

A framework for advancing sonographer roles in early pregnancy

September 2025

ISBN: 978-1-911738-24-4



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Foreword

The Association of Early Pregnancy Units (AEPU) has represented and celebrated the contributions of the multidisciplinary teams providing early pregnancy care across the UK for the past 25 years. In light of the 2023 independent Pregnancy Loss Review and the evolving landscape of healthcare provision within the NHS, the AEPU Executive Committee and the Society of Radiographers (SoR) are committed to supporting the development of specialist roles aimed at enhancing early pregnancy care. The AEPU and SoR recognise the vital role sonographers play in the early pregnancy pathway and hope this document will serve to extend their practice and foster the development and retention of sonographers who share our commitment to delivering the highest standard of care for patients and families facing complications in early pregnancy.

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1. Introduction

In the UK, early pregnancy care is typically provided by a multidisciplinary team (MDT) that encompasses gynaecologists, specialist nurses or midwives, sonographers and support staff. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends that early pregnancy care should be conducted in a dedicated early pregnancy assessment unit (EPAU) and be readily available to all women and pregnant people when required.¹ This multiprofessional model allows women and pregnant people (referred to as ‘patients’ in this framework) and their partners to access appropriate diagnosis and management in a setting that can meet their needs. Sonographers are an integral part of the early pregnancy team in many departments.

1.1 Introduction to extended scope of practice: enhanced, advanced and consultant level practice

The NHS Long Term Workforce Plan highlights the need to develop “new and enhanced roles” to develop the skills of staff and “free up the time of staff in traditional roles to maximise theirs.”²

The SoR is:

supportive of the development of advanced and consultant practice roles, including those that allow members to safely develop into new areas of practice. They build on the unique contribution of the professional workforce to health and care services, providing further opportunities for members to deliver and lead services for the benefit of patients, as well as providing further opportunities for fulfilling professional careers.³

The College of Radiographers’ *Education and Career Framework for the Radiography Workforce* provides details of the different levels of practice for radiographers and sonographers.⁴ These levels of practice are also relevant to other non-medical healthcare professionals working in the early pregnancy setting, including nurses, midwives and allied health professionals.

Extended scope of practice is defined as clinical specialists who are:

working beyond the recognised scope of practice of the profession of interest in innovative or non-traditional roles.⁵

Extended scope of practice can be at enhanced, advanced or consultant level, depending on an individual’s level of education, autonomy and attainment across the four pillars of practice.³ The Health and Care Professions Council highlights the importance of undertaking additional training “to update your knowledge, skills and experience if you wish to widen your scope of practice”.⁶

Enhanced practice is undertaken by:

experienced, often registered professionals who practice [sic] with autonomy and independently. They do complex work and manage day to day risk, including risks on behalf of, or with patients.⁷

Advanced clinical practice (ACP) is defined as:

a level of practice characterised by a high degree of autonomy and complex decision making. This is underpinned by a master's level award or equivalent that encompasses the four pillars of clinical practice, leadership and management, education and research, with demonstration of core capabilities and area specific clinical competence.

Advanced clinical practice embodies the ability to manage clinical care in partnership with individuals, families and carers. It includes the analysis and synthesis of complex problems across a range of settings, enabling innovative solutions to enhance people's experience and improve outcomes.⁸

Consultant practitioners work across four domains of: expert practice; strategic, enabling leadership; learning, development, improving across the system; and research and innovation.⁹ They demonstrate "expert clinical capabilities" and independent decision-making in complex situations, and lead innovation and change within services.⁴

1.2 Extended roles currently held by sonographers from a radiography background

Extended roles for sonographers from a radiography background are now well established across a range of specialties. Despite the prevalence of sonographers performing scans for obstetrics and gynaecology (O&G) patients, extended scope practitioner roles are notably less common within the O&G specialty.¹⁰ This discrepancy presents an opportunity for potential role expansion and service improvement within this field.

This section aims to illustrate the potential scope of practice for experienced and registered healthcare professionals. For sonographers who do not fall under statutory regulation, such as those in radiography, nursing or midwifery, certain limitations exist relating to prescribing and Ionising Radiation (Medical Exposure) Regulations. Local departments can consider which areas of practice are suited to extended roles for both statutory and non-statutory registered sonographers in line with current legislation.

