media account. Of the total sample, 12 participants (14%) consented to followup contact, and only four (5%) indicated prior use of the career framework.

The interview phase consisted of 11 questions seeking to understand how the framework was perceived, how it was used, whether they would use it again and would they recommend it to others. The responses highlighted a consistent need for parity over training and development and therefore the perceived need for an overarching competency framework for national use in all stroke units.

# Introduction

The *UK Career Framework for Stroke Nurses* was produced by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) project group with nursing representatives from across the UK and with significant stakeholder engagement from a wide range of nursing networks. The resource outlines the range of career pathways within stroke nursing and the minimum recommended education requirements, in addition to knowledge and skills. It provides a guide for stroke services and employers to develop local career development frameworks for the nursing workforce.

Registered nurses working in stroke care can map their career development, as well as assess their skills and knowledge based on this resource and other links embedded throughout the framework.

The career framework outlines the elements of stroke care based on the four pillars of professional practice: clinical practice, research, education and leadership, and management. The career framework then describes five potential career pathways open to stroke nurses for their future career aspirations. They are:

- clinical practice pathway
- practice education pathway
- traditional academic pathway
- clinical academic pathway
- leadership and management pathway.

The framework was launched in 2020 and has had annual quality assurance reviews to ensure content remains current, but it has not been evaluated until now. This review has been led by a working group established from the RCN Neuroscience Forum. A survey was undertaken to understand the impact and value of the career framework. From this initial survey, those respondents indicating they were prepared to be contacted were telephoned and a semi-structured interview was conducted.

# Purpose

The purpose of this evaluation was to understand how the framework was perceived and used within the stroke nursing workforce, and to assess its relevance, accessibility, and contribution to professional development. The evaluation sought to generate insight into whether the framework supports nurses in navigating career progression, developing specialist competence, and planning future roles within stroke services. It also aimed to inform future refinement of the framework so that it better aligns with the evolving needs, expectations, and challenges of the stroke nursing profession.

The aim of this evaluation project is to explore stroke nurses' views on the value and impact of the framework, with a focus on identifying its benefits, limitations, and areas for further development.

The evaluation also investigated key challenges facing the stroke nursing workforce, including limited career progression opportunities, lack of a clear and structured career pathway, inconsistent use of a national stroke-specific education framework, variation in roles and banding across services, and concerns around succession planning.

# Methods

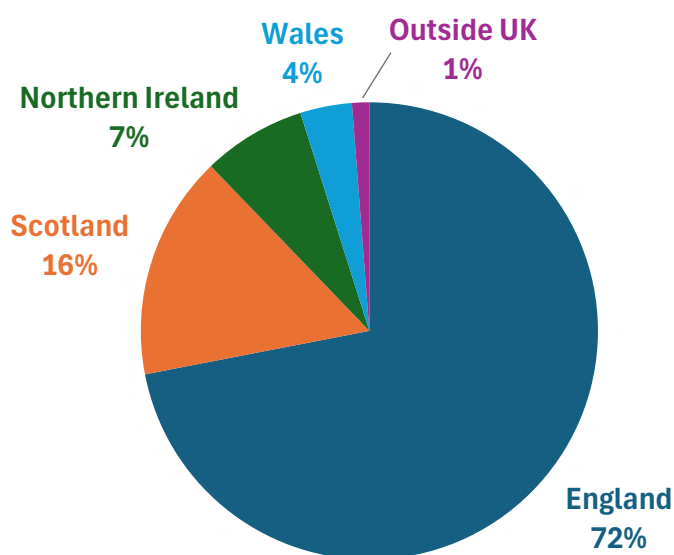
This evaluation utilised an explanatory sequential research design. The evaluation was conducted through a combination of an initial quantitative survey and self-request of qualitative semi-structured interviews for further questioning to provide granularity and context.

The interview cohort was generated by the inclusion of an opt-in question at the end of the survey. We aimed for a purposive sample to provide for wide representation and to avoid bias. An interview schedule was developed for use with all interviews.

Nurses who opted to take part in an interview were contacted by email and the interviews were arranged to be carried out by telephone at a convenient time for the respondents.

## Survey results

There were 81 respondents to the survey, of those 59 (73%) were from England, 13 (16%) were from Scotland, five (6%) were from Northern Ireland, three (4%) were from Wales and one respondent was from outside the UK. 57 respondents (68%) had completed specialised training or certification in relation to stroke care, although there was a range of job titles and roles perhaps explaining the difficulty in defining varying roles to an appropriate level of banding.



15 (19%) of respondents held a Diploma, 30 (38%) held a nursing degree, and 26 (33%) were trained to master's level. A further five respondents were trained to PGCert, and one trained to PGDip. Two respondents had completed a doctorate.

