

RCN Learning Representatives' Handbook



Notes

It is recognised that services are provided by nurses and midwives in a range of settings. For ease of reading, the generic terms 'nurse', 'nursing' and 'nurses' are used throughout this document.

The RCN recognises and embraces our gender diverse society and encourages this standard to be used by and/or applied to people who identify as non-binary, transgender or gender fluid.

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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1. The role of the learning rep

RCN LEARNING REPS: Role descriptor



Learning and training must be valued and protected to ensure the nursing workforce can deliver high quality care. Our members should expect to have fair and equal access within a positive learning culture which treats them with dignity and respect.

Learning reps provide space for members to think about their current practice and future aspirations and consider what learning they need to reach their goals. Where members are struggling or discouraged, learning reps help them access support and resources to boost their confidence, and challenge systemic barriers that might be getting in their way.

Learning reps build strong relationships in their workplace and understand how to influence for change. They connect with members to find out what matters to them and support them to get their issues heard and win changes that make a difference.

Learning reps grow the membership and encourage people to be active because they know that power and real change require a strong voice at a local and national level.

Supporting and representing RCN members

- Support members and colleagues by providing information and advice about learning and training
- Analyse learning and training needs.

Improving the working lives of RCN members

- Work with members and union colleagues to arrange union learning and training events
- Consult/collaborate with the employer to improve learning and training.

Creating and building workplace relationships

- Build workplace relationships and networks
- Attend and contribute to workplace committees/groups.

Being a representative of the RCN

- Raise your profile and the profile of the RCN
- Recruit members and reps
- Promote RCN campaigns
- Access and work within RCN support structures.

All activity is carried out with support of, and in partnership with, the local RCN officers, the UK Representative Committee lead and community of RCN reps.

As you can see, the role descriptor provides broad inclusivity, giving learning reps room to tailor activities to their workplaces and learners. A key aspect of your role is ensuring everyone has fair access to learning opportunities and training, helping them feel confident in their current position and able to progress their nursing career.

Your purpose is to advocate for learning and development opportunities for your trade union colleagues – but not to be a learning and development resource for employers.

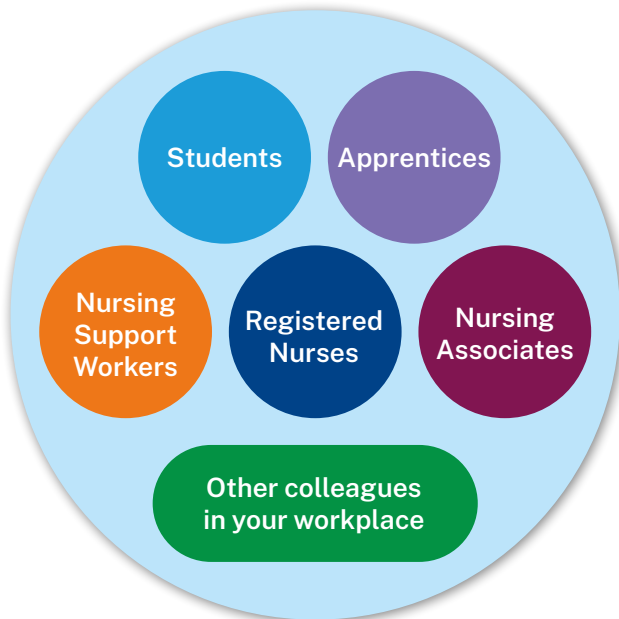
2. Supporting and representing members

Supporting individual learners is a substantial part of your role. You'll gain much satisfaction as your support and guidance helps your colleagues flourish.

Who are your learners?

As an RCN learning rep, most of your support and representation is with members of the nursing family who may approach you for information, advice and guidance about their learning.

You can also look more broadly at the learning culture in your workplace, supporting colleagues from other professions, or organising learning activities that include all staff.



The NHS Health Careers website outlines typical roles in health care, and includes case studies and information about development and career progression. Visit healthcareers.nhs.uk/explore-roles

Here are some specific audiences to seek out:

	Why they might need support	Useful resources
New staff	Many learning reps take part in their organisation's induction/onboarding process.	There is a curated list of promotional materials on the Reps Hub, most of which signpost to our excellent learning resources. Visit rcn.org/reps-hub and log in using your My RCN details.
New to health care	People embark on nursing careers at all stages of life and in all health care settings.	Visit rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/Nursing-Support-Workers/Learning-resources
Those who are revalidating	Revalidation requires at least 35 hours of continuing professional development.	Visit rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/Revalidation
Internationally educated nursing staff	To register with the NMC, nurses who trained outside the UK may need to complete an English language test and/or take the NMC Test of Competence. Nursing colleagues going through this process may welcome support.	Visit rcn.org.uk/Get-Help/Member-support-services/Immigration-Advice-Service/Preparing-for-IELTS-and-OSCE-exams and rcn.libguides.com/IELTS-OET-and-OSCE-exams

Case study: Supporting overseas nurses



Patience Bamisaye first came to the UK in 2011 to study a Master's degree in nursing, before deciding to stay, becoming a registered nurse. Her difficult experiences as an overseas nurse have shaped her pioneering approach to supporting internationally recruited nursing staff.

Although I was keen to see what nursing was like in the UK, unfortunately my initial experiences of working in the NHS were not very good, with a lot of bullying and racism. Even when I worked hard, supporting nursing students on their placements and covering shifts no one else wanted, I felt my contribution was never recognised. When I asked to take up opportunities to develop – for example, by studying to become a mentor – I was denied, while colleagues were encouraged. I was so miserable, I used to cry on my own.

Eventually I realised that I would never be able to grow in this environment, so in 2018 I moved to a university, becoming a lecturer in adult nursing. Here I found a completely different atmosphere. I had a great manager, who really supported me and at last I was enjoying my job.

I also joined the RCN – something I wished I'd done earlier, as they could have supported me through my difficulties. When I reflected on everything that had happened to me, I felt a need to tell my story, empowering internationally educated nurses to help them avoid similar upsetting experiences. I wanted to organise events and support people to become better nurses in the future, so in 2020 I decided to become a learning rep.

I decided to create a short course, with the aim of improving cultural understanding, breaking down the barriers and closing the gaps in our knowledge, enabling overseas nurses to thrive. When you look at the statistics, nurses from ethnic minority backgrounds are much more likely than their white peers to experience disciplinary proceedings, with most referrals coming from managers.

From my own lived experience, I know there can be a lot of misunderstandings and misconceptions relating to cultural differences, especially the ways we communicate with each other, including body language. For example, in my culture if your manager is talking to you, it's seen as polite and respectful to look away. But here, that's viewed as rude and you're expected to look someone in the eye.

Similarly, in the UK the usual form of delegating tasks is to ask someone to do something, rather than tell them what to do. But overseas nurses can sometimes be more direct, which can be perceived as being bossy or controlling. If you don't understand these key differences, it can give managers and your colleagues a completely wrong impression. Awareness is vital, so managers understand different cultures and staff are helped to communicate in ways more likely to be seen positively.

