



Department
of Health &
Social Care



Mental Health Qualification Guide

For awarding organisations who offer
qualifications accessed by the adult social
care workforce

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Mental health core capabilities in adult social care

Introduction

This 'Mental Health Qualification Guide' is for awarding organisations who offer mental health qualifications for the adult social care workforce. It has been developed in response to the comprehensive review of the 'Mental Health Core Capabilities Framework' (the framework), commissioned and funded by the Department of Health and Social Care and carried out by Skills for Care in partnership with NHSE and Skills for Health.

The primary aim of the review was to refine and build on existing content to ensure that the framework remains relevant, reflective of current practice, language and expectations, and continues to be fit for purpose across the care and health sectors.

The review spanned several months and drew on the views and expertise of mental health specialists from both health and social care, and those of lived experience groups to ensure that the updated framework was shaped not only by professionals but by those who have experienced mental health support first hand.

Key themes included:

- the addition of a new section specifically covering older people and mental health
- updated language
- greater emphasis on prevention throughout
- further expansion of the tiers
- the inclusion of a glossary of terms used
- an emphasis on person-centred, compassionate and culturally-sensitive care
- wellbeing of the workforce
- greater focus on shared decision-making
- balancing digital tools and assistive technology with human connection.

The updated framework was published in February 2026 and is available on the [Skills for Care website](#).

Lived experience input

As part of the review of the 'Mental Health Core Capabilities Framework', Skills for Care engaged with lived experience groups from across the country. These sessions were facilitated by Turning Point, a member organisation of the Expert Reference Group. The purpose of this engagement was to ensure the content within the updated framework effectively supports people with mental health needs, as well as the staff working with them.

Turning Point engaged with a cross section of their services, facilitating focus groups made up of individuals with diverse mental health experiences. These discussions were designed to ensure that the views of people who have experienced mental health support first-hand were considered and included within the framework review. The aim was to better understand what good support feels like, what helps or hinders recovery, and which qualities and skills matter most in those who provide care.

Participants drew on a wide range of services including hospital, community and outreach support, supported accommodation, crisis services and talking therapies. Their reflections represent a breadth of experiences across age, gender and cultural backgrounds.

The sessions explored the overarching question:

“What should professionals supporting you know, do, and be like?”

The groups presented a variety of valuable insights including:

- mental health care is most effective when it feels human
- people want to be listened to, treated with kindness and spoken to with respect which are areas all identified as the foundations of recovery
- choice in family involvement and respect for confidentiality is essential
- equality, diversity and cultural humility must shape all care interactions
- recovery is deeply individual – people want support that helps them become ‘themselves again’
- assessment should feel conversational and collaborative not clinical or repetitive
- shared decision-making about medication builds trust and adherence
- digital tools can aid recovery when accessible and supported but should never replace human connection
- training and supervision should prioritise trauma-informed practice, communication and cultural sensitivity
- people reported lack of clear understanding of their rights under the mental health act – explanations should be ongoing and accessible
- staff wellbeing and leadership culture directly influence the quality of care.

These insights were instrumental in shaping the language and practices within the updated framework, ensuring that the person remains at the centre of all activity. They are now embedded throughout the framework and should be reflected within both current and future learning and qualifications.

Aim

The purpose of the 'Mental Health Core Capabilities Framework' is to provide a nationally agreed minimum standard of learning required within the sector. The intention is that employers, educators and practitioners will use the framework to inform learning and qualification development, and to review and align existing learning, whether for adult social care or health, or for the many voluntary organisations that support people with mental health needs and their support network.

The aim of this qualification guide is to support awarding organisations to equip learners with the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed to perform their role effectively and confidently, in line with the nationally agreed minimum standards set out in the updated 'Mental Health Core Capabilities Framework'. It supports the development of competent, professional practice and enables learners to apply their learning in real-life situations, ensuring they are prepared with the knowledge and skills required to meet current and future sector needs when supporting people with mental health needs.

