

# Harnessing the full potential of Healthcare Assistants across South East London

Skills for Health

In light of NHS England's Call to Action Campaign for Primary Care – which highlights increasing pressure on general practice services and areas of concern like capacity – South East London Commissioning Strategy Programme Office brought Skills for Health on board to develop a Healthcare Assistant (HCA) package that would standardise skills, training and knowledge across six boroughs.

## The Challenge

With capacity in general practice such a critical issue, highly trained HCAs are perfectly positioned to play a crucial role in supporting practice nurses.

However, current HCA training and development within general practice is not standardised or regulated – and no minimum standards of HCA skills or training exist on a national or local level, resulting in huge variations in their knowledge and the work they're able to carry out.

So, the South East London Commissioning Strategy Programme Office asked Skills for Health to assess the current HCA landscape and produce a training needs analysis, a standardised role description, minimum standards and a training specification. They also carried out a training gap analysis – and all within eight weeks.

Representatives from Londonwide Local Medical Committees (LMCs), the Royal College of Nursing, Health Education South London, NHS England – as well as the Deputy Director of Primary Care South London – were informed of the project and given the opportunity to comment.



## How they did it

**Consult with key stakeholders –** Skills for Health spoke with more than 40 primary care, workforce and nurse leads across six boroughs to agree the core role and skills of the HCA in general practice. They prepared a draft job description and sent it to primary care and workforce leads, who were asked to distribute it to all the practices in the locality for consultation.

**Conduct a training gap analysis –** After reviewing the region's HCA training providers, Skills for Health identified their strengths, as well as any local and national training gaps.

**Outline a training specification –** Skills for Health established a bespoke learning and development framework designed specifically for HCAs in general practice in the six boroughs.

*“Skills for Health were very flexible in their approach. They managed to – very quickly – get everyone's buy-in and engagement, which is no mean feat. Within the short space of time that we had, Skills for Health delivered a high-quality product. I'd personally recommend them to any organisation throughout the country.”*

**Geri McKenna**  
Interim Project Manager  
South East London  
Commissioning Strategy  
Programme Office

## The outcomes

Skills for Health initially agreed to collect information through workshops, but because of time constraints, had to conduct consultations on a one-to-one basis – a personal approach that was appreciated by all those interviewed.

Armed with this rich, comprehensive data, Skills for Health produced a standardised role description based on National Occupational Standards that also included a transferable role template. They also established minimum standards for knowledge, skills, competencies and training, along with a training specification. Now, practices in the local area will be able to access bespoke HCA training, giving employers confidence that the quality of the training – along with the support offered – has the locality's seal of approval and, crucially, meets the National Occupational Standards.

They can also implement a standardised approach that supports existing HCAs, encouraging them to update their knowledge and skills – if necessary – and further develop their role within general practice.



It will also advance the careers of existing administrative staff who are interested in working with practice nurses. With a standardised training pathway, these staff – who are at risk of becoming redundant in the face of automation – can now segue into HCA roles, providing an excellent way to increase capacity while retaining loyal, committed staff.

Equally, it will also free nurses' time for more specialised work, and, ultimately, alleviate pressure within the practice.

Skills for Health issued a final report after they completed the project. This report included a list of recommendations, including:

- South East London Commissioning Strategy Programme Office should commission a bespoke HCA learning and development framework that encompasses all the learning units in Skills for Health's transferable role template
- Execute a practice-based assessment to promote a suitable learning environment for HCAs
- Harness and maximise the talents of local nurse leads who are keen to develop the role, knowledge and skills of HCAs in general practice

As a result of this review, consultation and analysis, the South East London Commissioning Strategy Programme Office are now in the process of taking Skills for Health's training specification and putting it into an invitation to tender – which could allow them to start HCA training as early as autumn.

*"It is very exciting that HCAs are being recognised for their valuable contribution to general practice. At the end of the day, this service should improve the experience for patients in general practice by ensuring that they are seen by an appropriate/skilled member of staff at their appointment.*

*For example, it means that Practice Nurses can be released to take on board more responsibility, complementing that of the doctors' and other healthcare professionals' roles, thereby offering patients a wider choice of care within general practice.*

**Anne Barrett**  
Consultant working on behalf of Skills for Health

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