

Early career principles and standards for occupational therapists

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Introducing our Early career principles and standards for occupational therapists

Early career occupational therapists are **newly registered practitioners**, those **returning to practice** and those **transitioning from international settings** in the first three years following registration with the HCPC.

Early career occupational therapists are characterised by their transition into autonomous practice, consolidation of core professional capabilities, development of professional identity and active engagement in continuing professional development and career planning.

Context

Our profession is growing, with increasing numbers of graduates, returners and international recruits entering the workforce.

Around 2,500 learners (students and apprentices) **graduate** from United Kingdom (UK) occupational therapy pre-registration programmes each year and are eligible to register with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) to begin their professional career (Royal College of Occupational Therapists 2025b). 15% don't immediately enter the workforce. Of those who do:

- 53% join the hospital sector (National Health Service [NHS] and non-NHS hospitals)
- 34% work in other health or social care settings
- 12% enter diverse roles across the breadth of occupational therapy practice. (Palmer et al 2023)

Despite this promising start, retention remains a challenge. Over 50% of learners (students and apprentices) who responded to our Workforce Survey (2025a) were looking to work in inpatient, outpatient services and hospitals, key settings for our services. Yet statistics tell us around one in five occupational therapists (21%) leave the hospital sector and community settings within two years (Palmer et al 2023).

International recruitment has played a key role in supporting the NHS workforce. Between 2013–2017, 1,114 occupational therapists joined the HCPC register via the international route. However, 51% left the register within four years, compared to just 5.7% of UK-educated registrants during the same period (HCPC 2023a). While this population may be geographically mobile, there is work needed to ensure they are supported to be a valued member of the occupational therapy community and wider health and care communities.

It is essential that occupational therapists who are **returning to practice** after a break of two or more years or registering for the first time following a period of non-practice after completing their studies, are fully supported as they begin or restart their careers. These individuals bring valuable experience, diverse perspectives and renewed commitment to the profession. Their successful re-/integration is vital to strengthening the occupational therapy workforce and ensuring contemporary, high-quality, person-centred care.

As identified in our *Occupational therapy workforce strategy* (RCOT 2024a), the profession faces:

- high vacancy rates
- expanding opportunities placing pressure on the existing workforce
- a growing and ageing population with increasingly complex health, housing and social needs.

These factors provide both opportunities and challenges. To meet current and future demand, we must invest in a skilled, diverse and committed occupational therapy workforce, supported by strong professional identity and career development opportunities.

This document sits alongside the *Professional standards of practice, conduct and ethics* (RCOT in press) and the *Career development framework: guiding principles for occupational therapy* (RCOT, 2021), providing profession-specific guidance for employers and early career occupational therapists to support a safe and successful transition into practice.

Supporting transition

Early career support must bridge the often-challenging transition from education into professional practice. It should recognise and build on the individual skills, experiences and learning achieved through pre-registration education. It should offer consistent opportunities for supervision, continuing professional development and structured reflection throughout the first three years of practice, instilling a commitment for lifelong learning.

Early career support should celebrate diversity, acknowledge each occupational therapist's unique attributes and lived experience, and foster a sense of belonging, progression and professional identity.

While there are many reasons occupational therapists may change roles or sectors, it's vital that, as a profession, we provide every early career occupational therapist with a strong and supportive transition to the profession. We all have a role in shaping the quality and sustainability of our profession and ultimately ensuring we enjoy being, and are proud to be, occupational therapists.

Through the introduction of our principles and standards to evidence delivery, we are setting clear expectations for both employers and early career occupational therapists. Our aim is to smooth the transition into practice, foster excellence, nurture a strong sense of professional belonging and ultimately improve retention, securing the sustainability of the workforce, quality and satisfaction across the profession. Early career occupational therapists should feel recognised, nurtured and equipped to thrive.

Embedding these principles will take time. They are designed to complement existing early career programmes while offering a unique occupational therapy perspective. Created by the profession, for the profession to support occupational therapists in successfully kick-starting their careers.

We've outlined five principles in this document. The principles are demonstrated through underpinning standards. Each principle reflects a theme identified through the transition and development process:

1. Establishing a sense of belonging and connection
2. Structured supervision and support
3. Career development and lifelong learning
4. Sustaining personal health and wellbeing
5. Professional identity and networking

Employers have a duty of care to support early career occupational therapists as they consolidate their learning, safely develop their autonomy and grow into confident professionals. This includes using the *HCPC's Principles for Preceptorship* (HCPC 2023b) alongside other relevant national policy and early career guidance to shape high-quality support.

To demonstrate the principles in action, we've provided supporting standards for employers to meet. It is the responsibility of both the early career occupational therapist and the employer to proactively engage in the period of transition.

Early career support is not limited to clinical skill acquisition. It encompasses professional identity development, wellbeing, leadership capacity and meaningful contribution to the future of the profession. Equally, it should provide opportunities to engage in a breadth of experiences across the four pillars of practice – clinical practice, education, leadership, and research and innovation.

