What are core skills?

Core skills are the crucial functional and employability skills that enable individuals to:

- use information and communicate effectively
- make a positive and effective contribution as an employee.

Functional skills include the ability to use English, maths and digital technology confidently and effectively at the level necessary to work safely and meet quality standards.

Employability skills include the ability to:

- self manage
- work with others
- problem solve
- learn and develop.

Why do core skills matter?

Core skills are key enabling skills.

They underpin the capability and confidence of individuals and organisations.

Core skills enable individuals to work competently and develop. Core skills are what make an individual valuable at work, whatever their role.

Organisations depend on the core skills of their employees to function flexibly and effectively.

Core skills are essential for high-quality, person-centred care and support.
Core skills give individuals the ability and the confidence to accept responsibility, to problem-solve, to use spoken and written communication effectively, to build rapport with people who use care and support and with colleagues, to understand and comply with standards, policies and procedures, to work flexibly, to challenge poor practice, to embrace learning and personal development.

**Social care standards and qualifications require core skills**

Core skills are embedded in adult social care standards and qualifications including:
- pre-employment qualifications
- Apprenticeships
- Care Certificate (formerly Common Induction standards)
- Health and Social Care diplomas.

All of these qualifications require functional and employability skills.

Pre-employment qualifications, the Care Certificate and the Health and Social Care diplomas include units that cover communication and handling information, self-management, working with others and personal development.

The Care Certificate requires employees to ‘understand the functional level of literacy, numeracy and communication skills necessary to carry out your role’ (Standard 2, Personal development, outcome 3.1).

Apprenticeships include English and maths.

**Staff need core skills to put social care values into practice**

The Social Care Commitment sets out the values we expect all adult social care staff to put into practice. These include working responsibly, working co-operatively, communicating effectively and continuing to learn. These values underpin the common core principles for dignity, end-of-life and dementia care. Staff cannot put these values and principles into practice without core skills.

**Core skills, confidence and willingness to accept responsibility**

“I say to staff, ‘you’re the person our service user sees, our service is only as good as you,’ but with some of them ownership of that side of things is quite weak. Even if they make a mistake, they do not accept responsibility. ‘Well, it’s not me,’ they go, ‘I’m just a carer.’”

Domiciliary care provider

Unwillingness to accept responsibility, defensiveness in face of perceived criticism, fear of the unfamiliar and reluctance to learn are all classic symptoms of low self-confidence, itself strongly associated with a lack of core skills. Lack of core skills significantly limits the range of life opportunities open to an individual – undermining the individual’s sense of capability and self-worth. By contrast, the more secure an individual’s core skills the more confident the individual is likely to be. The good news is that no matter how limited an individual’s core skills and self-confidence, support to help the individual improve their core skills is likely to have an immediate positive impact on their self-esteem and confidence.
What are skill levels?

Broadly speaking, skill is the ability to do something. Competence – the ability to do something to the standard required – is based on skill. Skill levels specify the degree of skill required. The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) recognises nine levels of skill, starting at entry level and rising to level 8. These skill levels cover both vocational and academic qualifications. Examples include:

**Level 1:** GCSE grades D-G, Level 1 Award in Preparing to Work in Adult Social Care

**Level 2:** GCSE grades A*-C, Level 2 Diploma in Health and Social Care, Intermediate Apprenticeship in Health and Social Care

**Level 3:** GCE AS/A Levels, Level 3 Diploma in Health and Social Care, Advanced Apprenticeship in Health and Social Care

**Level 5:** University degree, Level 5 Diploma in Leadership for Health and Social Care and Children and Young People’s Services, Higher Apprenticeship in Health and Social Care - Care Leadership and Management (England)

Skills levels for core skills

Skill levels in adult social care are based on national occupational standards. These standards set Level 2 as the benchmark skill level for occupational competence. Accordingly, the qualifications that demonstrate basic occupational competence, including the Care Certificate and the Health and Social Care diplomas, start at Level 2.

Nationally, Level 2 is also the benchmark skill level for competence in the functional skills of communication (including English, adult literacy and English for Speakers of Other Languages), maths (including adult numeracy) and information and communications technology (ICT). At this level, an individual can use these skills confidently and effectively – allowing them to meet the requirements of their role, access training and qualifications and progress.

The sector’s apprentice frameworks, however, specify functional skills in English and maths at level 1. Level 1 equates to a firm grounding in the skills and should equip staff in support roles to function adequately. Moreover, should a role demand higher level functional skills, an individual with functional skills at Level 1 should be well-placed to develop those skills.

Note that while national standards define skill levels for functional skills, there are no national standards – and therefore no recognised skill levels - for employability skills.
Do all staff need the same level of core skills?
In practice, different jobs are likely to require different mixes of core skills at a range of levels. Consider the demands of these different roles:

- care assistant in a residential care home
- office administrator in a home-care organisation
- care manager in a learning disabilities organisation
- personal assistant employed by an individual employer
- chef in a day centre.

Local circumstances are also significant. For example, digital technology may be used widely in one organisation, but not in another.

"We are really pushing email. At induction I will set people up with an IT account and show them how to use it from the houses or at home. Now all payslips are done by email."

Learning disabilities care provider

On top of this, over time the remit and responsibilities of any given role are likely to evolve - particularly now, as social care itself is becoming more complex and demanding.

For all these reasons, the best approach to skills levels is likely to be competence-based and provisional – in other words, to focus on the specifics of the role and individual in question. Can that person actually do what their role currently requires them to do in order to work safely and meet quality standards? As and when those requirements change, that same question should be asked again.

Likewise, development and progression may have implications for core skills. If the employer wishes to develop an individual – or an individual is eager to progress – what level of core skills will the individual need?

Using qualifications as an indicator of skills level
Qualifications can be good general indicators of an individual’s level of skill, at least at the point in time when they gained the qualification. It is always unsafe, however, to take qualifications as a guarantee of competence. For one thing, qualifications are based on an assessment of an individual’s performance at a particular time and place. The individual may or may not be able to reproduce that level of performance in different circumstances. For another, skills naturally fade over time, if not in constant use.


2 For more information on the Social Care Commitment visit http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Standards/The-Social-Care-Commitment/The-Social-Care-Commitment.aspx