Running for three years now, hundreds of staff have completed the hour-and-a-half long course and it's achieved tremendous feedback. Managers often tell me how the course has helped them to see how they've misinterpreted someone's behaviour. An important aspect of the training is encouraging internationally educated nurses to speak up if they experience any issues. Research shows they're more likely to keep quiet and struggle alone, fearing the consequences if they report something.

That's what happened to me, and I couldn't let that happen to anyone else. Although I have a background in education, I would encourage all learning reps to have a go at developing some learning events. Start small and build from there. I'm so proud of the impact this course has had and what I've achieved. It's made me a better person.

Inspiring learners and breaking down barriers

Workplace learning can be about professional practice, personal development, or just for pleasure. While some people constantly seek new opportunities, others can be more reluctant, seeing it as a chore or a reminder of bad school experiences.

Fortunately we have tools, resources and advice to help you tackle all kinds of challenges, inspiring a love of learning in even the most unenthusiastic learner – or manager.

Learning styles and inventories

Adults have a lifetime of learning experience and some may have negative perceptions about their abilities. Individual personality and preferences can have an impact on people's learning styles. Working with tools and inventories that consider individual preferences can offer strategies to help individuals identify and address their personal barriers to learning.

Inventories give staff tools to:

- start a learning conversation
- enable self-directed learning and continuing professional development
- build more effective teams
- create a learning culture.

While there are many different personality and preference tools and inventories, these are the ones you're likely to encounter in the workplace.

<p>VARK</p>	<p>VARK stands for visual, auditory, reading/writing and kinaesthetic. It describes a preference for the way someone will learn new information. Popular with teachers and young learners, it can also be helpful for workplace learning.</p> <p>What you might hear people say: "I was told I am a kinaesthetic learner. It means I'm very hands on and learn best by having a go."</p> <p>Cost: There are many free versions of the VARK test online. Read more vark-learn.com/</p>
<p>Kolb/ Honey and Mumford</p>	<p>Kolb's model of experiential learning has been turned into a learning styles tool by Honey and Mumford. It identifies four learning preferences relating to how we absorb and apply knowledge.</p> <p>What you might hear people say: "I'm a reflector so I like to gather all the information and then process it, before I move on or make a decision."</p> <p>Cost: There is a small cost attached to the official Honey and Mumford tests, available online or in a printed booklet. There are also free online adapted versions. Find out more talentlens.com/career-development/honey-and-mumford-learning-styles-questionnaire.html</p>

<p>The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)</p>	<p>One of the more complicated inventories, MBTI has 16 personality types, based on how someone responds to various statements. There are four scales, with a ‘type’ at each end, which is sketched out with strengths, weaknesses and likely behaviours in various situations.</p> <p>Because of its complexity, a full diagnostic session is required, delivered either individually or in groups. It’s mostly used for team or leadership development.</p> <p>What you might hear people say: “I’m an ENFP which means I am creative, but struggle with deadlines.”</p> <p>Cost: Assessments must be delivered by an accredited practitioner, so the cost will be high.</p> <p>Visit myersbriggs.org/</p>
<p>Insights discovery</p>	<p>A popular leadership and team development tool, with similar theoretical underpinnings to MBTI, but simplified into four ‘colour energy’ types. Individuals have a ‘unique mix of energies’ determining how they think and behave.</p> <p>With its emphasis on behaviours rather than learning, it’s better suited to team building and leadership development, but can help you understand why some learning opportunities and experiences may appeal more than others.</p> <p>What you might hear people say: “I’m very sunshine yellow and we’re sociable, dynamic people. I just wouldn’t be able to do a completely online self-directed course as I would struggle if I didn’t have classmates to share ideas with.”</p> <p>Cost: Assessments must be delivered by an accredited practitioner, so the cost will be high.</p> <p>Visit insights.com/products/insights-discovery/</p>

Some things to think about:

1. **Don't get too hung up on labels.** Most tools have been criticised for lacking scientific rigour, with too much emphasis on labelling. Use them lightly, making sure learners don't get too wrapped up in their 'type', at the expense of trying new things.
2. **Think about costs.** Tools like MBTI and Insights Discovery inventories can only be administered by an accredited practitioner using official materials, making them expensive. While some organisations may believe a commercially successful model is of more value than cheaper or free alternatives, that's not necessarily the case.
3. **Learning style fatigue.** The popularity of learning styles tools means that people may encounter several different models during their working life. Results may conflict, with impacts not always being positive.



Inclusion and belonging

**“Equality is giving everyone the same pair of shoes.
Equity is giving everyone a pair of shoes that fits.”**

Here is a useful analogy that helps us consider some of the ideas and values around inclusion and belonging – by thinking about shoes.

Equality	Everyone is getting a pair of shoes
Diversity	Everyone is getting a different type of shoe
Equity	Everyone gets a pair of shoes that fits
Acceptance	Understanding we all wear different kinds of shoes
Belonging	Wearing the shoes you want without judgement

How would that look if you thought about learning?

Equality	Everyone is getting educated
Diversity	Everyone is getting a different type of education
Equity	Everyone gets education that meets their needs
Acceptance	Understanding we all learn differently
Belonging	Learning in the way you want, without judgement

Neurodivergence and specific learning differences (SpLDs)

Neurodiversity describes society in all its 'diversity'. Most people are 'neurotypical', while those who are different are 'neuroatypical' or 'neurodivergent'.

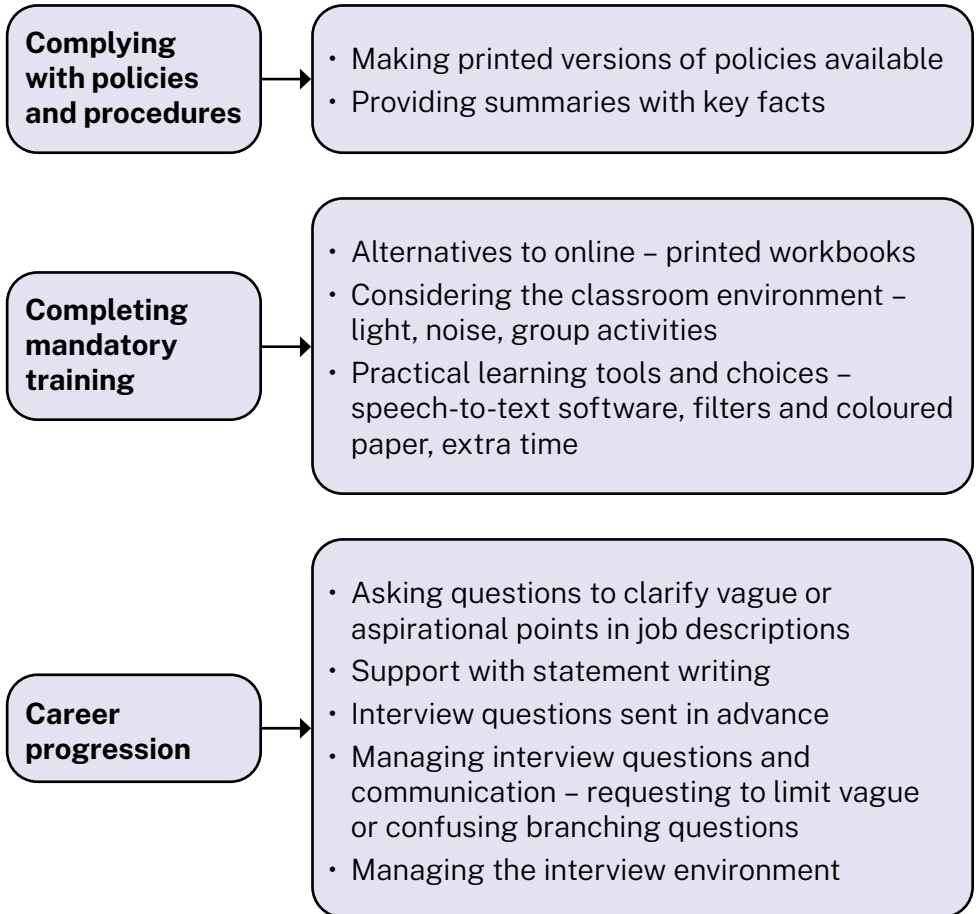
The British Dyslexia Association (BDA) estimates that between 15 and 20% of the population are neurodivergent – and it's thought this might be higher in health care organisations.

