



RHN Shared Learning

Monday 19th January 2026

How to respond when you do not know the answer

This shared learning is designed to help us respond confidently and professionally when we're asked for help and don't immediately have the answer. It sets out a simple, consistent approach that we can all use across the RHN, to support clear communication with patients, families, colleagues, and external visitors such as CQC inspectors.

Why this matters

People tend to judge confidence and credibility not by having an instant answer, but by how uncertainty is handled. An unclear or defensive response can quickly undermine trust, while a calm, open, and accountable response helps maintain confidence and shows professionalism.

Core principle

Acknowledge the request, be honest about limits, take responsibility for finding the answer, and close the loop.

Not knowing the answer is acceptable. Failing to manage the interaction is not.

What good looks like

1. Acknowledge and listen

- Give full attention.
- Confirm understanding of the question.
- Avoid interrupting or deflecting.

Example:

"Thank you for raising that. Let me make sure I've understood what you're asking."

2. Be honest without over-explaining

- Say clearly when you do not yet have the answer.
- Avoid speculation or guessing.
- Do not rely on jargon or excuses.

Example:

"I don't have that information to hand."

3. Take ownership

- Make it clear you will find the answer.
- Avoid vague references to “someone else” without accountability.

Example:

“I’ll find out and come back to you.”

4. Set a clear next step

- Explain how and when you will respond.
- Reference clear, recognisable roles.

Examples:

- “I’ll check with my ward manager and come back to you.”
- “I’ll confirm that with therapists and come back to you.”
- “I’ll check with Leisure and Family Services and update you.”

5. Follow through

- Do what you said you would do.
- Return with the answer, even if it takes longer than expected.
- If delayed, provide an update.

What to avoid

- Guessing or presenting partial information as fact
- Saying “I don’t know” without offering to find out
- Becoming defensive or dismissive
- Overloading the person with background detail that does not answer the question
- Redirecting the query without ownership

When the question comes from a CQC inspector

CQC inspectors expect transparency, accuracy, and accountability. They do not expect every member of staff to know everything.

Good practice with inspectors

- Respond within your role and level of responsibility.
- Be open when you do not have the answer.
- Demonstrate clear escalation and governance.

Effective response:

“I don’t have that information to hand. I’ll confirm that with the Patient Safety and Quality team and come back to you.”

Key message

Confidence is built through how uncertainty is handled, not by having every answer straight away. Taking clear ownership and following through reliably builds trust and reflects positively on the RHN, both in everyday care interactions and during inspections.