



Royal College  
of Nursing

# Becoming an RCN representative



# Take the RCN representative profile quiz!

Please read each question and tick the boxes that apply  
STRONGLY to you.

## Do you...

- |  |                          |
|--|--------------------------|
| have an interest in good employment practice?                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| get involved in charity work and fundraising outside work?                         | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| want to do something about workplace stress?                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| have an interest in employment rights and case law?                                | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| enjoy creative activities?   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| believe that a safer workplace equals better patient safety?                       | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| understand that patient care is inextricably linked to the welfare of employees?   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| feel that being persuasive is one of your strengths?                               | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| enjoy numbers, measurement and data?   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| stand up on behalf of your family and friends?                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| like to promote the value of learning for life?                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| take an interest in environmental and 'green' issues?                              | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| enjoy crisis intervention at work?   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| believe that access to learning is a fundamental right?                            | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| like organising people and events?   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| have an interest in your employment contract, terms & conditions and entitlements? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| enjoy attending evening classes?   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| believe happy workplaces make safer workplaces?                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> |

## How many of each colour did you tick?



**Mostly grey:**  
You would be well suited to the role of an RCN learning representative.



**Mostly blue:**  
You could do a great job as an RCN safety representative.



**Mostly red:**  
You have the necessary qualities to make an excellent RCN steward.

“ We all start as members and then some of us become RCN reps. As reps, we become friends, and those friends grow into our own RCN family. ”

*Ali Upton, Safety Rep, South East*

Every day, in workplaces around the UK, RCN representatives are making a difference. Often they are working behind the scenes, with many members and employers having little idea of the huge contribution they make.

In the summer of 2017, we invited a group of reps from all four corners of the UK to share their experiences and feelings. We gathered their stories, and created *The Value of Reps: In Our Own Words*.

You can download the book, and watch a short film from the day at [www.rcn.org.uk/get-involved/rcn-reps/become-an-rcn-rep](http://www.rcn.org.uk/get-involved/rcn-reps/become-an-rcn-rep)

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# Introduction

This booklet is designed to give you an understanding of the role and activities of RCN representatives. We've included information and case studies about each of the representative roles to help you consider which may suit and interest you most. You'll find an outline of the process for applying and an application form, along with information about what you can expect as you embark on your role, including learning, development and support.

We welcome expressions of interest from all members of the nursing team and we aim to provide newly accredited representatives (reps) with the knowledge, skills and confidence to become active and make a difference in the workplace.

You can also visit our reps' area on the RCN website, where you'll find useful information including short interviews with some experienced RCN reps.

Visit: [www.rcn.org.uk/rep](http://www.rcn.org.uk/rep)

“ We try to work collaboratively. It's not about who's right and who's wrong, raising your voice and going in for a fight, but about being professional and having a healthy debate. A lot of nursing staff can think their views are not listened to, so it's very important that they know we're taken seriously. ”

*Yvonne Lewis, Steward, Yorkshire and Humber*

# 1. What is an RCN rep?

A trade union representative (rep) is a member who has been elected to represent union members in the organisation where they are employed.

The RCN has three types of accredited rep:

- learning rep
- safety rep
- steward.

Where the RCN has a recognition agreement with an employer, trade union reps have a statutory right to reasonable, paid time off from employment to carry out union duties.

All NHS and many independent sector employers have recognition agreements with the RCN but if you do not think your organisation has one, please talk to your region about how we might work together to negotiate support and time off for the role. For more information about time off see section 12.

The diagram opposite shows the activities that all RCN reps are expected to undertake. Each rep will carry these out in relation to their area of practice (learning, safety and steward).



## Model of active representation

We have worked with RCN staff and reps to define a list of activities each rep should undertake. These were grouped into these five themes.



### Signposting

Directing members to relevant, high-quality resources relating to their employment, health and safety or learning and development, and the RCN's professional resources and campaign activity.



### Organising and campaigning

Building RCN membership and engaging members with the work of the RCN and the branch, including activity around recruitment, retention, campaigning and wider organising activity.