The guide focuses on the mandatory units within existing level 2 and level 3 award and certificate mental health qualifications and provides direction on updating language, approaches and working practices in line with the updated framework. It is designed to support awarding organisations in ensuring that content reflects current expectations and the latest understanding of best practice in mental health care.

The guide can also be used to inform the review and refinement of specialist mental health-based optional units within the level 3, 4 and 5 diploma qualifications for the adult social care workforce.

When used alongside the framework, this document helps to quality assure qualification content, ensuring it aligns with nationally agreed standards, sector-recognised terminology, and person-led working practices.

Care Workforce Pathway for adult social care

The Care Workforce Pathway is the first universal career structure for the adult social care workforce. It aims to provide clear guidance for progression and development for professionals in the adult social care sector by outlining the necessary knowledge, skills, values, and behaviours they will need in their work/practice. It also sets out how people can develop and progress across a long-term career in adult social care with support and training; attracting people to join and remain in the sector and supporting sustainable workforce growth.

The pathway has been developed in partnership between the Department of Health and Social Care and Skills for Care, informed by extensive engagement with the sector. Eight role categories have been published to date, with further role categories in development and being added through an iterative process.

The pathway supports managers and staff to structure development conversations, identify skills gaps and discuss development needs in the context of their organisation. Employers, leaders and managers across the sector can use the pathway to support workforce planning and career development, helping them to identify the most suitable learning and development opportunities for their workforce.

Mental health practice is embedded throughout the Care Workforce Pathway role categories. This is in recognition that supporting people with mental health needs is an essential part of adult social care. The role categories describe what people should understand and be able to do when providing mental health support, with expectations for the level of skills increasing as individuals move into more experienced or specialised roles.

Across the pathway, the level of knowledge and skills needed for mental health practice is reflected in the minimum knowledge and skills, and as specific areas of practice that individuals can or should develop, while some of the associated training and development available are set out within the suggested learning opportunities.

The 'Mental Health Core Capabilities Framework' along with existing and new qualifications available for the workforce, complement the Care Workforce Pathway by providing a recommended and structured way for the sector to develop the knowledge and skills required in these areas of practice. By using these alongside the Care Workforce Pathway, employers, learning providers and the workforce can take a more consistent and planned approach to developing skills and capability.

More information on the Care Workforce Pathway can be found on the [Skills for Care website](#) and the [GOV.UK website](#).

General guidance for qualification review and development

Skills for Care encourages awarding organisations to draw on a broad range of evidence and insights as part of their regular qualification review and development activity. The guidance in this section provides best-practice considerations to support high-quality qualifications for the adult social care workforce. In addition to this qualification guide, this should include, but is not limited to:

- **Engagement of subject matter experts, voices of people with lived experience, and development specialists**
Involving experienced practitioners, people with lived experience, technical experts and development specialists helps ensure that qualifications remain current and reflective of emerging practice across adult social care.
- **Insights and feedback from centres**
Training providers play a critical role in delivering qualifications and are well placed to highlight what is working well and where there may be challenges. Their feedback can be invaluable when it comes to shaping updates or revisions to qualifications.
- **Learner and employer engagement**
Direct input from learners and employers helps ensure that qualifications remain relevant, accessible and aligned with the knowledge, skills and behaviours actually needed in the workplace.
- **Standards and framework alignment**
Qualifications should align with nationally agreed standards and frameworks, including the Care Workforce Pathway, to help support clear progression routes and provide a consistent approach to workforce development.

Qualification assessment

The [Skills for Care and Development Assessment Principles](#) establish a consistent approach to the assessment of qualifications in the adult social care sector and support the quality assurance processes of awarding organisations. They set out the minimum expectations and approaches for assessment and internal quality assurance, and we expect awarding organisations to embed these principles across all qualifications accessed by the adult social care workforce.

When awarding organisations update existing qualifications, Skills for Care recommends that changes are clearly recorded within the qualification specification using robust version-control processes.

Version control should be maintained after any amendments and provide a clear reference point for external partners when reviewing the qualification's currency, quality, and alignment with the priorities of the adult social care workforce.