Some neurological differences are often described as 'specific learning differences' (SpLDs), as they relate to a difference or difficulty in how we learn. This is not just about learning in the traditional sense, but how we take on information, process what is happening, and respond. You're most likely to encounter the following:

- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia/developmental co-ordination disorder (DCD)
- Dyscalculia
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Autism

Neurodivergence can have a huge impact on someone's appetite for learning, as they may have had difficult experiences in the past. As a learning rep, you can offer valuable support, providing a space to explore what's holding someone back and signposting to help.

Colleagues can request reasonable adjustments in various areas including:



Is this discrimination?

Neurodivergence is included in legislative definitions of disability. You don't have to have a medical diagnosis to ask for reasonable adjustments, and the lack of a diagnosis shouldn't be an excuse to say no. As with adjustments to working practice, it's illegal for employers not to implement reasonable adjustments for someone who is disabled.

For ideas and resources, see *Neurodiversity: Supporting neurodivergent members and creating inclusive workplaces* rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/neurodiversity-supporting-neurodivergent-members-uk-pub-010-399

Access to Work funding

Access to Work and Access to Work (NI) provide government grants that can be accessed by anyone with a disability, health or mental health condition to support them at work. Funding can be used for a variety of things, including equipment, transport and coaching.

Learning reps can raise awareness and signpost members who need extra resources to help their learning. Navigating the application process can be daunting, especially for those with specific learning differences. Although the person making the application should lead the process, you can provide extra support or identify someone who can help.

Further information

- Government website and application area www.gov.uk/access-to-work
- Diversity and Ability have a great short video that gives an overview of the scheme diversityandability.com/access-to-work/

How do you identify learning needs?

Value My Skills



Value My Skills is an interactive tool that learning reps can use to help colleagues unlock their potential and energise their learning.

Learners are asked how confident they feel about a range of transferable skills, which are set out in everyday language and are not specific to a particular role or industry. This helps people think more broadly about their experiences, both past and present, in and outside of work.

For those feeling stuck or lacking in confidence, it may give a boost as they realise how many things they're good at doing. It may also help build someone's CV, especially for those new to work who don't have much formal workplace experience. In contrast, anyone approaching retirement or thinking of a career break can use it to consider the fresh start they might be seeking. Visit unionlearn.org.uk/value-my-skills



Appraisals and personal development plans

In almost all organisations, there will be an annual appraisal process. A good appraisal should be constructive, providing an opportunity to discuss achievements, challenges, and development opportunities.

Unfortunately, we often hear the process may not receive appropriate care and attention, from either the manager or the person having the appraisal. As a learning rep, you're well placed to improve negative cultures surrounding appraisals. In part 3, we'll look more closely at how you can work in partnership with employers to improve things. In the meantime, start thinking about your colleagues and how you might support them to get the most out of their appraisals.

Read the RCN's advice guide, which includes reasonable expectations and how to prepare rcn.org.uk/Get-Help/RCN-advice/appraisals-and-performance-reviews-checklist

Capability and performance

In some cases, an appraisal identifies areas where someone is struggling. Their manager may decide to address capability and performance issues through a personal development plan which includes specific learning and actions. Learning reps can identify the learning needed and how best to access it.

Serious concerns should be addressed under the relevant policies and procedures, with an RCN steward providing representation. In these circumstances, stewards and learning reps working together can enrich discussions. In your role, you can offer valuable insights on any barriers to learning so colleagues have the best chance to learn and allow their confidence to grow.

Case study: Supporting the wellbeing of care home staff through the pandemic



As a learning rep working for a care home provider, Fraser Smith decided to do something to offer extra support to members who were feeling the emotional impact of working during the pandemic.

During the pandemic, we experienced a very mixed picture in the independent care sector, with some homes having no positive cases of COVID for either the residents or staff, while sadly others witnessed deaths. Staff are always badly affected if they lose a resident. Those they care for become like family members and many residents have lived in the homes for several years. Many employees were also isolating from their own families during the height of the pandemic, often working longer hours covering for colleagues or just not wanting to leave a resident who was unwell.

As the pandemic continued, you could see some staff were really struggling and it was obvious something needed to be put in place to help them. My colleague and I had the idea of a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) course or workshop. We weren't sure how it might work, but we got initial support from RCN staff, who helped us set it all up, and the company backed the initiative too by advertising it.

We decided to host a webinar in January 2021, with two counsellors from the RCN who talked about PTSD, explaining what it was and how staff could get help if they felt they were suffering. It was interactive, with an opportunity for people to ask their own questions. We recorded it too, so those who couldn't make the live version could watch it in their own time.

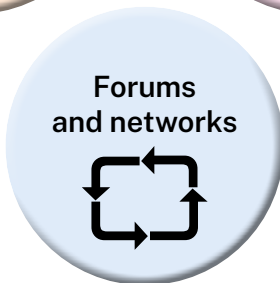
The feedback was really good. We know a lot of people can find it hard to ask for help, but even being able to recognise PTSD in yourself or a colleague can make a real difference. After the workshop, staff knew there was help available. As a company, we've become more understanding of wellbeing in general and it was very important to be able to give colleagues that opportunity.

What learning is available for members?

Thinking differently about learning

Most of us have encountered necessary but dull training, yet we know that learning can be so much more. Alongside helping us to practise safely and enhancing our skills, it can also bring more personal benefits. This includes re-energising our work, engaging us in our communities, and even improving our health.

Learning can be formal, but it doesn't have to be. Where else might you signpost people?



Organising a learning event

Informal learning events can be an effective way of opening the door to learning and bringing staff together.

- Learning at Work week takes place each May. Organisers provide an inspiration guide and you can use their tools and resources whenever you want to get an event off the ground. Visit learningatworkweek.com/
- Think about acceptance and belonging. How will you ensure your event is inclusive?
- Lunch and learn sessions deliver bite-size learning, without eating into work schedules. The focus may be on nursing, health and wellbeing, or promoting equality and inclusion. Keep them short, fun and promote them well in advance.
- Branch meetings provide a great space to sprinkle some learning. Invite a speaker, try an activity, or host a discussion that supports reflective practice. Chat to your branch executive for ideas.



