A GUIDE TO DEVELOPING THE ROLE OF ADVANCED PRACTICE PHARMACISTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Department of Health
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Foreword *by the Chief Pharmaceutical Officer*


Prof. Cathy Harrison

In the evolving landscape of the integrated health and social care system (HSC) in Northern Ireland, Advanced Practice Pharmacists (APP) will have a pivotal role to play in delivering future services across all sectors.

Our growing and aging population, with ever more complex healthcare and medicines needs, will increasingly require pharmacists with advanced level pharmaceutical expertise, working as independent prescribers and delivering patient care in areas of greatest healthcare need. Taking a whole system approach, these practitioners have the capability to provide more connected care, to lead and collaborate within clinical teams and support neighbourhood health models.

The Pharmacy Workforce Review (PWR) report, published in 2020, outlined the HSC pharmacy workforce needs over a ten-year period. The report recommended that '*we define and develop Advanced Practice Pharmacist roles in all sectors, support all pharmacists to undertake foundation training, progressing to independent prescribing and advanced pharmacy practice, aligned to service and patient need, and we develop and implement clear workforce development pathways for newly qualified and experienced pharmacists in all sectors to support this*.'

Since the PWR, the introduction of the 2021 standards for the initial education and training of pharmacists means that from 2026 pharmacists will be independent prescribers from the point of registration. I remain committed to supporting pharmacists to undertake an enhanced post registration development pathway.

I am committed to the continued delivery of reforms that will enable the skills and expertise of pharmacy teams in all sectors of the HSC to be fully utilised and recognised for the significant advances they bring to improving patient outcomes.

I would like to acknowledge the leadership of Dr Anne Friel and the members of the Northern Ireland Advanced Practice Pharmacist Task and Finish Group for their work in this area to date.

Professor Cathy Harrison

Chief Pharmaceutical Officer for Northern Ireland

1.0 Background

The Northern Ireland Pharmacy Workforce Review (PWR) 2020[1] detailed recommendations to enable the Pharmacy workforce to deliver on the wider transformation agenda, supporting progress through education and training, and developing clear workforce development pathways. The PWR is available on the Department website: Pharmacy Workforce Review 2020 | Department of Health.

Since the publication of the PWR, the pharmacy profession across the United Kingdom has seen radical reform of pharmacy initial education and training, with new initial education and training (IET) standards published by the UK pharmacy regulators in 2021[2]. Newly qualified and experienced pharmacists, as experts in medicines, have an active role in providing clinical care to patients, including prescribing medicines, and in helping people to maintain and improve their health, medication safety and wellbeing.

Advanced Practice Pharmacists (APP) have a pivotal role to play in delivering future services in Health and Social Care (HSC) in Northern Ireland. Our growing and ageing population, with ever more complex healthcare and medicines needs, requires pharmacists with advanced level pharmaceutical expertise, working as independent prescribers, delivering patient care autonomously in areas of greatest healthcare need. Taking a whole system approach, these practitioners have the capability to provide autonomous care and to lead and collaborate within clinical teams and neighbourhood health models. Healthcare organisations and systems will require strong pharmacist leaders and managers to assure the delivery of high-quality care, drive service improvement and transformation.

Department of Health policy and strategy recognises the need to develop the role of APPs to service areas identified as local and regional priorities. Strategic direction has been set out for general practice pharmacy[3] and community pharmacy[4], and there are plans to begin to develop a strategic direction for hospital pharmacy.

An Advanced Practice Pharmacist Task and Finish Group was established by the Chief Pharmaceutical Officer in December 2023. This group was made up of a wide range of pharmacy stakeholders (Appendix 1). In 2025 the Advanced Practice Pharmacist Task and Finish Group draft report 'Developing the role of Advanced

[1] Northern Ireland Pharmacy Workforce Review, 2020, Department of Health available at Pharmacy Workforce Review 2020 | Department of Health
[2] Standards for the initial education and training of pharmacists, January 2021, General Pharmaceutical Council available at Standards for the education and training of pharmacists | General Pharmaceutical Council
[3] GP NI 2030: A strategy for General Practice in Northern Ireland, Department of Health available at GPP NI 2030 - A Strategy for General Practice Pharmacy in Northern Ireland | Department of Health
[4] Community Pharmacy Strategic Plan 2030, Department of Health available at Community Pharmacy Strategic Plan 2030 | Department of Health

Practice Pharmacists in Northern Ireland' was presented to the Chief Pharmaceutical Officer and accepted by the Department. It is this comprehensive report that has informed the Department's guide for the development of APPs across primary and secondary care sectors in Northern Ireland. These roles will support and develop long-term clinical leadership within the profession.