Reviewing existing award and certificate qualifications

The review of the 'Mental Health Core Capabilities Framework' provided a valuable opportunity to ensure that the framework continues to reflect current practice and emerging priorities across health and adult social care. Updates to the framework include:

- revised language and terminology
- additional areas of emerging practice
- enhancements to existing capabilities to reflect shifting sector priorities
- updated further reading and reference materials
- refined content that is accurate, up-to-date and in line with current working practices.

Awarding organisations are strongly encouraged to update their existing mental health qualifications to ensure alignment with the updated 'Mental Health Core Capabilities Framework' and as part of their regular review processes. This will ensure that all mental health qualifications accessed by the social care workforce remain fit for purpose and equip learners with the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed to perform their role in supporting people with mental health needs effectively and confidently.

While a range of mental health qualifications is currently eligible under the Learning and Development Support Scheme (LDSS), this eligibility will be subject to review as our work continues to progress the capabilities of the adult social care workforce. Over time, it is the Government's ambition that all training, development and qualifications identified or funded through the LDSS for the adult social care workforce will be quality assured by the Quality Assured Care Learning Service. Current and existing mental health qualifications do not need to be approved by Skills for Care; however, a key component of any future approvals process would include checking qualification content for relevance, accuracy and alignment with relevant sector standards.

Updating language and terminology

The updated framework reflects a shift in sector-recognised terminology around mental health care, and existing qualifications should be updated to align with these changes. This will support clarity and consistency in how learners understand their roles within the adult social care workforce.

Key updates to terminology are outlined in the table below. These changes promote person-led language and reflect current best practice in the health and social care sector.

| Updated terminology | Replaces |
|--|---|
| <p>Mental health needs <i>To be used when referring to <u>people</u>.</i></p> <p>Mental health conditions <i>To be used when referring to <u>conditions</u>.</i></p> | Mental health problems |
| Mental ill health | Mental illness |
| Person/people | Individual/individuals <i>Where it makes sense to do so.</i> |
| Person-led care | Person-centred care |
| <p>Person who is neurodivergent</p> <p>People who are neurodivergent</p> | <p>Neurodivergent individual</p> <p>Individuals with neurodivergence</p> <p><i>Please note that neurodiverse/neurodiversity is a collective term and shouldn't be used to describe individuals.</i></p> |
| Reablement | Recovery |
| Support network | Family and/or carer(s) |

Updating qualification content

The framework review also identified areas where existing content could be enhanced or updated to reflect new priorities or areas of best practice. By refreshing existing qualifications to incorporate the key changes below, awarding organisations can ensure that their qualifications align with the updated framework, and that they remain current, credible, and valuable for those undertaking them as well as for employers who rely on them to evidence competence and capability.

| New or enhanced content | Suggested action |
|--|--|
| <p>Driving culturally-sensitive care for people with mental health needs</p> | <p>The lived experience groups involved in the framework review were clear that equality, diversity and cultural sensitivity are essential to good mental health care.</p> <p>Cultural factors can influence every aspect of a person’s mental health care journey, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the risk of developing mental health needs ▪ access to assessment and care ▪ the perception and understanding of mental health needs ▪ their experiences and outcomes. <p>Awarding organisations should consider integrating cultural perspectives into existing learning outcomes wherever relevant, particularly where they reference equality, diversity and inclusion, holistic assessment of people’s needs, wishes and preferences, or potential barriers to accessing care.</p> |
| <p>Greater recognition of everyone in a person with mental health needs’ support network and their role as partners in promoting positive mental health</p> | <p>Where relevant, learning outcomes should be updated to reflect the role of the wider support network of people with mental health needs, beyond just families and carers. Support networks include anyone who plays a significant role in a person’s life, as they may influence their care, wellbeing and decision making. This should also include advocates where appropriate.</p> <p>Awarding organisations should ensure that learners are required to consider informed consent when sharing information with support networks.</p> |
| <p>More consideration given to the needs of older people with mental health needs</p> | <p>The review identified a gap in the framework relating to caring for older people with mental health needs.</p> <p>Awarding organisations should update learning outcomes to explicitly incorporate the needs, experiences and presentations of older people with mental health needs.</p> |

The importance of trauma-informed care and practice

Trauma-informed practice is a critical part of good mental health care and the reablement journey.

