Joint statement of the UK Consultant Nurse networks for Learning Disability; Mental Health and Autism

Approved Clinician Role

The three consultant nurse networks have collaboratively provided this position statement which is to be shared with nurses registered on the learning disability and mental health parts of the NMC register.

The three UK networks have come together on this matter as it is a common issue to us all, our networks encompass all consultant nurses in the UK who wish to join. We believe there is strength in our joint voice, our consensus view and our unity and this gives strength to our nursing colleagues across the UK.

Approved clinician role and nursing: The Approved Clinician role was first developed as part of the review and refresh of the Mental Health Act in 2008. This role was introduced in order to widen the range of mental health professionals who could lead the care for people subject to the Mental Health Act 1983, and ensure better patient care experience, increased patient choice and that there are Approved Clinicians available with the appropriate experience to oversee their care and treatment needs.

This opportunity offers mental health and learning disability nurses the option to progress into a senior clinical role, encouraging the retention of some of our most skilled clinicians in the workforce. Nurses bring a unique skill set to this role which directly benefits patient care, promoting person centredness and holistic approaches for person centred care.

We are also aware that nursing is facing significant retention issues; one of the core ways to retain nurses is to offer a clear career pathway that allows nurses to develop and extend their roles and functions. The Approved Clinician role offers one such opportunity.

Where nurses do extend into this role it is important to retain the professional identity as a nurse and be clear about scope of practice commensurate with experience, broader skills and knowledge developed; and seniority.

Please also refer to the Health Education England Framework for Multi Professional Approved Clinicians for further detail[1] and the RCN and HEE development session[2]

---

[1] Multi-professional AC implementation pack (hee.nhs.uk)
[2] Approved Clinician — Learning Disability Nurses' Forum

Consultant Nurse Approved Clinician Numbers: A census conducted by the National Mental health and Learning Disability Nurse Directors Forum in 2021, identified at that time that there were 214 consultant nurses in mental health, learning disability and autism services of which 31 (14.5%) were Approved Clinicians (2 of those in learning disability) with 17 of those also being nurse prescribers. In addition the census showed that 19 (9%) consultant nurses were identified for or undertaking Approved Clinician training (2 of those in learning disability).

- The census did not discern between those who had gained Approved Clinician status and those who were deployed as Approved Clinicians / Responsible Clinicians
- The two learning disability Consultant Nurse Approved Clinicians and the two in training are within two NHS Trusts in the North of England.
- In the census the Approved Clinician role was indicated as not appropriate on the returns for the consultant nurses working in specialist autism services.

Since this development very few nurses have felt able to take up this opportunity, and those that have, often report feeling isolated and unsupported by their 'professional bodies'. This is a gap we intend to fill.

What is an Approved Clinician (AC)?

An Approved Clinician (AC) is "a person approved by the appropriate national authority to act as an Approved Clinician for the purposes of the Mental Health Act 1983"

The Mental Health Act 2007 identifies the following as eligible to act as Approved Clinicians in England:

- practitioner psychologists listed on the register maintained by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC)
- first level nurses with a field of practice in mental health or learning disability
- occupational therapists registered by the HCPC
- social workers registered by Social Work England.

To obtain approval, a portfolio of evidence would need to be submitted to the relevant regional panel, information and guidance is contained on Department of Health and Social care pages[3]

Approved Clinician competencies develop the clinician to consultant level practice, extending their approach and perception of a case which can greatly assist with an expert understanding of clinical risk, clinical formulation; considering a range of assessments and interventions both non pharmacological and pharmacological; dealing with differences of opinion and advising senior clinical staff and legal bodies such as Tribunals and Court of Protection.

The role of Approved Clinician has benefits across mental health, learning disability and autism practice even outside of the auspices of the Mental Health Act 1983 and can support where areas of human rights, mental health, mental capacity and other health and social care law overlaps.

---

[3] Mental Health Act: exercise of approval instructions 2015 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

What is a Responsible Clinician (RC)?