2.0 Advanced Practice Pharmacist (APP) role

APPs have the knowledge, skills, and expertise to be able to deliver care for people with more complex needs and with a higher degree of autonomy than less experienced pharmacists[5]. They can manage risk and make clinical decisions where evidence is limited or ambiguous, within a scope of clinical practice that is broad and deep in terms of clinical assessment, diagnosis, investigation, management and follow-up of patients[6]. In addition, they have the skills to transform care delivery at a service, team or organisational level through leadership, education and research[5, 6].

The Royal Pharmaceutical Society (RPS) core advanced curriculum describes the entry-level standard for advanced pharmacists working in any patient focused role. It is structured across four pillars encompassing five domains and is aligned closely to multiprofessional advanced frameworks (see Fig. 1).

These include clinical practice focusing on the delivery of pharmaceutical care to patients, leadership and management involving the ability to lead and manage clinical care teams, education emphasising the importance of educating patients and healthcare teams and research encouraging pharmacists to engage in research to improve patient outcomes. The RPS core advanced curriculum provides a credentialing assessment to ensure pharmacists have the necessary capabilities to practice at an advanced level.

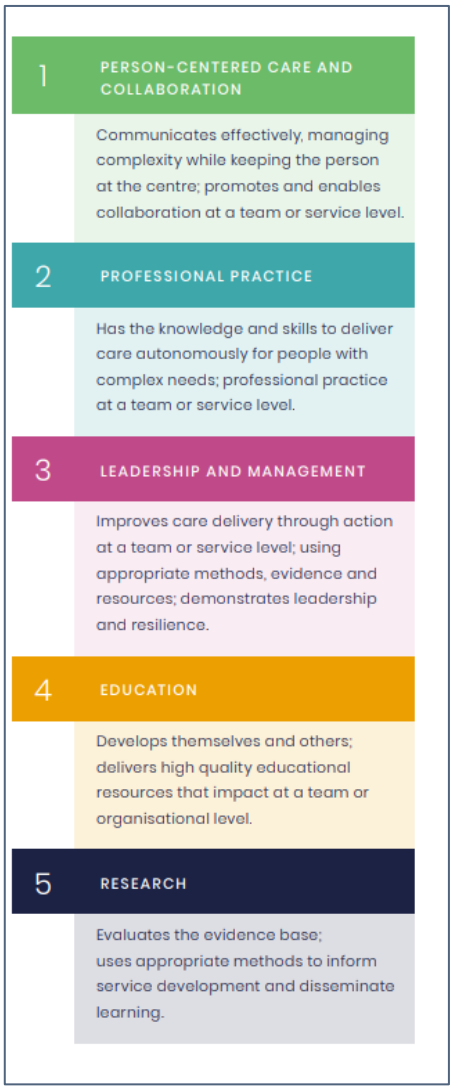

Fig. 1. RPS core advanced curriculum structured across four pillars encompassing five domains.

[5] Core Advanced Pharmacist Curriculum, 2022, Royal Pharmaceutical Society available at rpharms.com
[6] Forsyth, P; Rushworth, G. "Advanced pharmacist practice: where is the United Kingdom in pursuit of this 'Brave New World'?" International Journal of Clinical Pharmacy. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11096-021-01276-5

The role of an APP role within teams can vary however an APP should demonstrate that they have the profession-specific capabilities defined in the RPS core advanced curriculum, in addition to the broader clinical skill set required in their role/area of practice.

Summary of RPS Core Advanced Pharmacist Curriculum[5] - an Advanced Practice Pharmacist (APP) should:

- Demonstrate capability across the four key pillars of practice (clinical practice, leadership and management, education, and research);
- Be empowered to act autonomously;
- Have confidence applying high-level assessment, reasoning and judgement skills to uncertain problems;
- Analyse the risks and benefits within a situation and make a clear decision on the action to be taken;
- Understand the limitations of evidence, and when it is appropriate to deviate from this;
- Work collaboratively with other professionals or key stakeholders;
- Underpin and plan their development via reflective practice;
- Welcome and seek input from others (patients, carers, professionals, managers etc.) to improve how they deliver patient care/services;
- Consider professional practice and development as lifelong, continuously seeking improvement and progress.