### Supporting and/or representing

Supporting and/or representing individual members to improve their working conditions around employment, health and safety and/or learning and development.



### Questioning and influencing

Accessing and analysing information to identify workplace issues early that might impact on members and their practice and supporting proactive interventions on their behalf to improve workplace conditions.

### Underpinning activities

- Working within the scope of your role.
- Promoting equality and diversity.
- Recording your activity.
- Developing your skills and knowledge.

# Role Descriptor:

## RCN Learning Representative

RCN learning reps champion and promote the value of learning. They do this by offering support and signposting – assisting all members to plan, manage and undertake their learning in whatever way suits their learning style. They work in collaboration with the RCN, employers and other stakeholders to negotiate, develop, protect and embed learning in the workplace.

### **A learning representative might:**

- provide information, advice and guidance and signpost members to high-quality resources and learning opportunities
- engage with RCN members to organise an event in the workplace or support a campaign relating to the promotion or protection of learning in the workplace
- support individuals to identify and address learning needs that arise from their practice or from cases where they are being represented by stewards
- access and analyse information about learning and development and work in partnership to question, understand and influence the learning agenda.

## CASE STUDY:

Working with an RCN officer to achieve the best outcome for a member facing a disciplinary over errors in record keeping.



**RCN Rep:**  
Paul Brown,  
RCN Learning Rep

**Workplace:**  
Hertfordshire  
Community  
NHS Trust

“ A member had accidentally entered information incorrectly onto a patient’s records. They’d been suspended and were facing allegations of gross misconduct.

We worked together to improve her responsibility to maintain accurate records. These records are a legal document – and key to patient safety. The member was made aware of the NMC’s Code of Conduct and the Trust’s policy on documentation. She had to write a statement and I helped her to re-write this to reflect her awareness of the impact of inaccurate documentation, and the steps she was taking to improve her skills.

I can happily report that the disciplinary panel saw that this was an honest mistake, and there was no case to answer to. The nurse went back to work and the Trust avoided any unnecessary costs.

All-in-all, both member and employer were happy with the outcome. ”

## Role Descriptor:

# RCN Safety Representative

RCN safety reps encourage and promote a safe working environment, ensuring members' rights to a safe and healthy workplace by working collaboratively with the RCN, employers and other stakeholders to recognise and influence the management of risk in the workplace.

### Safety representatives might:

- provide information, advice and guidance and signpost members to information and resources that support a safe and healthy workplace
- organise initiatives and support campaigns that help to create a healthy and safe workplace and culture
- support individuals with health and safety (H&S) needs, some of which may arise from cases where they are being represented by stewards
- carry out safety inspections and identify H&S issues which need to be addressed and work in partnership with employers to ensure risks and issues are addressed.

## CASE STUDY:

Staff on sick leave due to stress were absent for many weeks and were not accessing timely support



**RCN Rep:**  
Denise McLaughlin,  
RCN Safety Rep

**Workplace:**  
Queen Elizabeth  
Hospital Gateshead

“ In October 2015, the number of staff absent from work due to stress was becoming a real concern.

I adopted a partnership approach to tackle this issue by using the RCN’s Healthy Workplace Toolkit with the Trust’s Health and Wellbeing Steering Group. I also worked with the Occupational Health (OH) team to access sickness data and developed a fast-track referral process for staff on stress-related sick leave. Prior to this, staff were only referred for additional support after four weeks’ absence.

Since the new process has been in place anyone with a stress-related issue is contacted by the OH team within 24 hours. Staff are also able to speak to a health care professional and receive independent advice, information about therapies, and support in approaching their GP. Additionally, the latest absence data shows that sickness levels have decreased.

”

## Role Descriptor: **RCN Steward**

RCN stewards promote the value of partnership working, facilitating the fair treatment of RCN members through collective and individual representation and by working collaboratively with the RCN, employers and other stakeholders to negotiate, assist and promote good employment practice in the workplace.