Case study: creating learning opportunities



A unit care home manager, based in Ayrshire, Sheena Martin was awarded RCN Learning Rep of the year in May 2023. Her inspirational work includes organising different events that encourage staff throughout the region to take part in a variety of learning and development opportunities.

I've only been a learning rep for about two years. Having worked in care homes for more than 30 years, I felt it was a shame that there weren't any based in the independent sector, as so many nursing staff are employed here now – around 40% of our members. I could see there was a real need, as I think it's even harder for staff outside the NHS to keep themselves up-to-date. So, with encouragement from my RCN branch, I decided to do the training.

Among the challenges is trying to cover a very large rural area. I use social media a lot to keep in contact with as many staff as possible, making sure they know I'm there to help and support them with all their learning needs.

Finding creative ways that count towards revalidation is a key aspect of my role. I've launched book groups in a couple of areas, which have proved to be so popular I'm now keen to expand them. They work just like any other book group, except we choose a professional book and meet every three months to discuss it, either virtually or face-to-face. It counts towards everyone's continuing professional development.

I also do a lot of work with nursing support workers, running special events for them. One simple idea is asking registered staff to write 'thank you' speech bubbles, saying why they value support workers. These are pinned to a board, so everybody can read them. I also make up goody bags that include a raffle ticket and some treats. It gives everyone a boost, especially in these challenging times, and makes them feel appreciated.

Sometimes it can be difficult to make contact with members in the independent sector, as they're working in small homes, rather than large hospitals. I've been using the RCN's case of memories, which uses medical equipment and aromas from the 1950s to stimulate reminiscence for care home residents. But it's also proved to be a really good way of being able to meet the nursing staff and support workers at each home, so I can find out what they need. By and large, care homes welcome the learning rep role, as they can see how it enhances support and development for their staff, enabling them to provide even better care.

The RCN provides such a lot of learning resources for staff at all levels, many of them free and accessible online. But not everyone knows what's available and that all kinds of different activities and events can form part of your revalidation. So another important aspect of my role is alerting and signposting everyone towards what's on offer, and how they can make use of it for themselves.

I love being an RCN learning rep. At heart, I'm a mentor, so I really enjoy being able to help nursing staff to develop their full potential. Sometimes staff in the independent sector can feel less valued by the RCN, compared to staff who work for the NHS. But my message is the RCN is there for you too, wherever you work and whatever your job.

The RCN learning offer

RCN members have access to an unparalleled learning offer, alongside career support. Learning reps need to identify what a member needs, signposting them to the RCN resources that will help them best.

RCN Learn	<p>RCN Learn brings together content from the RCN and RCNi in a single, searchable learning hub. You can access hundreds of quality-assured educational resources supporting clinical and professional development. There is free content for RCN members, and additional content for premium subscribers. Visit rcnlearn.rcn.org.uk/</p>
The RCN Library	<p>A true jewel in the RCN crown, it's one of the reasons why many choose the RCN over other trade unions. For anyone unsure where to start, the library team offers fantastic support, including literature searching, writing skills and reference training. Visit rcn.org.uk/library/</p>
Nursing Careers	<p>Jointly developed by the RCN and Health Education England – now part of NHS England – Nursing Careers explores the variety of opportunities within health, alongside how to plan your career. Visit rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/Nursing-careers-resource</p>
RCN Careers	<p>Full of useful resources for those in all nursing roles, there's also a link to book a careers coaching session. Visit rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/Your-career</p>

Where can you find funding for CPD costs?

Employer funding

For colleagues who know what they want to learn, the last hurdle can be sourcing financial support. If it's related to professional practice, their first port of call should be their employer. At the outset, find out how funding for CPD is accessed in your organisation, so you can describe the process and signpost your colleagues.

In part 3, we'll discuss working in partnership with employers to improve access to funding and time off for study.

Scholarships and bursaries

Nursing professionals can apply for RCN bursaries, RCN Foundation bursaries and other awards to fund professional development.

Find out more rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/scholarships-and-bursaries



3. Improving Working Lives

Professional responsibilities: Keeping up with your learning

All staff have professional responsibilities related to learning, with consequences for not being compliant.

Professional responsibilities

Contractual obligations

This is learning that all staff, regardless of their profession, are contractually obliged to undertake. It is deemed essential for safe and efficient service delivery, and personal safety, and ensures organisations are meeting their legislative duties (eg, Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the General Data Protection Regulations).

Statutory and mandatory training

Employers are free to set their own policies, and training will vary depending on the needs of the workforce; the type of service and risks encountered; insurers' standards; and the governance and legal frameworks in place, including country specific requirements. Examples include fire safety, safeguarding and moving and handling.

Revalidation and CPD

Registered nurses and nursing associates require at least 35 hours of continuing professional development (CPD) over three years to remain on the Nursing and Midwifery Council's (NMC) register. At least 20 hours of this must be in participation with other learners – for example, attending seminars, shadowing colleagues and taking part in learning workshops. Read more nmc.org.uk/revalidation

Professional consequences

Pay, progression and development

Employees are usually required to complete mandatory training, with penalties for failing to comply. This may include pay rises being withheld; being prevented from taking part in professional development; and the risk of being suspended from employment or paid at a lower grade.

Claims relating to workplace related injury or ill-health

If you are injured at work or struggling with physical or mental health issues that may be directly attributed to your working conditions, not completing your mandatory training may mean you're unable to claim relief or compensation from your employer, if this training could have prevented the injury or onset of ill-health.

For example, if you incur a back injury using a piece of equipment, it may prove difficult to assert the employer's liability if you haven't completed moving and handling training, despite being given reasonable opportunities to undertake it during work time. This is known as 'contributory negligence'.

Professional registration and indemnity

The NMC doesn't set specific requirements for saying how often mandatory training must be completed. However, registered nurses and nursing associates will not be able to meet the four domains of the NMC Code if they haven't completed mandatory training.

Your professional indemnity arrangement – usually covered by your employer – is likely to have conditions, including appropriate training ensuring competence in your area of practice. In other words, you should be able to show you have the knowledge, skills and judgment to perform your task or role to the appropriate standard of care.

Revalidation and registration

CPD is a core requirement for revalidation. Without evidence of completing at least 35 hours, a registered nurse or nursing associate can't revalidate, which means losing their registration and probably their job.

Case study: Supporting nursing colleagues with revalidation



Efa Akinjise Ferdinand, from Luton and Dunstable Hospital, explains why she decided to become a learning rep and why supporting members with their revalidation is particularly rewarding.

At RCN Congress in 2017, I bumped into a colleague who suggested I should become a learning rep. It was my second Congress and I was beginning to see nurses in a different light, listening to people who were passionate about their profession and learning.

For me, the attraction was in the learning opportunities the role presented – both for myself and fellow nursing staff. I really enjoy being able to support my colleagues in the workplace. We already had a learning culture on our ward. Learning something new helps us to deliver better care and I enjoy encouraging people to read and study. What I often find is that if one person gets involved in some learning, others will quickly follow suit.