3.0 Credentialling against the RPS Core Advanced Pharmacist Curriculum

The RPS core advanced curriculum. bridges the gap between the RPS post-registration foundation curriculum[7] and the RPS consultant pharmacist curriculum[8] (Fig. 2). The RPS provides a credentialing assessment process to assure pharmacists have the capabilities to practise at a post-registration foundation, advanced, or consultant level.

[7] RPS Post-registration foundation pharmacist curriculum https://www.rpharms.com/development/credentialing/post-registration-foundation/post-registration-foundation-curriculum

[8] RPS consultant pharmacist curriculum https://www.rpharms.com/development/credentialing/consultant/consultant-pharmacist-credentialing

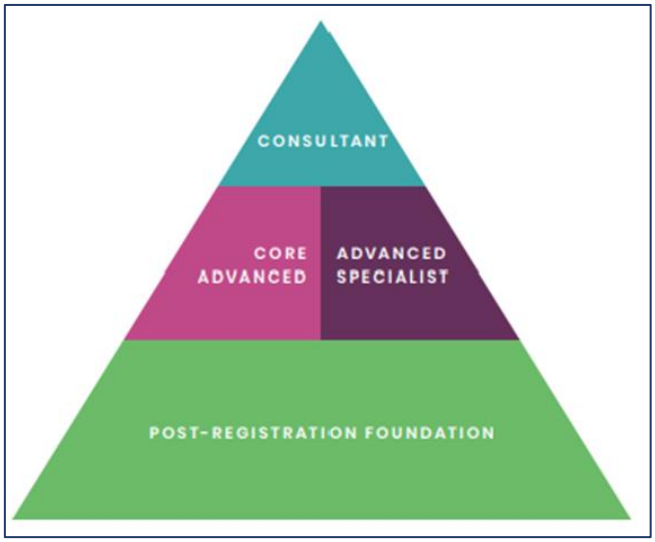

Figure 2: RPS Post-registration credentialing model

The RPS core advanced curriculum supports the development of a portable, flexible and adaptable patient-focused advanced pharmacist workforce by articulating the common capabilities of all advanced pharmacists, regardless of area of practice or care setting, across all pillars of practice (Fig. 3).

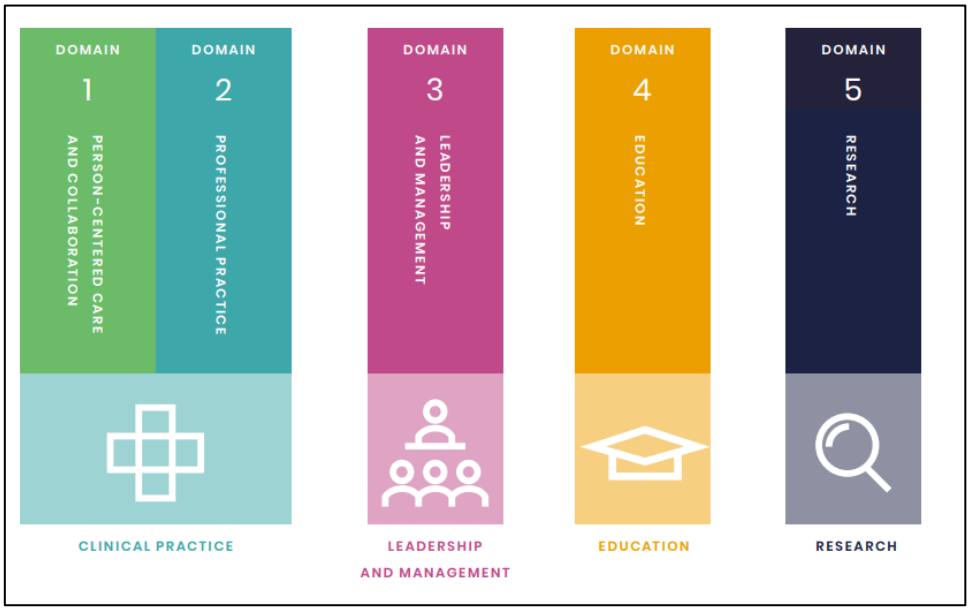

Figure 3: RPS four pillars of advanced practice

The curriculum has been developed to create an advanced pharmacy workforce to meet future patient and service needs. The curriculum outcomes are aligned to multi-professional advanced frameworks whilst articulating the pharmaceutical knowledge and skills required specifically of advanced pharmacists.