### **Stewards might:**

- provide advice and guidance and signpost members to resources relating to the terms and conditions of their employment
- organise an event in the workplace or support a campaign relating to the local or national issues of employment
- represent a member through a range of workplace issues such as a disciplinary, sickness or capability review
- access and analyse information about employment-related issues and work in partnership to question, understand and negotiate terms and conditions of employment with employers where these can be negotiated locally.

## CASE STUDY:

### Ensuring learning disability nursing staff didn't lose out financially following redeployment



#### **RCN Rep:**

Helen Oatham, RCN  
Steward and Chair of  
Norfolk Branch

#### **Workplace:**

Norfolk and Suffolk  
NHS Foundation Trust

“ After one of our learning disability (LD) wards was closed, all staff were moved to another LD ward as an interim measure before that one also closed. The requirement for staff to work unsocial hours was significantly reduced and, if their 13-week average for pay protection was calculated using these hours, staff would be financially worse off.

Some staff were unhappy about a perceived lack of information during the consultation period, in spite of managers' reported best efforts. I gathered evidence from the affected staff to show that they were financially disadvantaged and raised the issue with the head of human resources.

The Trust agreed that the staff enhancements should be protected, based on an average of the 13 weeks before the units closed or merged. Staff agreed with this suggestion and felt happier that they weren't losing out financially. Staff who now have further to travel have also gained extra financial protection on their mileage too.



## 2. Do I need any experience or formal qualifications to become a rep?

You don't need any qualifications to become an RCN rep. The RCN welcomes reps from across its membership. You do not need to be a registered nurse or an expert in human resources, education or health and safety to become a rep. All you will need is energy, enthusiasm and the desire to make a difference in the workplace. We will ensure that you have the right learning, development and support to help you grow into your role.

As an active rep you will need to read formal documentation, write statements and letters and use a computer. However, if you lack confidence in any of those areas, let us know and we can guide you to resources and help you brush up your skills before you start your learning. Please see section 10 if you feel you may need any reasonable adjustments or support.

It is often assumed that you need to be an outgoing, extroverted person to take on a rep role, but we know that people perform best when they



work in their own way. You might be a great public speaker and decide to be at the front of our campaign work, or you might be a reflective, detail-oriented person who loves to pore over policy. The more reps we have with varied talents, the better we represent our diverse membership in the workplace.

“As a manager, I thought hard about becoming an RCN Learning Rep before I did it. Sometimes there can be anxiety about senior managers taking on these roles. But I think it has made me a better manager.

*Dionne Daniel, Learning Rep, London*



### 3. How does being a rep impact on or enhance my career development?

It is a common myth that employers and unions are always at loggerheads. In fact, most employers recognise the value of having reps in their workplace and seek to work in partnership to improve workplace culture.

As you get active as an RCN rep, you'll learn new skills and gain confidence in areas you might not

have had access to in your nursing role. Many RCN reps say that their role has broadened their career horizons as well as supported their professional practice. The learning and development which the RCN provides is second to none and it will really help you to reflect on your knowledge and skills and improve your confidence, whatever your role.



## 4. How do I apply to become a rep?

To register your interest in becoming a rep, complete the form at the back of this booklet and return it to your local RCN office. You can also complete the form online at [www.rcn.org.uk/get-involved/rcn-reps/register-your-interest-in-becoming-an-rcn-rep](http://www.rcn.org.uk/get-involved/rcn-reps/register-your-interest-in-becoming-an-rcn-rep). This starts the application process.

Someone will then contact you to arrange an informal chat to discuss the role. This will give you an opportunity to talk through any questions you might have after reading this leaflet. It also gives us an opportunity to talk about the level of support you feel you have from your employer and line manager in terms of taking on the role.

If you confirm that you would like to go ahead and become a rep, we will then contact your local branch committee. The branch committee will be asked to ratify (or approve) your application and you will then be accredited as an RCN rep. The term 'branch' refers to all the union members within a geographical area. Each branch elects a committee, which manages the affairs of the branch. It is really vital that reps work with, and have the support of, their branch. This process helps start to forge those links.