Awarding organisations should review and update existing qualifications to ensure that learners are equipped with the knowledge and skills to implement trauma-informed approaches within their practice.

The use of digital assistive technology and tools to support person-led approaches for people with mental health needs, and the importance of balancing these with human connection

Awarding organisations should integrate digital skills and knowledge requirements throughout existing outcomes wherever relevant. This includes considering how technology and digital tools, including assistive AI, can support person-led approaches and promote positive outcomes for people with mental health needs.

Wherever the use of digital technology and tools is explored, learners must be supported to understand that these can complement but must not replace human interaction and connection.

Awarding organisations should also consider the digital capabilities that learners need to use a range of digital tools effectively and to support others in their use.

Prioritising shared decision-making, co-production and person-led care

Person-led approaches place people with mental health needs at the forefront of their own care, enabling them to identify and utilise their strengths, aspirations and resources.

Awarding organisations should review outcomes to ensure they:

- embed shared decision-making in medication decisions and care planning
- promote co-production as a means of empowering people with mental health needs and their support networks
- support positive mental health and wellbeing
- emphasise person-led approaches as best practice.

Greater emphasis on prevention throughout

Awarding organisations should embed a stronger focus on prevention throughout existing qualifications by embedding proactive, early-intervention approaches into learning outcomes, assessment criteria and curriculum content.

This includes highlighting the importance of identifying risks early, promoting wellbeing, and equipping learners with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively prevent issues before they arise.

Example updates to learning outcomes

To further support awarding organisations in the reviewing process, we've taken some sample learning outcomes from existing mental health qualifications and provided best-practice examples of how they could be updated and refined to align with the updated framework. We recognise that awarding organisations may choose to word or present their qualifications differently but having looked at a broad range of available qualifications, we believe the examples given reflect common criteria and should be useful to all awarding organisations.

Example outcomes have been taken from the following qualifications:

- Level 2 Certificate in Mental Health Awareness
- Level 2 Certificate in Understanding Working in Mental Health
- Level 3 Certificate in Understanding Mental Health
- Level 3 Certificate in Understanding Mental Health Care.

Level 2 Certificate in Mental Health Awareness

| Learning outcome | Assessment criteria | Suggested update |
|---|--|--|
| Understand how postnatal depression may affect the bond between the mother and baby. | Explain how postnatal depression may affect the bond between the mother with her baby. | Explain how postnatal depression can affect the bond between mother and baby and impact a baby's development. |
| Understand the social context of mental illness. | Explain how stereotyping can increase stigma and negative attitudes towards people experiencing mental health problems. | Explain how wider societal stereotyping and language can reinforce stigma and negative attitudes towards people with mental health needs. |
| Understand how mental health conditions can affect others. | Outline ways that the following conditions may affect the individual's friends, family and family networks when caring for them: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ anxiety ▪ depression ▪ postnatal depression ▪ bipolar disorder ▪ schizophrenia ▪ dementia ▪ eating disorders ▪ phobia. | Outline ways that the following conditions may affect the support network of a person with mental health needs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ anxiety ▪ depression ▪ postnatal depression ▪ bipolar disorder ▪ schizophrenia ▪ dementia ▪ eating disorders ▪ phobia. |
| Understand the role and availability of support for an individual with mental health problems. | Explain the process to be followed when signposting individuals who experience mental health problems, their families and | Explain the process to be followed when signposting people who experience mental health needs and their support |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| | carers for further help, resources or guidance about mental health problems. | network for further help, resources or guidance about mental health . |
| Know the rights of individuals with mental health problems. | Describe the rights of a person under the: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mental Capacity Act 2005 ▪ Mental Health Act 2007. | Update legislation reference to Mental Health Act 1983 (as amended) to cover amendments and future proof. |
| Understand legal rights and issues around confidentiality. | Describe the legal issues around confidentiality and data protection in relation to individuals experiencing mental health problems. | Describe the legal issues around confidentiality and data protection in relation to people with mental health needs . |