74% (n59) had been a registered nurse for over 10 years. There was a wide spread of the length respondents had been in their current stroke role, with 17 (21%) being in their current role for over 10 years and 51% (n40) being in their current role three years or less.

It was asked, aside from the current role how much stroke or neuroscience nursing experience respondents had. 36 (47%) reported that they had over 10 years' experience. Only 15 (20%) reported three years or less experience overall and of these only six (8%) had less than a year's experience indicating the majority of respondents were experienced in this field.

Of the 81 respondents only 13 (16%) had accessed the career framework before. The reasons for doing so were varied. Identifying learning and development needs and benchmarking current role were the top answers given. Demonstrating knowledge and skills and evaluating current skill set were also common answers.

There were some free text comments provided when respondents were asked what worked well with the framework. General themes were often about identifying and supporting learning needs. See below for examples of what worked well.



*Provides clear structure and pathway for career progression*



*Alignment with the four pillars*



*I hope it can guide me to be a specialist*



*It enabled me to create specific education for stroke specialist nurses and aided me to create the role I have today*

Respondents were also asked what they thought did not work well. A common response was about not being aware of the career framework. See below for examples.



*Not a well-known resource among nurses*



*I've never heard of it*



*Not well publicised*



*Difficult to apply to some hybrid roles in non-specialist centres who work through the whole pathway and include a managerial element, eg, clinical lead or advanced/consultant roles*

# How the survey results informed the interview phase

It was initially agreed for five respondents to be contacted, more if possible, across all levels of nursing, and with UK wide representation where possible. There were no respondents from Northern Ireland or Wales who indicated that they wanted to be contacted.

Thirteen respondents indicated they wanted to be contacted. One respondent from Scotland indicated they were prepared to be contacted but they were a nursing support worker, so were outside of the inclusion criteria as the interviews were focused solely on registered nurses. The twelve remaining nurses were contacted. Six replied, agreeing to be interviewed.

Of these six respondents, two were early career, three were at advanced practice level and one was at consultant level. One of the advanced practice respondents was from Scotland; the rest of the interviewed respondents were from England.

# Interview results

As outlined above there was a lack of geographical spread among the respondents and no nurses at enhanced level to represent views. It is acknowledged the limitations in numbers and spread of respondents will limit the content of these results. However, the interviews that were conducted provided rich insight, suggestions and feedback to the questions asked.

The interviews were conducted from the end of July until the beginning of September 2025. The length of the interviews ranged from 16 to 41 minutes.

The results from the interviews described individuals' experience of using the framework. Specific questioning included:

- enquiring why individuals used the competency framework
- any potential strengths or limitations
- whether they would use the document again
- suggesting any potential improvements to the document
- whether or not they would they recommend the framework to others.

All six of the interviewees agreed that the career framework was easy to find and locate on the RCN website. Similarly, most said they would use it again and would recommend it as a resource to others.

The positive feedback included how the career framework helped navigate nurses through various pathways open to them in stroke nursing and how to progress with educational milestones and experience. It was also a useful tool to use to support staff and students with structuring development goals. The alignment with the four pillars was also mentioned as a strength particularly for those progressing towards advanced practice roles.

The intuitive and interactive lay out of the framework on the website was highlighted as being user friendly. Being able to find so much information with embedded links, all in one place, were also cited as benefits. The fact that it provides a clear structure for professional development plans, and acts as evidence and support to take to appraisals to help achieve objectives, were also mentioned as strong positives.

The interviewees were asked to summarise the competency document in five words which proved difficult for some. Therefore, these responses ranged from three to 21 words. This illustrated powerfully how the respondents viewed the document, such as 'informative and insightful to 'an excellent resource for signposting nurses in the development of their career from newly qualified to advanced practice roles and beyond'.

# Potential for future work and opportunities

It is encouraging to report that the career framework has been well received and recognised as a strengthening resource for stroke nurses across the UK for those who have used it. The questions posed to the interviewees around the limitations of the framework or what could be improved also offered detailed comments and views pointing to potential further work, refinement and opportunities for the future.

The survey highlighted that the career framework was not generally well known among stroke nurses and needed to be advertised and promoted among the stroke nursing community much more powerfully. Embedding some case studies or videos within the career framework was also suggested to give 'real life' examples of differing career paths as to 'what they did' and 'how they got there' in order to inspire others and retain stroke nursing staff within the profession.