A Responsible Clinician is the "*Approved Clinician who has been given overall responsibility for a patient's case*" where they are detained under a section of the Mental Health Act or on a Community order of the Mental Health Act such as Guardianship, Community Treatment Order or Conditional Discharge.

Once approved, the AC can take on the role of Responsible Clinician taking clinical responsibility for people of any age who are subject to the Mental Health Act 1983 working within the scope of their practice. This means that each Approved Clinician brings something different depending on the clinician's prior knowledge skills and experience.

Nurses taking on this role need to maintain their professional identity as nurses and be very clear about their scope of practice to ensure the level of responsibility and accountability are appropriate to their knowledge, skills and expertise.

Role Expectation

The expectations of an Approved Clinician will vary depending on the organisation and service that they are employed to act within. The competencies of an Approved Clinician cover a wide range of aspects that are relevant to many services settings and roles. As such their knowledge skills and competencies can benefit a much broader range of people than those under the auspices of the Mental Health Act.

Some Approved Clinicians fulfil the role of Responsible Clinician for a number of people in either an inpatient or a community setting. Others use their knowledge, skills and competencies as an Approved Clinician to the benefit of the people they provide a health service to.

Attached to this position statement are a number of examples of nurses who are Approved Clinicians and how they fulfil their role.

Benefits to Nursing; services we work in and the people we serve

Nursing has transformed to become a graduate profession. There has been significant work undertaken to develop career pathways for nursing, now ranging from nursing associates to advanced nurse practitioners to consultant nurses and to executive nurses.

With the MHA (1983) providing nurses with the opportunity to train as Approved Clinicians (AC) and fulfil the role of Responsible Clinician (RC), nurses can further develop their role and care for patients in their time of most distress.

Nurses deliver care from a biopsychosocial model, providing person centred, inclusive and holistic support and interventions for people under their care. Consultant nurses are optimally placed in terms of skills and experience to undertake the role of the AC and RC and should be supported by their Executive Nurses and their organisations to complete the training necessary to develop a portfolio that gains approval.

There is a significant need to increase numbers of nurses, especially so in the specialist nursing branches of learning disability and mental health. Nurses often leave the clinical career pathway due to limits on their progression finding routes in operational management and research as

alternatives. In providing senior clinical career options for nurses it will positively impact on nurse recruitment and retention.

Nurses working in senior clinical roles, provides for person centred, evidenced based and high quality care from a profession that places people and their families at the heart of the decision making and care planning.

Nurses in these roles report feelings of job satisfaction; that their skills are being well used as a senior professional and that they are able to show the next generation of nurses that it is possible to progress as a senior nurse and continue to provide patient facing care.

The three UK Consultant Nurse Networks' Position

We strongly believe that patients and people accessing our health services will benefit from nurses developing as Approved Clinicians. Those nurses who have developed into this role have had direct feedback to that effect from those people they work with and their families and carers.

It is our view that Learning Disability and Mental Health nurses must have equal opportunity to develop as Approved Clinicians using the support available within organisations and from Health Education funding bodies across the UK.

The nurses who extend into this role should rightly be recognised as practicing at consultant level having achieved approval, their job title should reflect their position as a Consultant Nurse and their status as an Approved Clinician concurrently. This may require some organisations to develop Consultant Nurse posts in parallel to developing the Multi Professional Approved Clinician offer.

Where resources allow the three Consultant Nurse Networks aspire to commission or conduct research on the deployment of this role amongst the nursing profession.

The UK networks for Consultant Nursing will offer support into organisations, lobbying them and working with them to develop this senior level of the nursing career pathway at local, regional and national levels.

Rebecca Chester and Christine Hutchinson **UK Learning Disability Consultant Nurse Network**	Dr Ann Cox and Julie Onyegbula **UK Mental Health Consultant Nurse Forum**	Sarah Jackson and Kimberley Ashwin **UK Autism Consultant Nurse Network**

October 2022

Registered Nurse Trainee Approved Clinician Role and Function	
Name	Jacquie Shenton
Job Title	Consultant Nurse and Associate Director of Nursing
Contact details	Jacquie.shenton@lscft.nhs.uk
Service you work in	Community Learning Disability Services

How will you work as an Approved Clinician? Who will benefit and how?