Level 2 Certificate in Understanding Working in Mental Health

| Learning outcome | Assessment criteria | Suggested update |
|---|---|--|
| Understand the concept of mental health. | Describe key risk factors in developing mental ill health. | Describe a range of factors that can increase the risk of developing mental health conditions and lead to poor mental health . |
| Understand aspects of good practice in the care planning process. | Identify categories of risk and the key components of a risk assessment when working with a service user. | Identify categories of risk and the key components of a risk assessment when supporting people with mental health needs . |
| Know how to access information to support understanding of mental health issues. | Identify sources of information for those experiencing mental health problems and their families and/or carers. | Identify sources of information for people with mental health needs and their support network . |

Level 3 Certificate in Understanding Mental Health

| Learning outcome | Assessment criteria | Suggested update |
|---|--|---|
| <p>Understand attitudes towards mental health in society.</p> | <p>Describe how perceptions of individuals with a mental health condition may be shaped by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ media outlets and representation ▪ cultural values. | <p>Describe how perceptions of mental ill health and people with mental health needs could be shaped by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ media outlets and representation ▪ cultural values. |
| <p>Understand the role of diagnosis and planning in the recovery process for individuals with a mental health condition.</p> | <p>Explain how the families of individuals with mental health conditions can be affected.</p> | <p>Explain the ways in which the support network of people with mental health needs may be affected.</p> |
| | <p>Describe challenges which may be faced by family members when trying to access services for a relative with a mental health condition.</p> | <p>Describe the challenges a person's support network may face when trying to access services for someone with mental health needs.</p> |
| | <p>Describe challenges which may be faced by family member when they are trying support a relative with a mental health condition.</p> | <p>Describe the challenges a person's support network may face when trying to support someone with mental health needs.</p> |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| Understand the role of diagnosis and planning in the recovery process for individuals with a mental health condition. | Explain what is meant by 'recovery' in relation to a mental health condition | Explain what is meant by 'recovery' and 'reablement' in relation to mental health needs . |
| | Outline the stages involved in producing a person-centred care plan for an individual with a mental health condition | Outline the stages involved in co-producing a person-led care plan for people with mental health needs . |
| Know a range of treatments available for individuals with mental health conditions. | Describe a range of treatments available for treatment of a mental health condition including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ therapies ▪ interventions ▪ medication. | Describe a range of treatments available for mental health needs including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ therapies ▪ interventions ▪ medication. |

Level 3 Certificate of in Understanding Mental Health Care

| Learning outcome | Assessment criteria | Suggested update |
|--|---|--|
| Know the service framework for mental health. | Describe the role and responsibilities of the key statutory, voluntary or private agencies involved in mental health care in their own country. | Describe the role and responsibilities of relevant key agencies involved in mental health care. |
| | Explain why and how carers/informal supporters should be involved in service delivery. | Explain the benefits of co-production and working collaboratively with the support networks of people with mental health needs to shape service delivery. |

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| <p>Know the impact of mental ill health on individuals and others in their social network.</p> | <p>Explain how mental ill health may have an impact on those in the individual's familial, social or work network including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ psychological and emotional ▪ practical and financial ▪ the impact of using services ▪ social exclusion ▪ positive impacts. | <p>Explain how a person's mental health needs may impact on those in their support network including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ psychological and emotional ▪ practical and financial ▪ the impact of using services ▪ social exclusion ▪ positive impacts. |
| <p>Understand the strengths and limitations of the main interventions in mental health.</p> | <p>Explain the following barriers that an individual may face in accessing a range of intervention options in their local area:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ service or professional bias ▪ financial barriers ▪ equalities issues ▪ availability ▪ physical access. | <p>Add cultural barriers to the list of considerations.</p> |
| <p>Understand how to work within the care and support planning process.</p> | <p>Explain how to enable carers and family members to take an effective and appropriate part in the care planning process.</p> | <p>Explain how to promote and enable collaboration and shared decision-making in the care-planning process with the support networks of people with mental health needs.</p> |
| | <p>Explain why and how agencies and workers should work together.</p> | <p>Explain why and how agencies and partners should work together within the care planning process.</p> |

Understand how to work within a risk management process.