There were consistent requests for the career framework to be supported by a competency framework too, allowing for parity between all stroke units. It was acknowledged that units have their own competency packs, but local learning was promoting 'silo working' and if there was an overarching competency framework available then career progression would be better understood by organisations in order to support staff appropriately. It was felt that 'national standards' would be taken more seriously, although it was also acknowledged that there are already some excellent resources available that address this need but that it is inconsistent to who uses what across the UK.

This lack of a standardised approach in turn creates varying levels of pay recognition, job roles, and titles. Links to training, study days and formal module learning - particularly those where certification upon completion is given - was also suggested to be added to the framework. This reflects that access to internal or local teaching and access to postgraduate education is becoming increasingly difficult to access due to funding challenges.

# Recommendations

## Recommendation 1:

### **Improve visibility and awareness of the framework**

Develop and launch a national promotion plan using existing RCN and National Stroke Nursing Forum communication channels to increase visibility and uptake of the framework, achieving a 25% increase in webpage visits and a 20% increase in downloads within 12 months of it being updated and launched.

## Recommendation 2:

### **Integrate case studies and ‘real life examples’ into the framework**

Integrate three to five diverse case studies that illustrate different stroke nursing career paths, using insights from interviews and partner organisations such as the National Stroke Nursing Forum, Welsh, Scottish and Northern Ireland Nursing Stroke Forums. These real-life examples will make the framework more practical and inspiring for nurses and will be drafted and incorporated into the updated version of the framework.

## Recommendation 3:

### **Explore development of a national stroke nursing competency framework**

Undertake a scoping exercise to review existing competency documents and assess the feasibility of creating a UK wide stroke nursing competency framework. This work will be carried out in collaboration with the four national stroke nursing forums and in partnership with the team responsible for the Stroke-Specific Education Framework (SSEF), ensuring alignment with existing national education standards. The scoping exercise will be completed by September 2026 and is intended to address the strong demand for greater role clarity, parity and progression identified through the evaluation interviews.

## Recommendation 4:

### **Strengthen access and navigation of training and education resources**

Improve the framework’s training and education section by updating existing content, refreshing external links, and adding at least two structured learning pathways to make resources easier to navigate and more accessible. Working with RCN Library Services and education providers, these enhancements will be built into the 2026 framework revision to address gaps in awareness and consistency highlighted by respondents.

**Recommendation 5:****Use evaluation findings to direct the 2026 framework update**

Ensure the 2026 framework directly reflects key issues identified in the evaluation, including clearer role definitions, greater national consistency, reduced banding variation and improved support for early-career nurses. The updated framework will document how these findings were incorporated and will be completed by March 2027 using insights from the working group and evaluation data.

**Recommendation 6:****Establish an ongoing monitoring and evaluation cycle**

Introduce an annual monitoring and feedback system to track how the framework is used, its impact, and any emerging gaps, aiming for at least 100 responses each year from stroke nurses across the UK. This ongoing evaluation cycle will begin in 2027 and will replace one-off review approaches highlighted as insufficient during the current exercise.

## Key resources

National Clinical Guideline for Stroke for the United Kingdom and Ireland (2023). Available at: [strokeguideline.org/contents](https://strokeguideline.org/contents)

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2023) *Stroke Rehabilitation in Adults Guidance*. Available at: [nice.org.uk/guidance/ng236](https://nice.org.uk/guidance/ng236)

NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework (2015). Available at: [msg.scot.nhs.uk/pay/agenda-for-change/knowledge-skills-framework-ksf](https://msg.scot.nhs.uk/pay/agenda-for-change/knowledge-skills-framework-ksf)

Professional Standards Framework (PSF) (2023) Available at: [advance-he.ac.uk/teaching-learning/professional-standards-framework](https://advance-he.ac.uk/teaching-learning/professional-standards-framework)

*RCN Standards for Advanced Level Nursing Practice Subject Guide* (2021). Available at: [rcn.org.uk/library/Subject-Guides/advanced-nursing-practice](https://rcn.org.uk/library/Subject-Guides/advanced-nursing-practice)

*RCN Stroke Subject Guide* (2024) Available at: [rcn.org.uk/library/Subject-Guides/neurosciences](https://rcn.org.uk/library/Subject-Guides/neurosciences)

Stroke Specific Education Framework (SSEF) Available at: [stroke-education.org.uk](https://stroke-education.org.uk)

## RCN quality assurance

### Publication

This is an RCN practice guidance. Practice guidance are evidence-based consensus documents, used to guide decisions about appropriate care of an individual, family or population in a specific context.

### Description

This evaluation report explores stroke nurses' perspectives on the value and impact of the RCN's UK Career Framework for Stroke Nurses. It helps to understand how the framework has been used within the stroke nursing workforce and focuses on its benefits, limitations and areas for further development.

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