My current role already allows me to utilise the breadth of skills required in relation to Approved Clinician status. This will benefit patients to reassure them that I will be working in a holistic manner. As a Responsible Clinician I will work within a community setting initially with a small caseload of patients who are on a Conditional Discharge.

What have been the key enablers in you training to become an Approved Clinician?

Organisational support and 'buy in' to developing new roles.

The support of an experienced Multi-Professional Approved Clinician mentor who was able to challenge me and support my development.

What have been the key challenges in you training to become an Approved Clinician?

Time out form the work place to complete the shadowing and development of portfolio. The additional backfill money was not used so essentially I was continuing to fulfil all elements of my role as well as complete Approved Clinician training.

Any other points that might help someone decide to become an Approved Clinician?

It's a valued role, its helps you to consolidate and build on existing clinical skills.

It can help to inspire other nurses to see that there is a clinical career pathway within nursing.

Registered Nurse Trainee Approved Clinician Role and Function	
Name	Mike Caulfield
Job Title	Nurse Consultant and Non-Medical Approved Clinician
Contact details	Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Trust mike.caulfield@nhs.net 01244 397303 / 07795825090
Service you work in	Acute Mental Health Inpatients

How do you work as an Approved Clinician? Who benefits and how?

I work as an RC on a mixed adult/older persons acute inpatient ward and I have responsibility for a case load of 12 patients.

I work alongside a consultant psychiatrist and we split the patients on the ward (24) between the two of us. I work autonomously as an RC but I have clinical supervision from the consultant who I have a very good working relationship with and have had for a number of years now. I feel very supported by him and also I can go to him with any queries or areas of complexity that I feel are outside of my confidence in addressing.

The MDT on the ward benefits from my role as we are one of the few wards with two RC's and also my visibility and presence on the ward allows for a leadership element for the MDT.

The patients also benefit from my role for similar reasons as my visibility and accessibility on the ward leads them to feel that any queries that they have can be addressed and needs met in a timely manner. It is also a new way of working that the patients are getting used to but there have been no problems with this and the patients are accepting of this and my role and responsibilities once it is explained to them.

The service also benefits from a patient flow point of view with the size of the case load. As a nurse and RC there isn't the need for decisions around care and particularly discharge to need to await the consultant psychiatrist (this benefits his work load as well).

What have been the key enablers in you becoming an Approved Clinician?

My own personal development and wish to remain in a clinical role with patient contact.

The Trust being accepting of this via appraisal and supporting me with the time and opportunity to pursue and achieve this.

Having good consultant psychiatrists who have been open to the role and working alongside them as well as providing clinical supervision and support.

What have been the key challenges in you becoming an Approved Clinician?

COVID was a challenge with gaining approval due to the time delays in portfolio's being authorised and passed.

Some attitudes from medical staff as to the role and whether this would be required in addition to the existing RC.

Any other points that might help someone decide to become an Approved Clinician?

Being brave to have courage in your own abilities. It helps consolidate and 'formalise' a lot of existing autonomous practice.

Be patient, it is a long process. Don't be disheartened if portfolios are returned as needing amendments prior to being given approval. Look at it as learning and development of knowledge and skills and how these can be evidenced.

We're very much trailblazers for our profession and can really make our mark for nurses in what has traditionally been viewed as a medical entity.

Registered Nurse Approved Clinician Role and Function	
Name	Ian Thorpe
Job Title	Nurse Consultant, Forensic Intellectual Disability Pathway
Contact details	Ian.thorpe@cntw.nhs.uk Kenneth Day Unit, Northgate Hospital, Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne & Wear NHS Foundation Trust, Morpeth, Northumberland, NE61 3BP
Service you work in	Secure learning disability service

How do you work as an Approved Clinician? Who benefits and how?