Explain why and how agencies and workers should work together within the risk management process.

Explain why and how **teams** and **agencies** should work together within the risk management process.

Explain how to involve carers and family members effectively and appropriately in the risk management process.

Explain how to promote and enable **collaboration** and **shared decision-making** in the care-planning process with the **support networks** of **people with mental health needs** and **when this is appropriate**.

Reviewing specialist optional units within diploma qualifications

The updated 'Mental Health Core Capabilities Framework' highlights the need to review and update specialist optional units related to mental health care within core diploma qualifications to ensure they continue to meet the needs of learners, employers and the wider sector. This review should include checking that all terminology used within the units is accurate, up to date, and consistent with current policy, legislation, and recognised sector language. It should also involve identifying any emerging themes, practices, or areas of knowledge that were not previously included but are now recognised within the framework as essential for effective practice.

Updating optional units in this way will help maintain their alignment with the nationally agreed updated framework. This alignment supports quality assurance and promotes a consistent and standardised approach to learning across health and adult social care. By refreshing these units to reflect current practice, awarding organisations can ensure that diploma qualifications remain current, credible and valuable for learners, as well as for employers who rely on them to evidence competence and capability.

Updating existing optional units

Skills for Care recommends that awarding organisations undertake a structured and holistic review of optional units to ensure they remain fit for purpose, reflect current practice and maintain alignment with the nationally agreed framework. This should include:

1. Reviewing terminology in titles, descriptors and learning outcomes

The framework review process identified that some of the terminology used within optional units has become outdated or is no longer commonly used across the sector. Awarding organisations should therefore review and update the language used across all optional unit content as a starting point to improve clarity, sector alignment and overall consistency across their qualifications.

2. Reviewing content alignment alongside the updated framework

Awarding organisations should review the content of all relevant optional units alongside the updated framework to ensure clear alignment with key themes, core capabilities and priority areas. This includes checking that units appropriately reflect the knowledge, skills and behaviours outlined in the framework. Where key topics, updated practices or policy areas are included in the framework but are missing or only partially covered within existing optional units, these should be integrated or strengthened.

Ensuring clear content alignment in this way will help maintain the relevance and quality of optional units, so that they continue to provide meaningful choice and contribute to the capability development the framework is designed to support.

Approval requirements

Optional units within core diploma qualifications, such as the Level 3 Diploma in Adult Care, are included in the approval process; however, they are reviewed using a sampling approach that focuses on whether suggested topics are represented and if the range of units available demonstrates appropriate stretch and progression. Due to the wide number and variety of optional units across specialist areas, individual optional units are not reviewed in full during approval. We therefore rely on awarding organisations applying robust quality assurance processes during development and throughout ongoing reviews.

Many optional units currently available are legacy units carried forward from previous versions of sector qualifications. The review of the updated framework provides an important opportunity for awarding organisations to ensure that these units reflect current knowledge, skills and sector expectations, and that they meet the needs of learners and employers when supporting people in specialist areas such as mental health care.

Awarding organisations do not need to notify Skills for Care when making updates to optional units following qualification approval. We recognise that optional units will be subject to regular review and revision as part of awarding organisations' internal quality assurance arrangements.

Supporting resources

Further resources on other standards, qualifications and mental health can be found on the Skills for Care website, offering a wide range of guidance, tools and materials to support learning and good practice.

Additional detailed information is also available within the appendices of the 'Mental Health Core Capabilities Framework', which provides a glossary of terms used in the framework and further evidence sources and practical support for those developing or delivering mental health-related training.

The relevant Skills for Care links are provided below.

- [Developing your workforce](#)
- [Mental Health Core Capabilities Framework](#)
- [Other standards and frameworks](#)
- [Awarding organisations](#)