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## Strategic uses of National Occupational Standards

Delivering high quality social care services requires strategic leadership and clear operational management. Managers using National Occupational Standards have found that the standards help to reinforce the link from strategy to operational management and to service standards. There are a variety of uses for the standards, all benefiting from their comprehensive coverage and user focus.

In this leaflet we will consider how the standards can contribute to the following seven business areas:

1. Business planning
2. Workforce management
  - 2.1 *Selection and recruitment*
  - 2.2 *Employee development*
  - 2.3 *Developing and evaluating training*
  - 2.4 *Working effectively with staff, and with education and training providers*
3. Benchmarking
4. Change management
5. Contract specification for care services
6. Marketing
7. Risk management

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**What are National Occupational Standards?**

National Occupational Standards have been developed in most industries. They:

- describe best practice in particular areas of work
- bring together the skills, knowledge and values necessary to do the work as statements of competence
- provide managers with a tool for a wide variety of workforce management, quality control and specification tasks
- are the basis of training and qualifications.

Initially, the standards were used as the basis for qualifications, but wider uses of the standards are now emerging, such as their use in human resource management.

**Who develops them?**

In social care and social work the standards have been identified and agreed by representatives of employment through NISCC, CCW, SSSC and TOPSS England.

NISCC is working with partners in social care to develop standards that will focus on all levels of work, with an expectation that the standards will be used at least as much in human resource and operational management, as they will be in the development of qualifications. NISCC will continue to work with employment to contribute to and promote the developing uses of the standards.

**Structure of National Occupational Standards**

National Occupational Standards are organised into units of competence. Each 'unit' describes an area of work, with the activities separated out into 'elements' with associated performance criteria' and 'knowledge' listed. The standards also include units that highlight the 'values' required to work in care.

The care standards can be separated into different levels of competence and used to benchmark the skills, knowledge and responsibilities associated with more complex roles within organisations.

**Identified strategic uses of National Occupational Standards**

**1. Business planning**

Managers are using National Occupational Standards to describe the skills they need, gauge the skills already in the workforce and set out training and recruitment plans to fill any gaps. Costs can then be accurately judged and the value of existing staff and the good sense of investing in upgrading their skills can be recognised.

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## **2. Workforce management**

Inspections and reviews have shown that organisations that have well-developed workforce management strategies are most likely to provide high quality services. This positive relationship is found when the workforce management is well connected to the strategic purpose of the organisation and to the delivery of high quality services. National Occupational Standards offer a means to establish a common language' in achieving this type of relationship. Four areas where standards are being used for workforce management are highlighted below.

### *2.1 Selection and recruitment*

National Occupational Standards are being used to identify clearly the skills required for posts and are also used in writing job descriptions and drafting job adverts. See examples below.

#### **Care Assistant**

- Promote, monitor and maintain health, safety and security in the workplace.
- Promote effective communication and relationships.
- contribute to the protection of individuals from abuse.
- Enable clients to maintain their personal hygiene and appearance.
- Enable clients to participate in recreation and leisure activities.

#### **Child Care Worker**

- Contribute to the protection of children from abuse.
- Contribute to the development, provision and review of care programmes.
- Contribute to the prevention and management of challenging behaviour in young people.
- Encourage young people to develop and maintain a positive sense of self and identity.
- Promote and maximise educational opportunities and achievements for individual children and young people.

Best practice in the care sector depends on the ability of individuals and whole organisations to work in ways that are respectful of individuals and assist users of the services to be as independent as possible. These values are reflected through all the National Occupational Standards and are reinforced by specific units that focus on equal opportunities. These units include the promotion of:

- people's equality, diversity and rights
- people's rights and responsibilities
- equality and diversity of people
- people's right to the confidentiality of information.

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The performance criteria and knowledge requirements that support these statements can help staff involved in selection and recruitment to produce a checklist, which looks for relevant evidence during the selection process.

The development of standards at post qualifying level for child care offers managers the opportunity to use a standards-based approach for all levels of staff.

## *2.2 Employee development*

National Occupational Standards contain descriptions of best practice. Standards can be used as the basis for objectives in performance appraisal and as an aid in setting milestones in personal development. The standards are used to help training and development professionals tailor their provision for individual staff while meeting operational or business objectives.