Employers of all sizes and areas of practice are expected to foster inclusive, supportive organisational cultures that prioritise wellbeing, professional growth and active engagement of early career occupational therapists in shaping their practice environments. It's essential that employers and education providers collaborate to ensure continuity of learning and professional growth beyond point of registration.

These principles reflect the voices of early career occupational therapists, employers, academics and people who access occupational therapy services and are grounded in evidence. They shine a light on what works, champion what is valued and set out what is essential to build a confident, capable and inspired occupational therapy workforce.

How employers can apply the principles

The standards are not currently linked to a formal quality assurance mechanism. However, we strongly encourage employers of early career occupational therapists to adopt and embed them within their teams, services and organisations. The standards provide a framework for evidencing the principles. We've written them with the breadth of areas of occupational therapy practice in mind and are aimed to be relevant for all employers.

They are designed to complement existing guidance such as the HCPC's *Principles for Preceptorship* (2023b) and country-specific guidance – for example, *NHS England's multi-professional preceptorship quality mark* (NHS England 2025). While these regulatory and system-level standards exist, there has been variation across the four nations and no profession-specific guidance.

As the professional body for occupational therapy, RCOT is uniquely positioned to fill this gap and support consistent, high-quality early career development.

Additionally, with a growing number of graduates entering non-health-related roles, such as welfare or education (Palmer et al 2023), these Principles aim to strengthen the profession's appeal and retention by enabling a smoother, more supported transition across the breadth of occupational therapy practice.

Our next steps

We're committed to embedding these principles across the profession. As part of our Workforce Strategy delivery, we will:

- promote the principles through professional networks, events and resources
- support employers to implement them effectively
- gather feedback from early career occupational therapists and employers to refine and evolve the principles.

In time, we plan to launch an employer recognition scheme to highlight and celebrate organisations that demonstrate excellence in supporting early career occupational therapists, helping to position them as preferred destinations for first posts and career development.

Principles for early career occupational therapists

Our principles outline the things that need to be in place to support early career occupational therapists' transition into practice.

Each of these principles is supported by standards which employers can demonstrate to show how they're supporting their early career occupational therapists in a positive transition that fosters belonging, structured supervision, professional development, wellbeing and a strong professional identity.

Principle 1

Early career occupational therapists experience a sense of belonging, connection and feel valued as they begin or return to their professional journey.

Principle 2

Early career occupational therapists have access to regular, structured supervision that supports their individual transition into autonomous, safe and confident practice.

Principle 3

Early career occupational therapists are supported to engage in professional development, establish individual career trajectories and contribute to the development of the profession.

Principle 4

Employers proactively promote the wellbeing of early career occupational therapists through supportive working practices that enable sustainable, reflective and self-directed engagement in the profession.

Principle 5

Early career occupational therapists develop a strong professional identity and engage with the wider profession.

Early career principles and standards for occupational therapists

Principle 1

Early career occupational therapists experience a sense of belonging, connection and feel valued as they begin or return to their professional journey.

The employer demonstrates this through the following standards:

- 1.1** Induction processes support integration into the team, profession and wider service, with emphasis on distinct occupational therapy identity and values (Royal College of Occupational Therapists, In press 2026).
- 1.2** There are processes in place to actively promote an anti-racist and anti-discriminatory culture of inclusion through team engagement, and the principles of equity, diversity and belonging.
- 1.3** Employers facilitate access to peer support networks, both locally and nationally, including early career communities and occupational therapy-specific groups.
- 1.4** There is a process in place for early career occupational therapists to access mentorship opportunities that offer tailored guidance beyond supervision structures.

Principle 2

Early career occupational therapists have access to regular, structured supervision that supports their individual transition into autonomous, safe and confident practice.

The employer demonstrates this through the following standards:

- 2.1 Information about supervision arrangements and expectations is accessible to all involved, and early career occupational therapists receive focused supervision and guidance to support their transition towards the full scope of their role, enabling progression to safe, confident and autonomous practice.
- 2.2 Supervision uses a range of models and approaches that are inclusive and reflective, providing opportunities for feedback and discussion of confidence, challenges, professional identity and development.
- 2.3 There is a process in place to ensure those providing supervision to early career occupational therapists are prepared for and supported in this role.
- 2.4 Supervision recognises early career occupational therapists as individuals with levels of responsibility, autonomy and support adjusted to match their skills, experience and learning needs.
- 2.5 There is a process to ensure that early career occupational therapists are given timely access to personalised early career programmes.

Principle 3

Early career occupational therapists are supported to engage in professional development, establish individual career trajectories and contribute to the development of the profession.

The employer demonstrates this through the following standards:

- 3.1** There is a process to ensure early career occupational therapists take an active role in identifying their individual learning needs, setting development goals and engaging with professional development opportunities across the four pillars of practice within the Career development framework: *guiding principles* (Royal College of Occupational Therapists 2021).
- 3.2** Employers facilitate opportunities for high-quality continuing professional development (Broughton and Harris 2022), including opportunities for supporting learning, reflection and development as part of everyday practice.
- 3.3** Employers actively seek to understand the knowledge, skills and values developed during pre-registration education and ensure this learning is built upon in the workplace.
- 3.4** Employers actively seek to engage with education providers to inform the development of contemporary pre-registration programmes, supporting alignment between guiding policy, evolving service needs and graduate readiness.
- 3.5** Employers support early career occupational therapists to engage in practice that contributes to long-term workforce sustainability, including opportunities for career development, progression and retention.