My substantive role is within a secure learning disability service where I am Responsible Clinician for 6 inpatients. I believe the patients benefit as the Responsible Clinician is allocated on the basis of who is most appropriate for the patient's needs.

I am responsible for leading the multi-disciplinary team in the care of these patients, however as the person who has overall responsibility in terms of the Mental Health Act 1983 (as amended by the Mental Health Act 2007) for the patient's case, including those who are discharged from hospital but who remain liable to be detained (e.g. those on a Community Treatment Order (CTO)), I am ultimately the decision maker and must be able to justify these decisions both to the patient and the team and within the legal framework of the Mental Health Act .

I am currently seconded to work as a nurse consultant with the adult forensic mental health team. Part of my work within this team is being the Responsible Clinician for patients on community treatment orders and being clinical supervisor for conditionally discharged patients.

What have been the key enablers in you becoming an Approved Clinician?

Support at director of nursing level within the Trust.

Good mentorship from approved clinician colleagues.

Completing the Post Graduate Certificate in Professional Practice in Law, Mental Health Law at Northumbria University which is specifically about preparation for the Approved Clinician role.

What have been the key challenges in you becoming an Approved Clinician?

It is still the case that a number of professionals do not understand the role of the approved clinician and Responsible Clinician and that it can be carried out by other professionals, not just psychiatrists. This has required a lot of awareness training within the service.

Any other points that might help someone decide to become an Approved Clinician?

Speak to existing Multi-Professional Approved Clinicians, if you do not have any within your organisation you could speak to your Director of Nursing or Chief Nurse on how to develop this role.

You could also contact your regional approvals panel to discuss the role and the approval process, they may also be able to put you in contact with nurses in your area working as an Approved Clinician/Responsible Clinician.

Registered Nurse Approved Clinician Role and Function	
Name	Christine Hutchinson
Job Title	Consultant Nurse Approved Clinician; Associate Director of Nursing and Clinical Lead
Contact details	Chris.hutchinson@lscft.nhs.uk
Service you work in	Learning Disability Services and Specialist Autism Services

How do you work as an Approved Clinician? Who benefits and how?

I have worked for three different Trusts as an Approved Clinician. In the first two trusts I had a combined inpatient and community job plan. I was Responsible Clinician for a caseload of 14 inpatients, 10 were on a forensic rehabilitation pathway and 4 were people with severe learning disability and co existing autism and mental illness who presented with very significant behavioural challenge. The community part of my job plan was in running nurse led clinics for two CCG localities alongside the Community learning Disability Team. Those clinics involved me using my Approved Clinician competencies in the assessment and interventions (including prescribing) needed to keep people well and at home. I was also Responsible Clinician to people on conditional discharges or Community Treatment Orders. There wasn't anyone on Guardianship orders, but had there been I would have acted as Responsible Clinician for those also.

For the Trust that I am currently in I have a community job plan that spans both learning disability services and specialist autism services for those who do not have learning disability. I use my Approved Clinician competencies in everything I do clinically, from providing direct appointments through to case consultations and second opinions for Approved Clinician colleagues. I am also Responsible Clinician for a number of conditionally discharged patients currently and have supported other to achieve absolute discharge.

What have been the key enablers in you becoming an Approved Clinician?

Personal drive is important. I have always wanted to ensure that we deliver the best services that we can to the people we serve and I felt that as a consultant nurse and nurse prescriber this was another aspect where I could benefit people and patients.

Service transformation was needed and I wanted to trial out new ways of working to support service developments and address workforce gaps.

Having executive team members who have a vision and drive for new and extended roles.

Having Medical Approved Clinician colleagues who were supportive of the development what really helpful.

What have been the key challenges in you becoming an Approved Clinician?

I had to move organisations to become an Approved Clinician as the Trust I was in before I gained approval was not at that time interested in deploying the role and supporting their staff. But once in an organisation that was supportive there were few challenging to gaining approval.