Advanced practice for all healthcare professionals has been defined as a level of practice characterised by a high degree of autonomy and designated responsibility for complex decision making. This is underpinned by a post-registration master's level award or equivalent undertaken by an experienced practitioner that encompasses all four pillars of clinical practice, leadership and management, education, and research.[9] Equivalence at master's level can be demonstrated through a combination of formalised experiential learning supported by evidence mapping the individual's capabilities to the 4 pillars of advanced practice[9]. In England, the Centre for Advancing Practice's ePortfolio (supported) route allows advanced practitioners to demonstrate their equivalent experiential and educational learning against the capabilities.

The Centre for Advancing Practice recognises that successful completion of the RPS advanced practice credentialing assessment demonstrates that the individual has met the advanced capabilities across the 4 pillars of advanced practice. Pharmacists in England who have been credentialed by the RPS following completion of a supported pathway provided by the Centre for Postgraduate Pharmacy Education (CPPE) are eligible to receive a digital badge from the Centre for Advancing Practice, confirming equivalence at master's level.[10]

In line with other RPS post-registration curricula, the core advanced curriculum is made up of five broad domains aligned closely to the four pillars of practice:

- Person-centred care and collaboration
- Professional practice
- Leadership and management
- Education
- Research

The curriculum was developed through a collaborative approach with UK and sector wide representation on the programme task and finish groups. The development process included completion of an RPS Equality Impact Assessment[11] (EQIA).

[9] Multiprofessional framework for advanced practice in England 2025 Multi-professional framework for advanced practice 2025 - Advanced Practice

[10] The Pharmaceutical Journal, PJ, October 2023, Vol 311, No7978;311(7978): DOI:10.1211/PJ.2023.1.197831

[11] RPS Equality Impact Assessment - core advanced curriculum .pdf

4.0 Northern Ireland context

The Northern Ireland Centre for Pharmacy Learning and Development (NICPLD) provides a Post-registration Foundation Programme (PRFP) for all patient-focused pharmacists who are registered and working in Northern Ireland. The PRFP covers and assesses all the outcomes of the RPS Post-registration Foundation Pharmacist Curriculum[8]. The RPS is currently updating the Post-registration Foundation Pharmacist Curriculum to support pharmacists registering in 2026 under the new initial education and training standards[2] who will be prescribers at the point of registration. The PRFP will be updated accordingly to support novice prescribers; from 2026 onwards, it will be open to pharmacist prescribers who are registered and working in patient focused roles in Northern Ireland.

At present pharmacists must undertake the NICPLD Independent Prescribing (IP) course, or another General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC)-accredited IP course, before they can progress onto the current Advanced Practice development pathway. Patient-focused pharmacists who are registered and working in Northern Ireland are eligible to enrol onto an MSc in Advanced Pharmacy Practice (APP) at Queens University Belfast (QUB) or Ulster University (UU) if they have successfully completed both the NICPLD PRFP (or equivalent) and a GPhC-accredited IP course. The QUB and UU APP MSc courses cover and assess the outcomes of the RPS Core Advanced Pharmacist Curriculum. NICPLD delivers the clinical, leadership and management, and education pillars, and the universities deliver the research pillar.

Pharmacists registering from 2026 onwards will be prescribers at the point of registration[2] and will not be required to undertake a GPhC-accredited IP course. Thus, they will not be eligible to enrol onto the current QUB or UU APP MSc courses. This creates the need to consider the Northern Ireland pathways to support pharmacists on their post-registration professional development journey towards advanced and consultant levels of practice.

The proposal is to adopt a new pathway to achieve Advanced Practice Pharmacist qualification in Northern Ireland through credentialling against the RPS Core Advanced Pharmacist Curriculum, recognising the credentialling pathway in addition to equivalent formal postgraduate diploma or Masters qualifications. This new approach will require amendments to the current workforce development education pathways in Northern Ireland including communication of those changes for the pharmacy profession.

5.0 Development of a model for a Multi-professional Advanced Practice Academy in Northern Ireland

An ambitious vision to maximise the transformation of health and social care in Northern Ireland (NI) has been clearly articulated in Delivering Together[12] . This policy document describes the need to deliver person-centred care, focused on prevention, early intervention, supporting independence and well-being, and delivered in the most appropriate setting including the community setting, where possible.