I also find it rewarding to help my nursing colleagues with their revalidation. This can be a particular issue for agency nurses, as they may not always be working in the same place regularly. I like to reassure them that I'm there to support them, giving them advice on what to do, for example on their reflections or asking someone to write a piece about their practice. I've guided a few nurses who have said it wasn't as difficult as they'd thought it might be.

I think the role has helped my own confidence to grow too. I've become the RCN branch's equality and diversity link and I don't think I would have volunteered to do that were it not for my experience as a learning rep. It has also opened my eyes to the many different learning opportunities that are out there, helping me to think about other training.

Employer responsibilities: Supporting staff with their learning

There are some key responsibilities that underpin health and care provision, which include specific references to learning and training.

The Health and Social Care Act 2008

Regulation 18 of the Health and Social Care Act covers learning and training stating:

“Staff must receive the support, training, professional development, supervision and appraisals that are necessary for them to carry out their role and responsibilities. They should be supported to obtain further qualifications and provide evidence, where required, to the appropriate regulator to show that they meet the professional standards needed to continue to practise.”

Visit cqc.org.uk/guidance-providers/regulations-enforcement/regulation-18-staffing

Regulating Care

Wherever you work, there is a regulatory body that is responsible for inspecting services using a range of standards, policies, guidance and regulations. In all of them, you will find standards relating to the learning and development of staff:

- Healthcare Inspectorate Wales hiw.org.uk
- Health Improvement Scotland healthcareimprovementscotland.org
- Care Quality Commission (England) cqc.org.uk
- Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (Northern Ireland) rqia.org.uk

If service providers don't meet the standards, they can face action including warning notices, fines and even prosecution, in cases where people are harmed or placed in danger.

Supporting revalidation

While it is ultimately the responsibility of the individual to organise and capture evidence of their learning, the NMC has issued an employers' guide to revalidation. Although there's no enforcement, they outline the minimum support registrants should expect from their employer:

“Ensure nurses, midwives and nursing associates are able to revalidate, and that there is no significant obstacle to this from the organisation’s perspective. This includes supporting nurses, midwives and nursing associates to meet the requirements for continuous professional development.”

CPD principles

The RCN is part of the Interprofessional CPD and Lifelong Learning UK Working Group, which developed a set of CPD principles in January 2019.

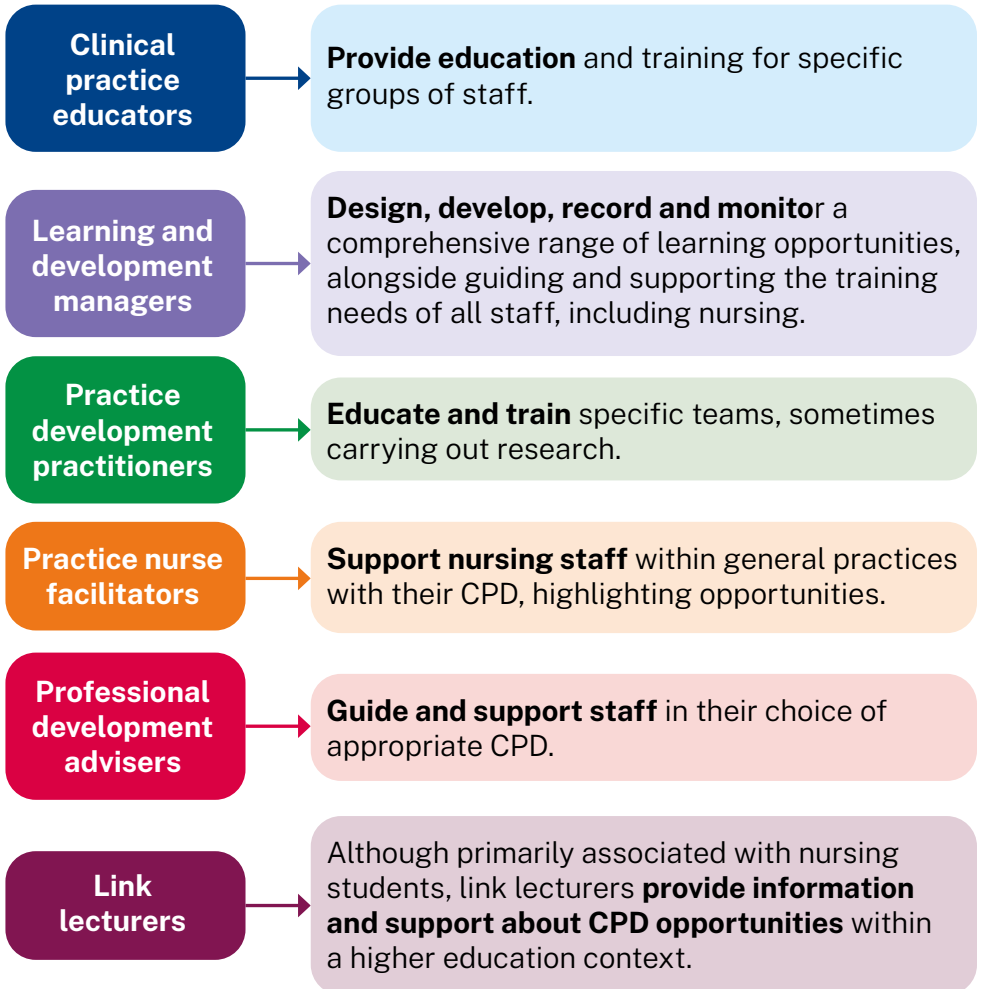
These can be applied to all workplaces and are relevant to all four countries of the UK. The principles identify what is expected from you, your employer and the wider health care system.

Find out more (pdf) bda.uk.com/uploads/assets/3830abb3-e267-4f5c-a93e7c3aca843ffe/cpdjointstatement.pdf

How is learning managed in organisations?

Whether part of the NHS or outside it, every organisation should have a policy setting out their commitment to training, including study leave and funding. Mandatory training and CPD may be managed by different parts of your organisation.

Here are some of the job titles you may encounter:





Questions to consider:

- Who manages mandatory training and CPD?
- How are budgets allocated? Is it by team, department, individual or band?
- How is it reported? And how can you access those reports?
- Is your organisation's training policy up-to-date? And when is it up for review?

Organisational barriers to learning

Alongside individual barriers to learning, there can be wider organisational barriers.

Costs

While there are costs attached to training itself, health care has the added financial burden of releasing staff to complete it. Many staff say they do mandatory training in their own time. And, while some organisations offer staff 'time off in lieu' or extra pay, many don't. The Working Time Regulation Act 1998 specifically notes that 'working time' includes any period during which a worker is receiving relevant training.