Once accredited, we will write to you to let you know. You will be allocated a place on the next available learning and development 'foundation' module, which should commence within three months of your accreditation (see the next section for further details).

Where you have a recognition agreement, your local RCN office will also write to your employer to confirm that you are an accredited RCN rep and are therefore entitled to paid time off to do your role and to undertake any learning and development needed to gain the required knowledge, skills and confidence. If you do not have a recognition agreement, but you and your regional office have negotiated support and time off for the role, then this process might be slightly different.

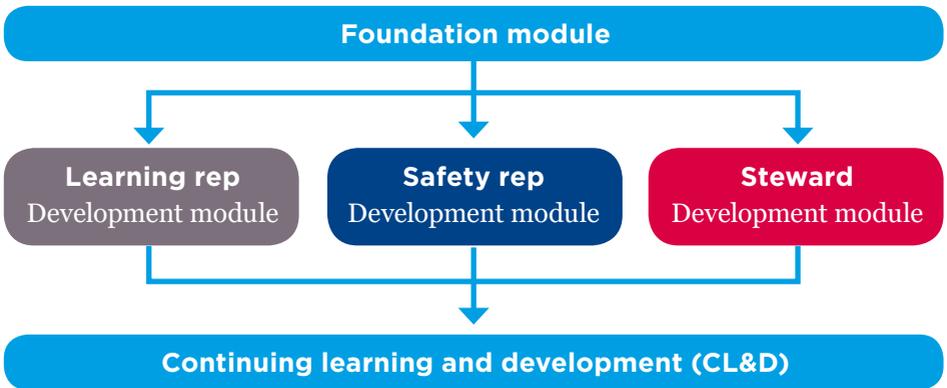


# 5. Undertaking the learning and development pathway for RCN reps

The learning and development pathway describes a framework of activities you will undertake in practice and the learning needed to perform them. The ‘pathway’ element refers to the route you take as you

access learning that is relevant to you, your role and your area.

We’ve described the stepping stones to becoming confident and active in your role and tried to keep our framework really straightforward.



“ People look at me now and see someone who has grown. What do I have that I didn’t before? It’s called a voice. I feel like I have found a purpose again, and that has had a knock-on effect for me personally and also in my clinical role. I feel reinvigorated. ”

*Liz Jeremiah, Steward, South East*

The **foundation module** is the start of your learning. It covers the activities that all RCN reps undertake to support members in the workplace and develop the RCN as a trade union and professional organisation. The foundation module brings all three types of reps together from your region or country. You'll be encouraged to plan your activity, have a go in your workplace, and come back and share your experience so that you can build your confidence and learn from each other.

You will then progress to a **development module**, which is tailored to the particular rep role you are undertaking. This is where you delve deeper into your specific role and the activities that support

a workplace culture that values learning, health and safety or good employment practice, depending on the role. You will often meet and work with reps from beyond your local area on this module.

Once you have completed the development module, there'll be a wide range of continuing learning and development opportunities, resources and events you can access to keep your knowledge and skills up to date and to keep you motivated.

As an RCN rep, you will be supported in your role by a member of staff from your local office, usually an officer who works in your area. They will help you to put your learning into practice and take your role as a rep forward.





## 6. How long does the learning take?

The average rep takes around six months to complete the pathway, although this will depend on your own pace and commitments at work and home.

You should access a foundation module within three months of accreditation as a rep. The module takes about two months to complete. This includes periods when you are

back in your workplace putting your learning into practice by having a go at some of the activities you have learned about and practised on the module.

Once you have completed the foundation module you will be able to access the next available development module, which should take the same amount of time to complete.

## 7. What's involved in each module?

Each module takes two months and consists of four days of face-to-face learning and some protected time to get active in your workplace. You'll also have time to reflect and build on your learning so that you'll complete each module feeling confident in your role.

The face-to-face learning will usually be three or four consecutive days at the start of the module and you'll be learning and having a go at what you might be doing back in the workplace.