Work is underway on the development of workforce and leadership strategies, to make sure that the health and social care system has the right people and the right leadership to deliver safe, high quality services now and meet the challenges of the future.

Evidence demonstrates the positive impact of nurses, midwives, pharmacists and Allied Health Professionals working at an advanced level of practice and that these practitioners add critical value across various health care settings.

The Chief Nursing Officer has commissioned work to develop a model for a Multi-professional Advanced Practice Academy in Northern Ireland to promote collaborative working in a safe and supportive environment and ensure high quality education, mentorship, networking and research opportunities for its members. An NI Advanced Practice Academy Steering Group is being established to undertake this work with representation across the Healthcare professions, including pharmacy.

[12] DoH (2016) Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together
https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/health-and-wellbeing-2026-delivering-together

6.0 Next steps for the development of Advanced Practice Pharmacists (APPs) in Northern Ireland

Through the publication of this paper the Department of Health is formally adopting a new pathway to achieve Advanced Practice Pharmacist qualification in Northern Ireland through credentialling against the RPS Core Advanced Pharmacist Curriculum. To support development and implementation in the period up to April 2030:

1. Pharmacist employers in General Practice, Community Pharmacy and Trusts should define APP roles in their sector and update job descriptions where necessary to recognise the credentialling pathway in addition to equivalent formal postgraduate diploma or Masters qualifications.

2. NICPLD should support development and introduction of the APP credentialing pathway in Northern Ireland, in parallel with the current Masters in Advanced Pharmacy Practice course. NICPLD to make available an educational programme to support access to RPS APP credentialing against the core advanced curriculum.

3. NICPLD should collaborate with the NI universities and communicate clearly to the workforce when the current MSc APP will no longer be available.

4. NICPLD should develop a communication plan that describes all the changes to the workforce development education pathways in NI, clearly explaining the impact of those changes for the pharmacy profession.

5. NICPLD should support development of a Multi-professional Advanced Practice Academy in Northern Ireland, through representation on the Advanced Practice Academy Steering Group.

6. Advised by NICPLD and the NI Committee for Pharmacy Education and Training (NICPET), DoH should consider development of funding pathways to support development of pharmacy professionals working in specialist areas where the core advanced curriculum may not be the most appropriate pathway.

7. Three years after implementation begins Department of Health should commission an evaluation of the impact of an APP credentialing pathway in Northern Ireland.

Appendix 1

Membership of the Task and Finish Group

Membership of the Advanced Practice Pharmacist Task and Finish Group included wide-spread representation from a range of stakeholder organisations as follows:

- Dr Anne Friel (Chair), Head of Pharmacy & Medicines Management, Western Health & Social Care Trust
- Dr Laura O'Loan, Associate Postgraduate Pharmacy Dean, Northern Ireland Centre for Pharmacy Learning and Development (NICPLD)
- Dr Glenda Fleming, Deputy Director, Medicines Optimisation Innovation Centre (MOIC)
- Ms Jill Macintyre, Head of Pharmacy and Medicines Management, South Eastern HSC Trust
- Ms Sarah McGinnity, Clinical Pharmacy Development Lead Pharmacist, Belfast HSC Trust
- Ms Anna Fay, Lead Practice Pharmacist, Lisburn GP Federation
- Ms Ennis Shields, Governance and Services Pharmacist, Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland (CPNI)
- Ms Jayne Agnew, Northern Ireland Consultant Pharmacists Representative, HSC Trust
- Ms Jaqui Hanley, Consultant Pharmacist, Antimicrobials, Western HSC Trust
- Professor Kevin Vowles, Professor of Clinical Psychology, Queens University Belfast
- Ms Julie Greenfield, Manager, Pharmacy Forum Northern Ireland
- Laura Hughes, Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland
- Dr Fiona Hughes, Senior Lecturer Education, School of Pharmacy, Queens University Belfast
- Dr Deborah Lowry, Associate Head of School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Ulster University
- Dr Lisa Byers - Senior Principal Pharmaceutical Officer, Department of Health
- Mr Christopher Garland, Senior Principal Pharmaceutical Officer, Department of Health
- Mr Michael McCabe, Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG), Department of Health
- The Group had input from Mr Stephen Doherty and Mr Joseph Oakley from the Royal Pharmaceutical Society (RPS).