<p>Online learning</p>	<p>Online learning is a great problem-solver for organisations as it can be delivered cost effectively and has built-in compliance monitoring. It can increase engagement, offering high-quality, imaginative learning – but it’s not without its barriers, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time. Online learning is susceptible to being squeezed into short breaks and completed in staff’s own time. • Quality. Online learning packages can vary in quality and off-the-shelf packages may lack relevance to the workplace. • Shortcuts. It’s an open secret that staff find short cuts to completing this kind of training, either by circulating the answers or completing it as a group. • Hands-on experience. Can learning that is related to physical skill and movement be learnt online?
<p>Box ticking</p>	<p>While there can be many benefits of appraisals and personal development plans, they can also become ‘tick box’ exercises or focus heavily on service provision, rather than someone’s personal development.</p>
<p>Availability and access</p>	<p>How and when is learning delivered? Does it favour certain workers? Planning and delivering learning for a huge organisation can be challenging, with some groups overlooked. Think about the different roles in your organisation and how and when those staff work. Do they have access to learning during working hours, with the time and equipment they need to complete it?</p>
<p>Discrimination</p>	<p>Does every group in your organisation feel included, with fair and equal access to learning? Consider job roles, departments, and protected characteristics. Could working with staff networks open discussions about access to learning?</p>

Being a voice for local members

As you become more active in supporting individuals, you'll begin to gather vital information about the bigger picture on learning provision. You may want to work with members on a collective basis.

Asking groups how they're getting on, how they feel about learning and training, and what they would like to see improved, is a great way to connect with members and start a dialogue between unions and your employer.

Staff surveys, training needs analysis and appraisals

All organisations have a structure to gather information about the learning and training needs of their workforce. Often this happens via the appraisal system. In addition, staff surveys usually include questions about learning and development or career aspirations.

If organisational changes are happening, a 'training needs analysis' may also be undertaken. Alterations to staffing or service delivery also require an examination of staffing levels and skill mix to meet new ways of working. Any enquiries must be fit for purpose, with staff given the chance to engage meaningfully.

Questions to consider:

- Do all stakeholders have an opportunity to take part in a meaningful way?
- Is the data gathered what you would have expected?
- Is there a disconnect between what staff are saying, and what is uncovered in surveys, appraisals and training needs analysis?

Policy reviews

Most employers have a set of policies setting out agreed employment practice and procedures. Alongside an overarching training policy, there may be separate policies relating to issues such as recruitment, apprenticeships, secondments, and sabbaticals.

As a learning rep, you need to explore your organisation's policies to establish where learning and training is situated and whether any other policies impact someone's access to, and experience of, learning and training.

Most employers review policies in partnership with staff. Before you agree any changes, speak to members to find out how the policy works in practice and whether they feel it needs alterations.



Critiquing a policy

Step 1: Read through the policy

- Does the new policy replace an existing policy? Does it 'reinvent the wheel'?
- Who has written/designed the policy?
- Does the policy need to be read in conjunction with other policies?
- Are there guidance notes accompanying the policy?



Step 2: Review the content

- What are your general impressions of the policy?
- What is the evidence given for the policy and is it valid in your opinion?
- Is it non-discriminatory?
- Is the policy based on current employment legislation and/or good practice?
- Will the policy affect RCN members? How many?
- Will it mean changes in work practices?
- Will it lead to improvement or deterioration in terms and conditions?
- Is the policy realistic and able to be delivered?



Step 3: Review the presentation and accessibility of the policy

- Is it well presented, easy to understand, and jargon free?
- How does the policy compare with any RCN model policy or RCN advice or information – for example, job-share or workability booklets.

Partnership working

With the evidence you've gathered, you should feel confident to raise issues or ideas with your employer, working collectively to bring about change. Seek support from your local branch executive and members.

In the NHS, the term 'staff side' describes a group where recognised trade union reps meet to consider issues for discussion with the employer. It is an important place to seek support, but you may also find there are other relevant workplace committees related to your rep role.

Regionally and nationally, there may be opportunities for you to represent your members, including Social Partnership Forums or RCN UK Rep Committees.

You may find this RCN guide useful, '*Working Together: Being active on staff side*'. Read our publication

rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/pub-007153

Learning agreements

A partnership learning agreement is a formal arrangement between the RCN and the employer, providing a framework to establish and grow learning and development. It sets out the terms under which trusts or employers, trade unions and staff side organisations – where they exist – work in partnership to promote lifelong learning, training and development throughout an organisation, ensuring equal access to learning opportunities.

Agreements should be supported by an action plan detailing the agreed activities of the partnership and a committee or forum that includes – as applicable – learning representatives, managers, heads of learning and development, and any other learning partners.

Visit rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/Learning-agreements

Case study: Developing learning agreements



Arianne Shephard has been an RCN learning rep in an independent healthcare company since 2018. Despite her organisation changing hands several times, she has maintained her role, also ensuring that learning agreements remain in place.

The learning role rep has always been really important to me and it's something I've managed to continue, despite several company takeovers. In 2022, I moved to another organisation, making clear at the interview that I wanted to retain my learning rep role. I took up the new post on condition I could explore the possibility of having a learning agreement, as I knew this was something that could benefit the whole group.

When you're no longer working within the NHS, you can feel isolated and as if you've come away from the nursing family. But from day one, this learning rep role has drawn me back in, reigniting my passion for nursing.

The initial training opened my eyes to everything the RCN provides to help people make the most of their learning. No matter what your role is, it's so important for everyone to take part in opportunities to learn. It's something you will always have that can only ever grow and you can continue to share it.

Learning a new skill opens different doors and impacts so many others – your patients, your colleagues and even senior leaders. And as an organisation, it shows you're willing to invest in that person and are interested in their development.

To make sure our learning agreement works in practice, a key aspect has been to recruit a variety of learning reps. Now we have a very diverse and active group of 10 people, which includes nursing support workers and internationally educated nurses. Some have had their own difficulties with learning, including dyslexia, but it means they can help others with similar challenges, demonstrating learning really is for everyone.

As learning reps, we recognise that people learn in different ways. Personally, despite coming from an academic family, that style doesn't suit me, so I can understand others' challenges, helping them find a way through. Some may have had poor experiences in the past, leaving them feeling disheartened – but if you don't learn, you're limiting your progress.

The learning rep role is so inclusive. We're the voice on the ground who can say, this is what we need, here's where the barriers are, and this is how we think they can be overcome. We have real influence over decisions and what happens next.



Irene Murray is the RCN National Officer working with the Independent Sector. She has been supporting Arianne, helping to flesh out a learning agreement that delivers benefits for all nursing staff.

The RCN learning agreement is a very straightforward template, which talks about how we will work together with the employer. At the beginning we like to sit down with learning reps and managers to devise a practical action plan for the next 12 months. This gives us a real focus for the year ahead.

Over that time, we provide a variety of different learning and development sessions. These might be training days, lunches or even webinars. In Arianne's organisation, learning reps wanted more support for health care support workers who had been internationally educated. Another aspect they highlighted is leadership and what the RCN might be able to offer, while a third strand focuses on preceptorship.

Organisations can promote that they have a learning agreement with the RCN, which many feel is a powerful recruitment tool. But having an agreement that works is very much driven by RCN members on the ground. This is a far more convincing and effective approach than trying to impose something from on high.

Ask. Listen. Act and using the RCN Nursing Workforce Standards

The *RCN Nursing Workforce Standards* can be used by reps and branches to start a conversation about workplace experiences, highlighting and addressing system-wide issues. They can help move the conversation from 'who went wrong and how can we blame them' to 'what went wrong and how we can fix it'.