Specialism	Clinical duties offered
Obstetrics ^{10,11*}	Assist with amniocentesis and chorionic villus sampling, sonographer-led discharge, fetal medicine scanning, follow-up and management of care pathways, high-risk pregnancy clinics, lead research sonographer
Gynaecology ^{10–12*}	Perform hysterosalpingogram (HSG), hysterosalpingo contrast sonography (HyCoSy), saline infusion sonography, biopsy, cyst and pelvic drainages, sonographer-led gynaecology ultrasound assessment (including International Ovarian Tumour Analysis classification and onward referral to gynaecological oncology for high risk)
Head and neck ^{11,12*}	Fine needle aspiration (FNA), biopsy, cyst drainage
Abdomen and scrotum ^{11,12*}	Contrast enhanced ultrasound (CEUS), elastography, drainages, biopsy, nephrostomy, paracentesis, chest and abdominal aspirations and drains, sonographer-led prostate cancer diagnosis pathway (including magnetic resonance imaging interpretation, pre-intervention counselling, fusion-guided biopsy, results dissemination to patient and onward referral)
Musculoskeletal (MSK) and lumps ^{11,12*}	MSK injection, biopsy, aspiration, foreign body marking, steroid injection, one-stop clinic, sonographer-led rheumatology service
Vascular ^{11,12*}	Ultrasound guided angioplasty, CEUS, endovascular aneurysm repair, sclerotherapy, VNUS closure (radiofrequency occlusion) guidance
Paediatric ¹²	FNA, biopsy, one-stop neonatal hip clinics
Prostate ^{11,12}	Biopsy, manage treatment complications
Breast ^{12*}	Cyst aspiration, FNA, biopsy, stereotaxic, localisation, mammographic reporting

Table 1: Examples of radiographer sonographer extended practice. Adapted from the SoR^{10,11} and the British Medical Ultrasound Society (BMUS)¹² and the 2025 SoR census* (unpublished at the time of publication).

A survey of sonographers suggested that some sonographers were already undertaking extended roles such as sonographer-led discharge in EPAUs, while many respondents would be keen to do so with the appropriate support and training.¹³

Reeve et al (2023) suggest a framework for implantation of advancing practice in the clinical setting that provides useful resources to supplement this document.¹⁴

2. The role of the sonographer in early pregnancy units

The sonographer's role in the early pregnancy care pathway centres on the provision of an accurate ultrasound diagnosis of normal early pregnancy development and any complications that may arise. Sonographers are often the first to communicate an early pregnancy diagnosis to patients and their partners, providing them with a unique opportunity to influence the trajectory of onward care.

To date, there appears to be little consensus regarding the scope of the sonographer's role in the early pregnancy setting, with wide variation of practice across the UK. Roles for non-medical professionals have been advancing for many years to meet the workforce needs of modern healthcare. This document aims to outline the key knowledge and skills required to develop a specialist clinical role for sonographers working in an early pregnancy setting. Depending on the expertise and level of practice across the four pillars of practice,³ this role might be at enhanced, advanced or consultant level. For simplicity, in this document these will all be referred to as 'advanced early pregnancy sonographer'. This document should provide clear direction for senior leadership teams to create new roles that support best practice in local service provision for all service users. The overarching vision is for staff to operate at the highest level of their licence or ability,^{15,16} progressing to consultant sonographer-level practice where their knowledge, skills and expertise permit.

Defining the breadth and depth of the specialist role will enhance career opportunities for sonographers seeking to develop their expertise in early pregnancy. Implementing the various elements of the role effectively will alleviate pressure on the MDT and facilitate more timely diagnosis, treatment and discharge for patients. It will also provide improved continuity of care for many patients, in line with the *NHS Long Term Plan*.² The advanced early pregnancy sonographer is also well placed to engage patients with health promotion and social prescribing, given the appropriate support, education and training. This is consistent with the Pregnancy Loss Review recommendations to ensure care is offered to support emotional and psychological needs.¹⁷

Sonographers working in this extended practice role, at any career level, will be responsible for understanding the full care pathway for patients who are experiencing early pregnancy complications. As such, this role will be underpinned by master's level academic learning as a minimum, with an expectation that many will eventually proceed to doctoral level studies to further develop the evidence base, in alignment with NHS and professional body expectations.^{4,8,9,18,19} Formal education to underpin requirements of this role, such as an advanced clinical practice MSc (including prescribing and patient assessment or appropriate negotiated clinical modules) may be required.

Leadership skills will be employed to build strong working relationships with members of the MDT and other local EPAUs, thus improving care pathways through emergency care, gynaecology and onward antenatal care.

In addition to their own comprehensive continued education, sonographers specialising in this area should be actively involved in the provision of education for others in the MDT. Advanced early pregnancy sonographers will be responsible for maintaining and developing their own competence while assessing and facilitating the competence of other professionals, including sonographers working in the EPAU. They will take the lead in ensuring appropriate, supportive, peer review audits are undertaken regularly for all practitioners performing ultrasound examinations.