## 8. What is the learning like? Is it very formal?

During the foundation and development modules, you will learn in small groups in a very practical way. It's not formal or anything like school or college. We encourage a safe and supportive learning environment to ensure you feel comfortable enough to have a go at the activities you will be undertaking as a rep.

We believe that our newly accredited reps bring a huge amount of life experience to the role. We have a wide range of learning activities that give you the opportunity to not only gain new knowledge and skills, but also build on those you already have.

As you go through your modules, we'll provide you with the opportunity to have a go at the activities you will be expected to undertake, so that you can build your confidence before you get out into the workplace.



As you progress through your pathway, we'll make sure you have time and space to share your successes and challenges, so that you can learn from your fellow reps and start to build up a network of support for the future.

## 9. Is there any testing or assessment?

There is an assessment element that you will need to undertake, but we have kept this as simple, relevant, and easy to undertake as possible. For each

module we will ask you to reflect on your learning and submit three learning statements that demonstrate your understanding of the role.

## 10. Will the RCN support me if I need to make adjustments to my learning and practice as a rep?

Each RCN country and region has a dedicated learning and development facilitator (their job title may vary). They are responsible for supporting reps through the pathway. Contact them to talk about anything you might need to make your learning more enjoyable, positive and suited to the way you learn.

If you need to make a reasonable adjustment to the learning process, we'll try to accommodate your needs as best we can. We'll also talk to your officer/supervisor about whether you might need similar support in the workplace.

There might be rare occasions when we cannot accommodate your adjustment. This might be because we do not have the technology, equipment or expertise to support your needs, but may also be because an activity is an essential component of the rep role you have chosen and cannot be excluded. In such a case, we would work with you and your local office/branch to look at alternative roles or ways that you can remain a part of our activist community and support our members in the workplace.

## 11. Will I need to travel far or stay away from home?

The two modules usually take place in an RCN office or a suitable alternative venue. You may have to travel and stay away from home.

The RCN will cover the cost of travel and accommodation costs in accordance with the RCN members' expenses policy. Lunch will be provided, and an evening meal and

breakfast will be included if you are required to stay overnight in a hotel.

If you are concerned about the travel and/or overnight stay please contact your local RCN office and ask to speak to your learning and development facilitator, before you apply, to talk it through.

## 12. How much time off do I need from work, and how do I get released?



You will need to negotiate five days off work to complete each module. Negotiating time off is your first activity as a rep, but you have plenty of support to enable you to do that.

Where there is a recognition agreement, a trade union rep is entitled to time off to perform their trade union duties and attend appropriate training. This will be outlined in a local recognition/facilities agreement, or equivalent in your organisation.

When you are accredited, we will write to your HR director informing them of your new role and your right to time off. Then, when you are invited to attend the foundation module, we will include a letter to

give to your manager that explains not only your right to time off, but the value of having a proactive RCN rep in the workplace.

It is important that you build a good relationship with your manager, and so we always emphasise the benefits of having an RCN rep in the workplace. You will have spoken to someone from your RCN office or patch as part of your application process, and they will be able to support you should you encounter any problems getting time off to attend.

If you do not have a recognition agreement, but have negotiated support for the role and time off from your employer, the process may look slightly different.

## 13. When can I get active in my workplace?

From the time you are accredited as a rep, there are ways you can become active in your workplace.

While you are waiting to access the foundation module, you can start to get to know your RCN colleagues and members by attending a branch meeting and exploring the RCN website to seek out the latest news, resources and campaigns.

During the foundation module you will start to explore the defined activities that all three reps undertake. You'll have the opportunity to try out activities during the programme to

build your confidence and then have a go in your workplace. During the development module, you'll start to explore the activities specific to your role. Again, you will have a chance to have a go during the programme.

As you make your way through the pathway, we will encourage you to share your experience of getting active in the workplace with your rep colleagues. Sharing successes and challenges, and learning from other reps, will become an essential part of your practice as a rep and the pathway will help you to start building those support networks.

