

Reimagining RCOT communities: frequently asked questions

October 2024

Our vision is to create inclusive communities where all members can find a place to share, learn and network based on their region, area of practice, career level or professional interest. Historically RCOT members could connect with each other through our ten Specialist Sections, 13 regional groups and practice networks, but opportunities were limited outside of formal events. Feedback from members has shown that this model did not meet the diverse needs of our membership.

Over the past 18 months we've hosted workshops and used member insights to help us understand members' needs and their vision for a reimagined communities offer. We've also heard from our volunteers on the strengths and benefits of their communities and the challenges they've faced. We've used these insights to understand the gaps and opportunities, including how technology can help us create and host an inclusive communities model which is relevant to the professional lives of the occupational therapy workforce.

We continue to update these FAQs as the project develops. If you have any additional questions, please contact the Communities team at communities@rcot.co.uk. We're happy to help.

Reimagining our community model

Why are we developing a new communities model at RCOT?

We know how valued communities and the networking opportunities they provide are to our members. Whilst we have a strong legacy of communities and opportunities for members to come together to learn, share expertise and deliver activities, there were barriers to our approach and opportunities for improvement. Each member is a valuable resource to their professional body and peers and brings with them a wealth of diverse experiences, but we didn't have a truly equitable, accessible and inclusive way for members to connect with each other.

We have ambitious plans for our membership so we can collectively step up for occupational therapy. We want our communities to support members with their personal and professional development and to drive occupational therapy and occupational therapists forward.

What is the new communities model?

Members told us they want to explore an area of practice or professional issue, connect and network with others across career levels and with diverse experiences, share resources and access learning and development opportunities. In response we will develop a series of practice, professional and regional networks that we'll host on RCOT Communities, an online community engagement platform.

These networks will be inclusive and easily accessible spaces for all members, enabling you to find, meet and come together with others with a shared interest and to support your development needs. By facilitating virtual networking through RCOT Communities, members will be able to be part of more than one network at any time enabling you to enjoy and access a wide range of activities and resources and participate in community sharing and collaboration with each other.

We're currently working with our volunteers and a selection of groups on a closed test and learn phase of RCOT Communities to see how we can best use the functionality and features on offer. Volunteers and members are also supporting us to define the objectives, activities and roles of the new networks.

How will the new communities model benefit members?

Our ambitions are to improve and enhance our member offer and experience by developing networks that can be responsive to the needs of all members irrespective of career stage, region or area of practice. Specifically, it will enable members to:

- Seek solutions and support in their professional lives,
- Access networking opportunities relevant to their professional lives,
- Realise the value and benefit of joining a network and
- Address some of the barriers that limit equitable, inclusive and accessible peer to peer engagement opportunities.

Why are we no longer using the term Specialist Sections?

Members told us the term Specialist Section itself was not inclusive or accessible, and they viewed this as meaning you needed to be a specialist in that area of practice to join. This prevented members who were curious about a subject or at an earlier stage in their career from joining. The new networks will be spaces where any member can join, and we'll be using terminology to encourage this. We'll still use the term specialist in the new communities model, but this will be at later stages where the term is a more appropriate descriptor.

How have Specialist Sections, regions, committees and members been involved?

Since the summer of 2023 we've worked closely with volunteers, Specialist Sections, regions and members to help us review and develop a new approach to community engagement. We've done this through a series of workshops, stakeholder discussions and meetings, as well as through extensive communications. All Specialist Section and region volunteers have been invited to test the new community engagement platform, RCOT Communities. Members are also helping us to define and develop the networks and the new volunteer roles needed to support them. We're grateful to everyone who's participated in our review and is helping us define and shape a new communities model that will serve us for years to come.

Which networks can I join and when will they be available?

To date we've agreed the practice networks that will be ready for you to engage with when we launch. They are:

Acute care	Healthy ageing	Neurological practice
Children, young people and families	Inclusive Built environments	Oncology
Dementia care	Learning disabilities	Palliative and end of life care
Frailty	Long term conditions	Primary care
Health and work	Mental Health	Social care

There will also be Regional networks and two professional networks: Research Connect and Independent Practitioners. The activities offered by all these networks will depend on what volunteer roles we're able to fill and we'll continuously refine to ensure we're meeting member's needs.

You'll be able to join multiple networks when we launch RCOT Communities in 2025, alongside the other improvements to your digital experiences with us, including a new website, member portal and digital contact centre.

What volunteer roles will be included in these new communities?

Alongside an improved communities model, we're improving our approach to volunteering with new volunteer practices and better support. There will also be more flexible, accessible and proportionate volunteering opportunities for members that fit in around your personal and professional commitments. We'll support current volunteers to transition to new positions and recruit new volunteers from the wider membership at the end of 2024.

Will we have to pay extra to join the community engagement platform and the new networks?

No. Access to our new RCOT Communities platform and our new communities will be included in your RCOT membership to enable equitable, inclusive and fair access for all.

Will there still be in person events?

Yes. We will complement virtual networking with in-person events because we recognise the importance of these opportunities. We're taking the time to understand how we can best meet the needs across our membership by leveraging the right opportunities for networking and professional development across both virtual and in-person opportunities and we're working with our volunteers, Events team and Professional Development team to understand what this will look like.

Will I still be a member of an RCOT region?

Yes, you'll continue to be a member of your RCOT regional community, and these communities will become regional networks hosted on RCOT Communities. New members will still automatically join a region when they join RCOT.

Will I still be a member of a Specialist Section?

To support the transition to the new communities model, your Specialist Section membership came to an end on 30 September 2024. Whilst there will be a gap in activity, you'll be able to join the new networks on RCOT Communities in 2025. There is no longer additional subscriptions to pay to join our communities, and we'll include this benefit in your RCOT membership.

What is happening between the Specialist Sections ending and the launch in 2025?

The transition to the new model and the RCOT Communities platform is requiring focussed time and effort from the team at RCOT and our volunteers to make this a success. We've asked volunteers not to plan any activity between October 2024 and the launch in 2025. There will be a brief gap in activity, so please bear with us as we improve this valuable member benefit. A small selection of activities were already committed to and these will go ahead. There will be RCOT events held during this time so there will still be opportunities for CPD activities.

What will happen to funds held by Specialist Sections and regions and how will community activity be funded in the future?

The existing funding allocated to communities will remain allocated to communities, but it will no longer be divided into individual Specialist Section and region budgets. This will avoid the situation where member funds accumulate, and we end up with large reserves as has been the case to date. We'll be using these funds to kickstart our new communities' model for the benefit of all our members and the profession more widely in areas where we can have the maximum impact. For example, we know that members highly value in-person events, so we'll be looking to see how we can support these. All members will be able to join multiple practice networks and their regional network when we launch in 2025 at no additional cost. Where Specialist Sections have received funds for specific purposes, such as completing a particular project, those funds will continue to be used for their intended purpose.