The SoR recognises the lack of a defined pathway for an extended practice role for a sonographer working in early pregnancy care. This document has been created in collaboration with the Association of Early Pregnancy Units (AEPU) to devise a framework that can be used to inform local decisions about the standard and scope of practice for sonographers extending their role in early pregnancy care services across the UK. This will align with the BMUS *Preceptorship and Capability Development Framework for Sonographers*,²⁰ the College of Radiographers' *Education and Career Framework for the Radiography Workforce*⁴ and the SoR's *Guidance on scope of practice for advanced practitioners and consultant practitioners 2025*¹⁹ and can be adapted to meet local service needs and different models of EPAUs.

All sonographers extending their scope of practice must be aware of the requirements to have appropriate professional indemnity insurance in place that covers their full scope of practice, as stipulated by their regulatory body.³

3. Advanced early pregnancy sonographer: knowledge, skills and competencies

In addition to the skills required for the level of practice, such as advanced or consultant level practice, all sonographers working in EPAUs should be familiar with and meet standards expected in current national guidance and associated publications such as Skills for Health National Occupational Standards (2019)²¹ and the SoR and BMUS Guidelines for Professional Ultrasound Practice²² and SoR's *Competencies for ultrasound practice in private baby scan clinics*.²³

The following knowledge, skills and competencies (KSC) are suggestions to support local services to implement and progress the role of the advanced early pregnancy sonographer. These KSC may vary depending on the role requirements, local service needs and professional background of the sonographer, such as whether they have statutory professional regulation requirements or not. The KSC are separated into the four pillars of advanced and consultant level practice but can be supplemented locally in alignment with other relevant guidance.

It is important that appropriate training, mentoring and clinical supervision are provided for all advanced early pregnancy sonographers.

Additionally, any change to the scope of practice of the sonographer needs to be agreed and approved according to local processes. The sonographer extending their practice should be aware of regulatory guidance linked to scope of practice, such as that issued by the Health and Care Professions Council, which states:

You must only practise in the areas where you have the appropriate knowledge, skills and experience to meet the needs of a service user safely and effectively.

You must undertake additional training to update your knowledge, skills and experience if you wish to widen your scope of practice.

You must refer a service user to an appropriate practitioner if the care, treatment or other services they need are beyond your scope of practice. This person must hold the appropriate knowledge, skills and experience to meet the needs of the service user safely and effectively.²⁴

3.1 Clinical skills

The extent of clinical skills required will be determined by the local needs of individual departments. This document aims to provide examples of activities that could fall within the scope of practice for an experienced sonographer when supported by robust governance

processes, preceptorship and a capability framework.

The advanced early pregnancy sonographer:

- should be a source of expertise, providing expert opinion for complex diagnostic cases. The sonographer may have a dedicated list, during which they will scan complex cases and/or be consulted to provide an opinion during a scan performed by other members of the team
- will be competent to undertake consultations independently, including comprehensive history taking, informed consent, physical and psychological assessment, transabdominal and transvaginal ultrasound examinations
- will manage patients with uncomplicated early pregnancy diagnoses, the complexity of which should be determined by local protocols. This would likely include all ongoing normally sited pregnancies, uncomplicated miscarriage and pregnancy of unknown location
- must be an expert communicator, with the ability to counsel patients with complex diagnoses and/or needs and be able to empower patients to make personal informed decisions about their care and management. The sonographer should be familiar with *Consensus guidelines on the communication of unexpected news via ultrasound*²⁵ and other relevant guidance to enhance communication
- should be trained to provide comprehensive bereavement care, including an understanding of the requirements for handling pregnancy loss remains. This includes familiarity with the National Bereavement Care Pathway²⁶ and other associated resources and guidance
- can guide referrals to other professionals and local or national support groups
- demonstrates autonomy in complex clinical decision-making
- should have knowledge, skills and competency in basic patient assessment and recognition of the unstable patient. Local policies should be in place for the sonographer to provide initial intervention for any patient who becomes unstable while waiting for the medical team to arrive – examples may include the administration of oxygen and intravenous fluids
- will lead or significantly contribute to specialist clinics, such as recurrent miscarriage or ‘pregnancy after loss’ clinics recommended by the Pregnancy Loss Review¹⁷
- can be authorised to prescribe medicines within the legal framework, professional guidelines and local protocols for their profession^{27,28}
- can supply or administer prescription-only medicines (POMs) using a patient specific direction (PSD) or patient group direction (PGD) as legally permitted by their regulatory status, and can also supply or administer other medicines according to local protocols.^{29,30}

If relevant to their local scope of practice, an advanced early pregnancy sonographer should:

- possess venepuncture and cannulation skills
- be trained to provide manual vacuum aspiration (MVA) for the treatment of miscarriage for selected patients, within a clear governance framework
- be competent at performing a speculum examination and removing pregnancy tissue protruding from the external cervical os.