Any other points that might help someone decide to become an Approved Clinician?

You need to think very clearly about your scope of practice, the knowledge and skills that you bring to the role and where you would best fit in being deployed as an Approved Clinician.

This role is not about replacing psychiatry positions, but about transforming health services so that people accessing our services have more choice and have appropriately trained people providing their Approved Clinician or Responsible Clinician oversight. Psychiatry posts are still required and it's important that your colleagues know that.

Connect with other people who are Approved Clinicians or are in training, there are increasing numbers of us around up and down the country.

It's a fantastic role, challenging at times, but one in which you can make a real difference for people. It sits really neatly with development as a consultant professional if working in mental health learning disability or autism services.

Registered Nurse Approved Clinician Role and Function	
Name	Matthew Hibbert
Job Title	Consultant Nurse/ Approved Clinician
Contact details	mhibbert@nhs.net
Service you work in	Secure Forensic Mental Health Care

How do you work as an Approved Clinician? Who benefits and how?

I work in a Secure Hospital primarily on a Low Secure Unit where I am the Responsible Clinician for male patients detained under either Part II or Part III of the Mental Health Act. I feel my nursing background and my additional training as an Advanced Clinical Practitioner has meant I am able to offer a different type of leadership to the team and this has assisted us in building a culture of shared responsibility and positive risk management. In turn this has assisted the team to work in innovative ways and this has led to us being able to successfully discharge individuals who had previously appeared quite stuck in hospital.

What have been the key enablers in you becoming an Approved Clinician?

The Trust I work for has taken a positive stance on these roles and has shown that they are committed to creating and supporting Multi-Professional Approved Clinicians. I benefitted greatly from a dedicated training post which allowed me to safely rehearse the role under supervision. On a personal level the key enablers I had were a supportive Director of Nursing who could see the potential of developing the Multi-Professional AC role and lobbied for this. They showed interest in the work I was doing as a non-medical prescriber and gave me confidence to take this further into ACP training in preparation for the AC role. Later having a supportive Clinical Director back me to take on the AC training really helped. I also benefitted greatly from working with an established and practicing Multi-Professional AC and the support of having a peer group whilst training.

What have been the key challenges in you becoming an Approved Clinician?

Initially it was a lack of clarity of the pathway to becoming an Approved Clinician. It has taken many years for this to be understood and supported locally.

Any other points that might help someone decide to become an Approved Clinician?

This is the best job I have had.

The role is challenging and not for the fainthearted but it allows you to make a significant difference to people's lives. It takes a substantial commitment from you as an individual but it is incredibly worthwhile.

Registered Nurse Trainee Approved Clinician Role and Function	
Name	Sarah Jackson
Job Title	Consultant Nurse Autism, Associate Director of Nursing and Autism Clinical Pathway Lead
Contact details	Sarah.l.jackson@lscft.nhs.uk
Service you work in	Specialist Autism Services

How will you work as an Approved Clinician? Who will benefit and how?

I am currently a trainee Approved Clinician and am taking opportunities across both community and inpatient settings to shadow other Approved/Responsible Clinicians in order to develop the knowledge and skills required in relation to Approved Clinician status. To get a breadth of experience I am shadowing in both mental health services for adults and older adults and learning disability services for all ages.

Once I receive approval to be an Approved Clinician, I will use the competencies to increase and improve services to autistic people aged 16 and over who are at risk of admission to a mental health hospital or who are already admitted. I will provide Approved Clinician consultations with Responsible Clinicians in both community and inpatient settings in relation to autistic people they are working with. It is possible that I might also be the named Responsible Clinician for some autistic people whose needs are particularly complex.

What have been the key enablers in you training to become an Approved Clinician?

Funding opportunities via Health Education England to complete the Post-Graduate Certificate in Mental Health Law

The support of my organisation, and 'buy in' to developing new clinical roles.

The support of an experienced Multi-Professional Approved Clinician mentor who is able to challenge me and support my development.