Employees can use the standards to assess their own performance against a clear and objective description of their job as well as assess their competence against other jobs and thus gauge their suitability for career moves.

The different levels of standards enable both managers and individual staff to be clear about future development and training, to enable individuals to undertake work at a more complex level.

## *2.3 Developing and evaluating training*

The thoroughness and objectivity of National Occupational Standards, enable training plans and training courses to be developed to address both organisational and individual learning needs. The standards can be used to inform the content of training programmes, as they specify in detail what constitutes best practice and can therefore be used for the assessment of competence and the achievement of qualifications. They can also be used to evaluate training by defining the practice outcomes expected from a training investment. The training can then be evaluated against the outcomes, and most importantly, the actual practice of those who have been trained can be checked against the intended outcomes. Monitoring of the effectiveness of the training can continue to be carried out through supervision and appraisal of individuals.

For organisations wishing to achieve Investors in People (IiP) accreditation, the use of National Occupational Standards will be a very positive indicator to the IiP assessors that the organisation is taking a strategic approach to workforce management.

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*2.4 Working effectively with staff, and with education and training providers*

National Occupational Standards can be used by employers to set out the learning outcomes they expect from training. Training providers are now mapping the relationship between their programmes and the standards, thereby creating an opportunity for better understanding between themselves and employers as the purchasers of training. Training programmes that can be mapped to the National Occupational Standards can often attract external funding support and can therefore be a cost effective resource in meeting business training needs.

**3. Benchmarking**

National Occupational Standards are providing an excellent foundation for benchmarking exercises.

The standards often contain descriptions of processes and performance criteria that can be used to measure success. Where organisations are competing for the same resources and contracts, or in complex purchaser/provider relationships it is often difficult to find other organisations who are willing to enter into comparisons and benchmarking. The 'neutrality' of the standards is an aid to finding a best practice route, and benchmarking against the standards can provide a helpful first step.

**4. Change management**

Organisations can spend large sums of money and resources introducing change but the results of their investments vary enormously. One of the more common reasons for lack of success in a change initiative is that the workforce did not fully understand what they were being asked to do differently. This can be because the messages were not clearly communicated or the staff were uncertain of their existing skills. National Occupational Standards can be used to solve some of these difficulties by describing the gap between the practice required by the changes and the existing staff skills. Standards are often then used to form the basis of new job descriptions, role specifications and the functional requirements of departments, teams and individuals.

**5. Contract specification for care services**

National Occupational Standards are being used to form the basis for contract specification for example in domiciliary services. Clarity about the service required is promoted if both the purchasers and the potential providers are familiar with the standards and can use extracts from them as a 'common language' in contracts, tenders and service level agreements.

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For purchasers, the overall service required can be defined by quoting from the units within the standards, the elements can then be used to help specify activities required with the performance criteria providing an evaluative base for service level agreements. Suppliers competing for the work are then able to match their experience and evidence of competence against the standards.

## 6. Information and marketing

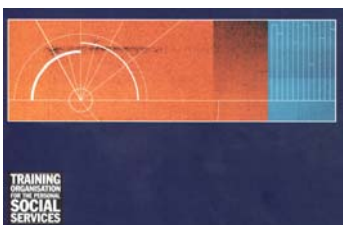
Managers in care will be concerned to improve the way in which the work of their service is understood by other organisations and the public. The complexity of care work can be misunderstood as defensiveness or a deliberate mystery. Organisations can use National Occupational Standards as a basis for informing and promoting their work to customers, suppliers, employees and the public. The clarity of the standards, particularly those dealing with values, help to show the reality of the work and engage people in the complexity of the balances that care has to achieve. Such an approach also allows managers to show how they are establishing a competent workforce through training, employee development and supervision.

## 7. Risk management

The term risk management covers a number of different issues within the care sector. These range from the general responsibility of all staff to work safely, to specific issues such as prevention of harm and re-offending. Two examples would be:

Each individual within the workforce is responsible, as an agent of the organisation, under the Health and Safety at Work Act, for their safety and for the safety of those in their care. National Occupational Standards have embedded within them actions and activities that are based on 'safe practice. So training and management of staff can be carried out with reference to achieving those standards.

National Occupational Standards require individual staff working with vulnerable clients to identify lines of communication, responsibility, and protocols for risk management. These protocols would enhance existing processes or policies within an organisation's overall plans.



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