Download a copy of the Standards at rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/rcn-workforce-standards-uk-pub-009681

Download a copy of 'Ask. Listen. Act': rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/ask-listen-act-uk-pub-010-004



Taking action!

What's the issue?

Try to capture the issue, describing it in a short 'problem statement' that includes how widespread it is and if it has been raised already.

What is your ideal outcome?

Link your statement to a clear desired outcome that will be effective in the long-term.

What needs to be done to achieve that outcome?

This depends on the issue and the energy and influence needed for the desired outcome.

You might:

- take the issue to your local RCN branch
- work with other unions to raise it at staff side
- talk to the people you know can make the change quickly
- arrange a meeting for members to discuss the issue and agree what they would like to do next.

Include members throughout, so they both own the issue and any positive results achieved.

Who can help? Each issue needs a different approach with different people to make a change. Your RCN officer is key.



4. Creating and building workplace relationships

Facilities time and your relationship with your line manager

Recognition is when an employer formally recognises a union, such as the RCN, usually with a written agreement.

As a learning rep, if the RCN has recognition, you are legally entitled to facilities time – paid time for trade union duties. This includes time off to undertake your Learning and Development Pathway for RCN Representatives. You are also entitled to unpaid time off when taking part in trade union activities.

Facilities time will be outlined in your local recognition/facilities agreement, or its equivalent in your organisation.

Some workplaces may not have trade union recognition. If you don't have an agreement, or are having difficulties in securing facilities time, speak to your RCN supervising officer as early as you can.

Negotiating time off with your manager is a key first step. Some managers may not have experience of trade union reps. You can help them understand your role and the many benefits it brings to the organisation.

Five things managers should know about RCN learning reps

RCN learning reps:

1. are legally entitled to time off to undertake their duties and managers can talk to HR about how to backfill
2. work with individuals to help them to consider their current practice and future aspirations, including the learning needed to reach their goals
3. understand the barriers to learning, helping those who are struggling or feel discouraged to access support and resources, boosting confidence
4. can signpost and support staff to navigate their way through the unparalleled high-quality resources available through the RCN, helping them find the right learning at the right time
5. understand the link between learning and high-quality patient care. They can work in partnership with employers to consider organisational need and access to learning, ensuring everyone's right to learn.

Use these publications to support discussions:

- RCN Learning Reps Role Descriptor
rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-learning-reps-role-descriptor-a4-leaflet-uk-pub-010-860
- Making the case for facilities time and facilities agreements in the NHS
rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-006202
- Acas Code of Practice on time off for trade union duties and activities
acas.org.uk/acas-code-of-practice-on-time-off-for-trade-union-duties-and-activities
- Acas Non-Union Representation in the Workplace
acas.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-03/non-union-representation-in-the-workplace.pdf

- Time off for trade union duties and activities in Northern Ireland nidirect.gov.uk/articles/time-trade-union-duties-and-activities
- NHS Terms and Conditions of Service Handbook (Section 25: Time off and facilities for trades union representatives) nhsemployers.org/publications/tchandbook
- Scotland – Staff Governance Standard www.staffgovernance.scot.nhs.uk/what-is-staff-governance/staff-governance-standard/

Building a network to support your role

Once you have agreed facilities time, start identifying key people to work with you.

- **Learning and development in the workplace** – including those working in organisational learning and development, and in clinical practice development. There are groups and committees you may wish to liaise with or ask if you can become more closely involved in their work.
- **Other union learning reps** – If you work in a large organisation where other unions are represented, find your fellow learning reps.
- **Other RCN reps** – Connect with other RCN reps working in your organisation. You can work collaboratively with stewards and health and safety reps, supporting members individually, and making improvements across the organisation.

5. Being a representative of the RCN

Raising your profile within the workplace

RCN reps play a key role in building the RCN membership and union activism at a workplace level.

Your links to local members are vital, helping you listen and understand common concerns; supporting members to organise local campaigns; and raising issues that might become national RCN campaigns.

1

Walk around your workplace, making sure members and non-members know your face and how to contact you for information and support.

2

Start conversations with members and non-members, listen and engage members in activism.

3

Understand and become familiar with the workforce, identifying gaps in RCN membership and where potential activists are based.

4

Work with other RCN reps, carrying out constant member and representative recruitment. We have a range of resources to help recruit new members and promote the RCN in your workplace.

5

Use your MyRCN details to log in to the reps' hub, where you can order resources.

Being a constant recruiter

The more people who join the RCN, the stronger and more powerful the voice of nursing becomes. A bigger pool of active and engaged members means a bigger voice, more credibility, and more clout.

Many of our members join the RCN after a conversation with their colleagues or friends. There's no hard sell, it's just members talking to others about what matters to them, explaining how the RCN might be able to offer support, based on the benefits they've personally experienced.

There's no step-by-step formula to recruiting members. Consider requesting to attend staff inductions, or create engaging noticeboards and permanent recruitment displays.

By far the most fun is holding a social event. Ask members to bring along someone who isn't a member and get chatting.



Recruiting members: 10 things to say

We are the largest nursing union in the UK, probably the world.

We are viewed by health care employers, government, health bodies and charities as experts on all that is nursing.

We only recruit nursing staff as members – so nursing is our specialism.

Nursing support workers and health care assistants can join the RCN. The membership charge is less than registered nurse membership, but the service is equal.

We have trained workplace stewards, health and safety reps, and learning reps who specialise in supporting and advising nursing staff.

RCN in-house lawyers cover all aspects of employment law. With their help, members are much less likely to be struck off or receive sanctions.

Members can join any of more than 40 professional forums and networks to share professional knowledge as well as shape standards, practice and education.

We have the largest body of learning and development resources and opportunities for all levels of nursing, compared to other unions.

We have the largest free nursing library in Europe. It can be accessed electronically.

We provide learning opportunities specifically for nursing support workers. *First Steps* is a popular free resource for both members and non-members.

For up-to-date information on membership fees, it's best to check the membership page on our website. Note that new nurses and midwives pay half in their first year of registration, while trainee nursing associates and health care assistants pay a lot less than registered nurse members rcn.org.uk/membership/Membership-fees

Supporting RCN campaigns

Working with our members, the RCN has been campaigning for more than a century.

We've been protecting and securing better and safer working environments, improving terms and conditions, achieving better pay and ensuring access to learning. As the voice of nursing, we have also campaigned for improved service provision for all.

Campaigning is about finding your voice, raising awareness and trying to achieve change that makes things better, tackling issues that really matter to members, wherever they are. It's also a vital function of trade unions.

Every RCN member has the potential to become an active campaigner. If something is important to you, invariably you're able to speak confidently about it. Members are experts in their own experience, so are perfectly equipped to give voice to issues affecting them and those in their care.

Campaigning activity may be specific and local, focusing on an issue impacting a group of members and their colleagues, for example, car parking or rest areas. It can also be much more wide-ranging, such as national campaigns about rest and rehydration, or staffing for safe and effective care.

As a learning rep, you can discover what really concerns members, signposting them to evidence or national campaigns to help them make the best case. At times, you'll be advocating on their behalf but more importantly, you'll be helping them to find their own voice – and be heard.