## 14. If I'm a registered nurse, can my work as an RCN rep support my NMC revalidation?

The NMC recognises that not all nursing roles involve direct patient or clinical care. You will find that many of the activities and learning opportunities you undertake as an RCN rep support one or more of the four areas of the NMC code:

- prioritise people
- practise effectively

- preserve safety
- promote professionalism.

Our experienced reps have helped us to produce a guide: *Reflecting on active representation: Using evidence from representative activity for NMC revalidation*. You can find this in the publications section of the RCN website.

# 15. What kind of support can I expect for my learning and practice?

Each RCN country and region has a dedicated learning and development facilitator who is responsible for supporting reps through each module. They will also work with your region and country to provide continuing learning and development opportunities.

You will be supported by a named member of staff from your local RCN office. They will help you to turn your learning into practice and to get active in your workplace. They are usually an RCN officer, or senior officer, but could also be someone from the RCN region or country with a specific responsibility for reps' learning and development. RCN stewards will receive appropriate supervision for the casework they undertake.

We cover all expenses associated with your learning and development, in accordance with the RCN members' expenses policy, in a timely manner.

A full Statement of Expectations outlines the commitment the RCN will expect of you as a rep, and the support offered to RCN reps. You will find this at: [www.rcn.org.uk/publications](http://www.rcn.org.uk/publications). Please read this before you complete your application.

As you strive to make a difference in your role as a rep, there'll inevitably be times when you'll feel tested. But we'll be with you every step of the way, offering the support and development you need to overcome challenges and make a real and lasting impact in the workplace.





# Becoming a rep

Please indicate which type of representative you would like to be accredited as:



Learning representative

Safety representative

Steward

Title (Mr, Mrs etc.) ..... First name .....

Surname.....

RCN membership no. ....

Job title .....

Workplace .....

Employer.....

Home address .....

Postcode.....

## Preferred contact details:

Telephone no. .... home/work/mobile\*

Email..... work/personal\*

\*please delete as appropriate.

As part of the application process for becoming a rep, your preferred contact will be shared with your branch chair and secretary and the other RCN reps in your workplace who may contact you to discuss the role. Once you are accredited as a rep we will agree with you the contact details to be shared with the members you will be supporting.

## Correspondence will be sent to your home address.

This form is used to keep RCN representative records up to date and to enable us to notify your HR officer and/or your line manager.

## OFFICE USE

Branch.....

Name of Branch Executive officer .....

Date email sent .....

**Which of these ethnic groups best describes you? (Please tick one box)**

If Other, please specify.

**White**

- |                                  |   |  |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> English | <input type="checkbox"/> Northern Irish | <input type="checkbox"/> Welsh           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Irish   | <input type="checkbox"/> Scottish       | <input type="checkbox"/> Gypsy/Traveller |

Other .....

**Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups**

- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> White and Black Caribbean | <input type="checkbox"/> White and Black African | <input type="checkbox"/> White and Asian |
|--|--|--|

Other .....

**Asian / Asian British**

- |                                    |                                      |                                  |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Indian    | <input type="checkbox"/> Bangladeshi | <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pakistani | Other .....                          |                                  |

**Black / African / Caribbean / Black British**

- |                                  |                                    |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> African | <input type="checkbox"/> Caribbean |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|

Other .....

**Other ethnic group**

- |                               |             |
|-------------------------------|-------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Arab | Other ..... |
|-------------------------------|-------------|

**How/where did you hear about the role of an RCN rep?'**

- |                                      |   |  |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> RCN rep     | <input type="checkbox"/> RCN staff member | <input type="checkbox"/> RCN stand at an event |
| <input type="checkbox"/> RCN website | <input type="checkbox"/> RCN Bulletin     | <input type="checkbox"/> Email from the RCN    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Poster      | <input type="checkbox"/> Other            |  |

**Please tick to confirm the below is correct.**

- I will not hold office in any other UK nursing organisation or any UK health service union at the same time as holding office in the RCN.

**Return to your local office**

(see the RCN's offices section at [www.rcn.org.uk/about-us/our-structure](http://www.rcn.org.uk/about-us/our-structure))



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