What have been the key challenges in you training to become an Approved Clinician?

It is difficult to get time away from my contracted role at times due to clinical and other pressures. I am also seeking shadowing opportunities, from other very busy clinicians.

Any other points that might help someone decide to become an Approved Clinician?

This is an amazing career development opportunity for learning disability nurses.

Registered Nurse Approved Clinician Role and Function	
Name	Katy White
Job Title	Consultant Nurse and Multi Professional Approved Clinician
Contact details	katy.white9@nhs.net
Service you work in	Junipers Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit, Devon Partnership NHS Trust

How do you work as an Approved Clinician? Who benefits and how?

I am the Approved Clinician for a 10 bed PICU ward. I work in an integrated way with the MDT including psychology, OT, ward doctor and nursing staff. Since taking over the role on the ward I have emphasised the importance of working as an MDT, considering both psychopharmaceutical treatment but also other interventions and holding the patient at the centre of the care pathway.

As a nurse approved clinician I bring the skills of my nursing background to the role, this provides a different way of working and therefore a different approach. As a nurse I focus on a hands-on approach, working alongside the team and considering holistic assessment and treatment.

What have been the key enablers in you becoming an Approved Clinician?

Devon Partnership have developed a training program for Approved Clinicians which provided a dedicated training space for development, learning and completion of the competencies to be approved as an Approved Clinician.

Through this opportunity I was provided with mentors, learning experiences, access to postgraduate study and peer learning through action learning sets and peer supervision.

What have been the key challenges in you becoming an Approved Clinician?

The step between been a nurse practitioner and an approved clinician was significant and then the step from being a trainee to qualified and responsible for patients was also a significant step.

In addition to this, other challenges, I experienced were; difficulty with others understanding the role and the scope of practice both as a trainee and once achieving Approved Clinician status, lack of national guidance and oversight around specific issues such as working as a prescriber and approved clinician and helping other practitioners and families understand my role.

Any other points that might help someone decide to become an Approved Clinician?

Although a difficult learning process the role is a fantastic opportunity and although there are a number challenges these are able to be overcome and as more nurses gain Approval the understanding, structure and governance is developing allowing for smoother working and better understanding of the role.

Registered Nurse Trainee Approved Clinician Role and Function	
Name	Julie Onyegbula
Job Title	Mental Health Consultant Nurse, Approved Clinician
Contact details	Julie.onyegbula@nhs.net
Service you work in	Barefoot Lodge, Open Rehabilitation Ward, Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust

How will you work as an Approved Clinician? Who will benefit and how?

I am the Approved Clinician for a 15 bedded open mental health rehabilitation ward. I have full clinical responsibility and work closely with the multi professional team including psychology and occupational therapy.

I have direct patient contact and responsibility for their care by way of assessing their mental disorder and overseeing a treatment plan, while providing day to day clinical leadership to the team. I think this is an exciting opportunity for me as a nurse and also for our patients, as having multi professional approved clinicians can bring a different approach to the care.

Senior clinical roles in nursing are limited being an AC enables these clinical nursing pathways.

What have been the key enablers in you training to become an Approved Clinician?

Having a personal drive and commitment to the process. Maintaining the vision of why you are doing it and how you think it will transform services.

Support from Trust Board level and direct line manager to help remove barriers.

Support and encouragement from other deployed ACs or ACs in training.

Formal study of Mental Health Law Post Graduate Certificate at University of Northumbria that includes mentoring and support from leads.

What have been the key challenges in you training to become an Approved Clinician?

Governance and support systems around my role and deployment.

Others understanding of the role, despite it being law since 2008 many colleagues are unsure and question it.

Any other points that might help someone decide to become an Approved Clinician?

This is the best job I've ever had, it puts patients at the forefront and provides opportunity to really make a difference to their care, their own and their families experience and also to empower nursing teams by way of role modelling effective, compassionate, safe senior clinical leadership.

Ask to shadow someone in this and see how it works, you will be excited and inspired.