For more information about RCN campaigns see:

- Getting heard, making change – A campaigning resource for RCN representatives
rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/pub-007937
- Reps campaigning poster –
rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/pub-007936
- The Campaign with us section of our website
rcn.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us
- The Organising for change section of our website
rcn.org.uk/get-involved/organising-for-change

Building relationships within the RCN

As a learning rep, you have a direct link to the RCN's governance structures, via your branch and the RCN UK Learning Reps' Committee.

The RCN UK Learning Reps Committee:

- provides a voice for RCN accredited learning reps, helping to shape the RCN's policies on workplace learning
- reports through the Trade Union Committee to the RCN Council
- supports and shapes the learning and development you receive, including the joint reps' conferences, which take place in spring and autumn.

Each England region and UK country is represented by a learning rep who has been elected by the membership of that region/country.

Find out more rcn.org.uk/about-us/how-the-rcn-is-governed/rcn-committees-and-groups/learningrepresentatives-committee

Connecting with your branch

Branches involve members within a geographical area, helping deliver the RCN's charter objectives and strategic plan through:

- recruiting, retaining, supporting and developing members
- encouraging members to become engaged, involved and active in the RCN
- enabling learning and development, leadership and support for professional and trade union activity
- providing communication and networking opportunities for RCN members locally
- providing a focus for local RCN visibility and local activity
- providing a local RCN structure and its associated accountability linking with the relevant board to ensure that the views of branch members are taken into account in all consultations and that decisions and actions of the board are communicated to members in the branch
- submitting proposed agenda items for RCN Congress and ensuring that the branch is represented at Congress
- supporting nominations for election to RCN Council, RCN President and Deputy President, the Agenda Committee and other entities as determined by the charter, standing orders and regulations.

Branches are also responsible for accrediting RCN representatives.

Support for you as an RCN learning rep

Managing members' expectations

Representing and negotiating on behalf of members is an essential element of the role of RCN workplace representatives. However, members may only become aware of your role when they're having difficulties. Sometimes they have unrealistic expectations of what you can achieve on their behalf, making excessive demands on your time.

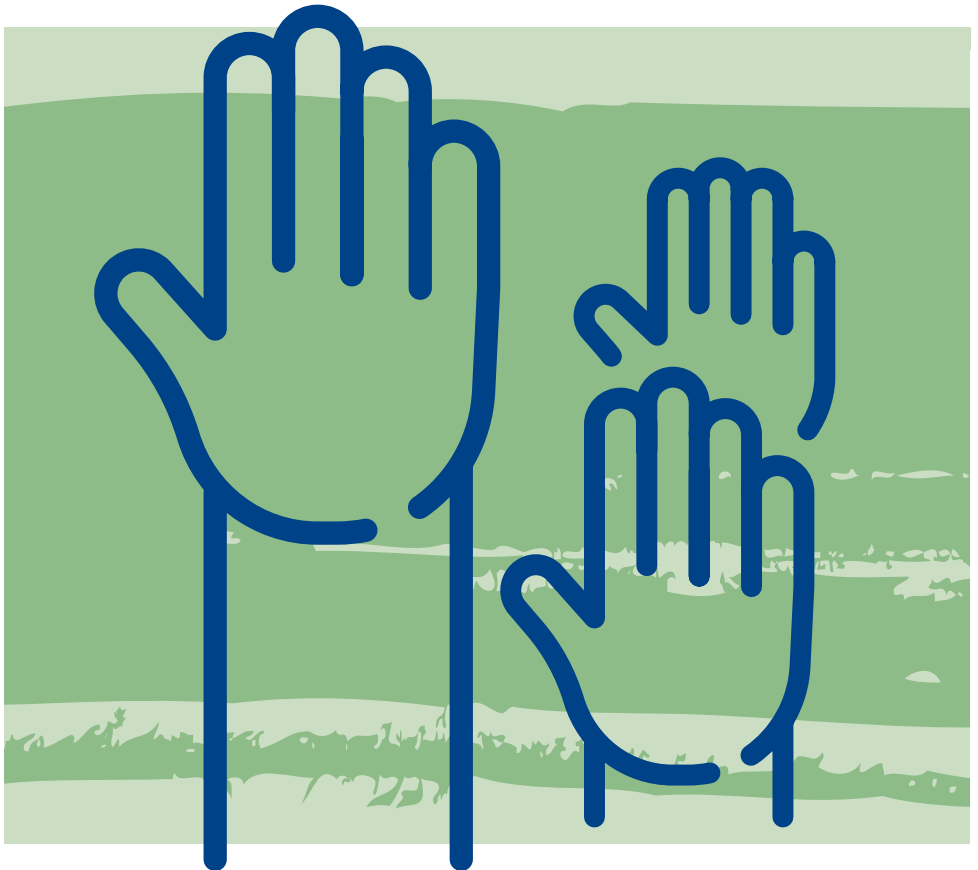
- **Ensure members understand** the purpose and scope of your role.
- **Make sure they know you're not an RCN employee** and, while you have RCN support, you do this role in addition to your substantive post.
- **Determine your boundaries.** For example, when will you switch your phone on/off? Communicate this clearly from the outset.
- **Ensure that an 'out of office' message is on your emails,** directing members to RCN Direct when you're not available.
- **Only promise what you can deliver.** Be realistic about what can be achieved.
- **Agree your preferred methods of communication** such as text, email, telephone, etc. Keep communication lines open and members updated.

Managing unacceptable behaviour

We recognise that members can be experiencing high levels of stress and may also be unwell when they contact our representatives.

If a member's behaviour no longer falls within the RCN Respect Charter rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-006214 contact your supervising officer and consider completing the 'Reporting unacceptable behaviour' form on the RCN Reps' Hub.

Raise any worries or concerns with your RCN officer, remembering you can always ask for help or support.



6. Celebrating success and sharing experiences

It's important we share our experiences and celebrate our successes, whether big or small. Every action adds up to something positive, proactive and powerful.

For instance

- Do you have quick corridor chats, where you signpost someone to a resource or guidance?
- Did you raise the issue that people on nights weren't getting any face-to-face training?
- Have you organised a well-received 'lunch and learn' session?
- Has someone achieved reasonable adjustments because you gave them the confidence to ask?

A positive learning culture makes a huge difference to everyone's working lives and is one of the top three things members are both interested in and want to protect.

Share your stories – with our RCN officers, branch colleagues and networks. In addition, your local UK Learning Rep committee member would love to hear about your successes. We also encourage nominations for our Learning Rep of the Year award.

Becoming a rep changemaker

RCN rep changemakers are a group of around 200 reps who have said they are willing to be contacted about opportunities to support projects that might benefit from their expertise and experience.

As a rep changemaker you can choose what you would like to get involved in, depending on your capacity to help and on what matters to you.

Being a changemaker is about bringing different perspectives to important issues and sharing your learning with others.

Find out more rcn.org.uk/reps-hub/rep-changemaker



The RCN represents nurses and nursing, promotes
excellence in practice and shapes health policies

rcn.org.uk

RCN Direct

rcn.org.uk/direct

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