3.2 Leadership/management

The advanced early pregnancy sonographer:

- should act as a professional role model for other sonographers and practitioners working on the early pregnancy unit
- actively engages in service development, commissioning and provision of complex care pathways
- works independently as an autonomous practitioner, while functioning as an integral part of the MDT
- ensures patients receive a streamlined service in all areas of care
- leads or significantly contributes to departmental governance meetings, including learning from both discrepancy and excellence
- will lead or significantly contribute to the preceptorship programme, mentoring and development of other staff to help them understand the needs of patients in early pregnancy care
- leads on or has input into the development of local protocols and guidance relating to ultrasound
- should engage with regional and national organisations to promote excellence and safety in early pregnancy care.

3.3 Education/teaching

The advanced early pregnancy sonographer:

- should provide academic and clinical leadership, support and mentoring for relevant members of the MDT to help them provide safe ultrasound examinations and care in the

early pregnancy setting

- ensures effective clinical competency assessment and competency sign-off for all ultrasound learners within the early pregnancy setting
- may work closely with, and provide teaching at, higher education institutions and/or imaging academies
- should disseminate good practice at a regional, national or international level
- may contribute to the creation of regional, national or international educational resources such as e-learning modules, guidance documents and educational posters.

3.4 Research, audit and service evaluation

The advanced early pregnancy sonographer:

- will be actively involved in audit and service evaluation within the department to promote best practice
- ensures their own knowledge is continually updated to include contemporary early pregnancy research and guidance
- should have completed Good Clinical Practice training for researchers³¹
- seeks to be involved in early pregnancy research as appropriate, contributing to clinical research network supported studies. This may involve approaching and gaining consent from participants, or undertaking research activities such as ultrasound scans, systematic reviews, data analysis, publication and dissemination³¹
- contributes to research, dissemination and implementation of best practice evidence
- may seek to collaborate with or lead original MDT research.

4. Conclusion

The *NHS Long Term Workforce Plan*² recognises that upskilling the workforce and offering opportunities for enhanced, advanced and consultant level practice will help to retain experienced NHS staff delivering clinical care. By implementing recommendations from the plan, the scope and reach of allied health profession (AHP) roles will be developed to help manage demand. This includes increasing the number of advanced practitioners and non-medical prescribers, and AHPs acting as senior decision-makers in appropriate clinical settings.

Sonographers in the UK have a high level of autonomy and deliver excellent standards of ultrasound provision, owing to the quality of their education, training and commitment to improving patient care and outcomes. Many sonographers have extended their role to advanced and consultant level practice across a range of specialisms, offering additional clinical care within their scope of practice, expanding and improving service delivery and engaging with education and research to impact on health and care outcomes. However, these roles have been slower to develop in the fields of obstetrics, gynaecology and early pregnancy ultrasound. To retain highly skilled and experienced sonographers working within the maternity and gynaecology settings, it is essential to provide a supportive environment with opportunities for sonographers to flourish within these specialties.

This document is designed to complement the SoR's *Guidance and recommendations for running an effective, high-quality obstetric ultrasound service and supporting obstetric sonographer career development*,¹⁰ and to provide a framework to initiate the development of specialised roles for sonographers from a predominantly radiography background who have a passion for providing excellent early pregnancy care.

Some elements of this guidance may be appropriate for sonographers without statutory professional regulation requirements, but they must be aware of the legislative restrictions on their scope of practice. Individual sonographers could use it as a source of inspiration to guide their own professional development activities. Additionally, it can help managers, commissioners and other stakeholders shape potential new posts.

Finally, this document can form the basis for a formally recognised programme of education and competency-based assessment for sonographers wishing to specialise in advanced early pregnancy care. As with all enhanced, advanced and consultant level roles, the needs of the individual service will dictate the necessary requirements of each post, with this document providing an insight into the potential scope of practice for experienced sonographers who are adequately educated and have appropriate support and governance in place.

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7. Acknowledgements

The authors and the SoR would like to thank the following people for their input into this document:

- AEPU Executive Committee members
- SoR Ultrasound Advisory Group members
- Zoe Lewis, Early Pregnancy Specialist Sonographer and Ultrasound Education Lead, Liverpool Women's NHS Foundation Trust



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