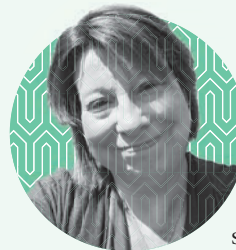




Support workers: a new career pathway

Ruth Howes and **Alison Bloxham** reveal how the new RCSLT support worker framework can help SLTs and support workers alike

Ruth Howes, lead author of the new RCSLT competency framework for support workers



RCSLT's new support worker framework is designed to ensure that all support workers receive equal recognition in their role and have access to initial training and ongoing CPD. The aim is to make sure that any support worker can develop competencies based around their job role,

achieve career development and transfer competencies between services using a skills passport.

How did the RCSLT framework evolve?

Support workers play a vital role in speech and language therapy. Having appropriately trained and supported support workers can make services more effective, and can help SLTs to manage their workloads more effectively. But in 2021, a survey by RCSLT showed that support workers lacked appropriate supervision and opportunities to train and develop at work.



In response, a working group of 19 SLTs and support workers, representing the four nations and a range of services, began developing the RCSLT framework and toolkit. In the background was a project reference group of 90 practitioners.

One member of the working group was Monica Rodriguez, an SLT apprentice based in Hertfordshire Community Trust. She told *Bulletin*: “I joined the RCSLT working group because I came to realise that there was a significant knowledge gap among support workers concerning their roles. I was motivated to help develop a resource that would promote greater understanding about their vital contributions, and facilitate opportunities for future career development and networking.

I see the RCSLT support worker framework as a vital support system for other support workers in their respective roles and careers by sharing best practice, knowledge and experiences.”

Using the framework

The support worker framework is based on the core competencies in NHS England’s AHP Support Worker Competency Framework. Above the core competencies sit clinical or role-relevant competencies. These are generic to ensure relevance across specialisms but can be added to and adapted for individual service needs. There is no right or wrong way to use the support worker framework: it has been designed to be used flexibly to meet the individual requirements of the support worker and service. A set of competencies relevant to an individual’s role is chosen to form a learning plan.

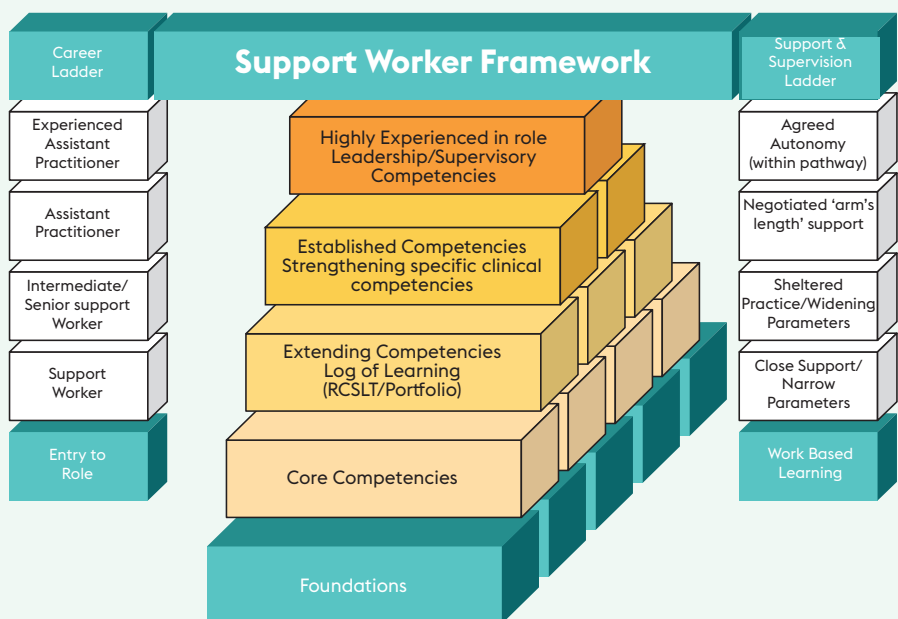
Ladder of support and supervision

This ladder is critical when considering delegation, and

encourages a dynamic approach, which brings a support worker’s experience into decision-making and supervision needs. Levels on the ladder should develop over time, from ‘close’ support with narrow parameters, to ‘arm’s length’ support with wider parameters. Many experienced support workers work with a level of autonomy in their care pathway.

What is the approach to learning?

The learning approach of the framework focuses on acquiring competencies through active or work-based learning. Reflective practice is an essential part of the approach. A portfolio or learning log is used to record progress and evidence competencies.





A dedicated supervisor, known in the framework as a ‘competencies coach’, works through the framework with the support worker and guides learning through reflective conversations. Guided conversation is the powerhouse, bringing active learning to life.

Why do we need to develop our support workers?

Support workers play a vital role in speech and language therapy. We know that support workers are proud of their roles, the skills and the experience they offer. Some will have ambitions to qualify as SLTs, but many others wish to remain in their support worker job role and have their work consistently regarded as a valued, professional activity. This is an evolving role with a skillset which complements and strengthens the SLT role.

Continuing to provide a spotlight on this framework is essential to ensure it becomes embedded within services.

Resources should be used flexibly to enable further development specific to each individual support worker. It gives structure to initial training and CPD whilst instilling confidence that support workers have a voice and that their needs have been considered and valued by RCSLT. All support workers deserve their work to be consistently regarded as a valued and integral activity.

My support worker career

Alison Bloxham shares her own career journey and looks at how the support worker framework can make a difference to the profession

I have been very fortunate that I have had the opportunity to develop my core and clinical skills over the past 15 years. I often have the chance to observe and learn from therapy sessions, especially when new clinical ideas are being used. The majority of my working week is supporting two SLTs delivering a speech and language therapy service in speech and language units and social communication units within a mainstream primary school setting. I also complete various administration tasks for all three teams.

I also help with the induction of newly appointed support workers. They are encouraged to complete a shadow day when they can observe my support sessions, reading my clinical notes and discuss their role and responsibilities. This is a welcome opportunity as I get to meet new colleagues and establish a peer support network.

Having a competency framework offers recognition to support workers. It demonstrates the importance and diversity of the role. Showing interest and investment in your staff will promote team morale. It

will show the broad range of skills and competencies support workers have. I am hoping to use the framework to give me direction for my professional development in both core and clinical competencies. Not every support worker wishes to become an SLT, but I would like the opportunity to train as an SLT through an apprenticeship or the Open University.

The framework will help me in my role by enabling me to establish what level I am working at. There is a toolkit for team leads and managers, which can help with recruitment, induction and training of support workers. Appraisal conversations can also be planned using the framework. It also gives guidance about the skills needed for me to begin supervising other support workers within the SLT service.

Every support worker has a unique working life, because our roles are individually tailored to the services that we support. The new support worker framework acknowledges this variability. Its scaffolding approach will support the newly appointed to achieve their competencies, but will also give direction to current support workers to further their CPD. **B**

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FIND OUT MORE

Visit the support worker hub and framework

rclsit.info/support-workers-hub

Join us: support workers can join RCSLT at a reduced rate by choosing the ‘Assistant’ membership category. Visit **rclsit.org/about-us/membership-overview**