Principle 4

Employers proactively promote the wellbeing of early career occupational therapists through supportive working practices that enable sustainable, reflective and self-directed engagement in the profession.

The employer demonstrates this through the following standards:

- 4.1 There are processes in place for early career occupational therapists to develop agency in managing their health and wellbeing.
- 4.2 There is a process in place where employers regularly review and adjust workload expectations to support the early career occupational therapists' wellbeing, balanced with the needs of the service.
- 4.3 Employers actively promote resources to support health and wellbeing management, particularly in response to stress and transition-related challenges.

Principle 5

Early career occupational therapists develop a strong professional identity and engage with the wider profession.

The employer demonstrates this through the following standards:

- 5.1 There are processes to support early career occupational therapists to explore and articulate the unique value of occupational therapy in multiprofessional settings.
- 5.2 There are processes to support early career occupational therapists to engage in peer learning and leadership opportunities.
- 5.3 Early career occupational therapists are provided with information about RCOT membership, including its purpose and the benefits of being an active member of the professional body.
- 5.4 Early career occupational therapists are expected to engage with the wider profession. This may include accessing RCOT Communities, World Federation of Occupational Therapists and other occupational therapy forums.

Definitions and terminology

Term	Definition
Autonomous practice	A fundamental element of the occupational therapy standards of proficiency, this is the ability to assess a professional situation and address it appropriately with the relevant occupational therapy knowledge and experience. It also includes being able to make reasoned decisions, to be able to justify these decisions and accept personal responsibility for all actions (Health and Care Professions Council 2023c).
Continuing professional development (CPD)	The way in which an individual continues to learn and develop throughout their career. CPD is essential and evolves skills, knowledge, professional identity and professional conduct so that individuals stay up to date and practise safely and effectively (Broughton and Harris 2022).
Early career	The first three years following registration with the HCPC. 'Early career' includes newly registered practitioners, those returning to practice after a prolonged absence and internationally qualified occupational therapists adapting to UK practice. It is characterised by the transition into autonomous practice, consolidation of core professional capabilities, development of professional identity and active engagement in CPD and career planning.
Early career programme	'A programme of structured support that's helpful if you're newly qualified, been internationally recruited, are returning to practice or are moving between different settings or areas of practice. Early career programmes can help you develop confidence, skills and knowledge' (RCOT 2025c).
Employer	A public, independent, private or third sector organisation that employs people to undertake a specific role with legal and contractually acceptable terms and conditions. For apprenticeship programmes, the employer is an organisation that employs an individual to undertake a specific job that includes training or skills development as part of the role.
Equity, Diversity and Belonging (EDB)	<p>Equity recognises differences and complexity in circumstances, experiences and needs. It means treating people differently to achieve fairness by being flexible and responsive to access, opportunities and resources. Like occupational therapy, equity is about understanding and recognising individual needs. It's about everyone having what they need, to make the most of life.</p> <p>Diversity means recognising, respecting, valuing and celebrating different and intersections in needs, identities, backgrounds, experiences and perspectives. It's the key to breaking down cultural and institutional barriers and fostering a culture of creativity and innovation.</p> <p>Belonging is about much more than simply including people. It means proactively welcoming, celebrating, supporting and empowering every voice, so we're all properly recognised, valued and free to be our true and authentic selves' (RCOT 2024b, p.10).</p> <p>As stated in RCOT's Equity, Diversity and Belonging Strategy (2024b), each of these three concepts is vital, so while 'EDB' is a useful shortform, we don't want it to become a meaningless acronym or minimise the individual elements' importance.</p>

Graduate	An individual who has successfully met the programme requirements of their education provider and has been conferred the associated award.
Mentorship	Mentorship is defined as ‘a goal-oriented learning process which takes place in a supportive environment’ (Doyle et al 2019, p. 544). Mentorship should be personalised, inclusive and equitable. It provides a supportive relationship in which an experienced professional offers guidance, encouragement and space for reflection. It is non-evaluative and typically takes place outside formal supervision structures. Effective mentorship has been shown to positively influence behaviour, attitude, motivation, job performance, organisational commitment and career development, as well as help develop a sense of belonging (Doyle et al 2019).
Pre-registration programme	Occupational therapy pre-registration programme of study, approved by the HCPC, leading to eligibility to apply for registration as an occupational therapist with the HCPC.
Professional standards of practice, conduct and ethics for occupational therapy	<i>The Professional standards of practice, conduct and ethics for occupational therapy</i> (RCOT In press) outline the expectations for safe, effective and ethical occupational therapy practice, covering professional behaviours, accountability, service user relationships and ongoing development.
Supervision	A professional relationship and activity which ensures good standards of practice and encourages development (College of Occupational Therapists 2015).
Wellbeing support	Resources and approaches used to promote and maintain mental, emotional and physical wellbeing.

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