

Office of the Mental Health Champion



2024/25

Annual Report

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Mental Health Champion: 2024/25 Annual Report

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Mental Health Champion: 2024/25 Annual Report

Foreword and introduction

Professor Siobhán O'Neill has been Northern Ireland's Mental Health Champion since 8 September 2021. The Terms of Reference for the Mental Health Champion's role dictates that the Champion will provide their annual report to the Minister of Health within three months of the end of the reporting year: and the Minister will update the Executive in respect of progress against key performance indicators for the role. This annual report covers core business activity during the 2024/25 financial year. This period is referred to throughout the report as "the reporting period".

The overarching aim of the Office of the Mental Health Champion is to advise and assist in the promotion of mental health and wellbeing through all policies and services. The role was created in 2020 with the full support of the NI Executive who were, and remain, committed to improving the mental health of everyone throughout Northern Ireland in all aspects of life. There is a desire to weave a mental health promoting ethos into all policies and services, which have been advised and assisted by the Champion. As a signal of the collaborative will for the role to succeed, funding for the role continues to be provided on a cross-departmental basis.

Summary of purpose

The purpose of the Mental Health Champion is to further the mental health agenda across all platforms and fora; to promote emotional health and wellbeing, access to evidence-based support and services; and to promote recovery. A copy of the Terms of Reference for the Mental Health Champion's role is available at [Annex A](#).

The Mental Health Champion takes part in the public debate around psychological wellbeing, mental health and suicide prevention, and champions these issues to improve the experience of people suffering from mental ill health and those who have experience of mental ill health.

The Mental Health Champion is a public advocate and consensus builder; a government advocate; advisor and challenger; and a network hub for all mental health matters in Northern Ireland.

Throughout her tenure as Mental Health Champion, Professor O'Neill will continue to engage with people with lived experience and other stakeholders and will continue to be a focal point for the discussion around wellbeing, mental health and suicide.

Governance statement

The Terms of Reference for the Mental Health Champion's role authorises the Champion to retain the freedom to make independent decisions on the strategic direction of their work area as set out in the annual business plan. A governance and accountability framework is in place to set out the way in which the Champion and the Department of Health will work together to ensure effective governance arrangements are in place while maintaining operational independence. The Office of the Mental Health Champion follows and utilises the host organisation's governance processes and systems for the purposes of IT, finance, HR, risk management, procurement and estates. As such, the management team within the Office of the Mental Health Champion applies the principles of good practice in Corporate Governance and continues to further strengthen its governance arrangements by

undertaking continuous self-assessment of its compliance with Corporate Governance best practice.

The Permanent Secretary of the Department of Health, as Principal Accounting Officer of the Department, is accountable for issuing funding to the Office of the Mental Health Champion. In order to underpin the independence of the Champion's role, the Principal Accounting Officer has designated the Senior Policy and Research Officer within the Office of the Mental Health Champion as Senior Accountable Officer for all expenditure incurred by the Champion's Office. The Senior Accountable Officer is formally accountable for all aspects of governance, decision-making and financial management with the Office of the Mental Health Champion. The Senior Accountable Officer remains available to the Principal Accounting Officer and the Minister of Health to provide advice, guidance and a rationale with regards to the stewardship of the Office of the Mental Health Champion.

The Senior Accountable Officer is content that all expenditure utilised throughout the reporting period was reasonable and proper and in line with the stated objectives of the Mental Health Champion.

Hosting

The Office of the Mental Health Champion was hosted, at arm's length, by the Department of Health for the duration of the reporting period.

Independence

Professor O'Neill is seconded from Ulster University to fulfil the role of Mental Health Champion four days each week. Professor O'Neill's academic standing and her role within Ulster University, along with the Terms of Reference for the Mental Health Champion role, help ensure the independence of the Mental Health Champion role. The Senior Accountable Officer within the Office of the Mental Health Champion underpins the independence of the Champion's role.

Organisational structure and support

In addition to the Champion, the Office of the Mental Health Champion currently comprises:

- 1 x Senior Policy and Research Officer
(this position is Head of Branch & Senior Accountable Officer (G7));
- 1 x Policy and Research Officer (DP);
- 1 x Communication Officer (DP);
- 1 x Temporary Research Officer (DP) and
- 1 x Administrative Officer (currently vacant).

Cost/finances

In April 2020, the NI Executive agreed cross Departmental funding of up to £500k per year for the Office of the Mental Health Champion. All Departments currently contribute £55k per annum which provides a total budget of £495k.

An analysis of each component of the Mental Health Champion expenditure for 2024/25 is provided below under the section titled "2024/25 Budget summary".

Gifts register

The Office of the Mental Health Champion adheres to the Department of Health's policy in regard to gifts and hospitality. This includes maintaining a Gifts Register detailing any gifts that are received by the Champion and/or staff in the normal course of business. All gifts with a monetary value of £50 or over were either refused in advance or returned to the sender during the reporting period.

Business plan for 2025/26

A summary of the Business Plan for the Mental Health Champion for the 2025/26 financial year is as shown in Annex B.

Risk management

Risk management is an organisation-wide responsibility and internal processes exist to identify, track, mitigate and (where necessary) escalate risks to ensure minimal impact on business activity. A Risk Register for the Office of the Mental Health Champion is maintained, reviewed and updated regularly throughout the year and is shared annually with the Department of Health for oversight.

Performance and achievements during the reporting period

The reporting requirements for the Mental Health Champion are set out in the Terms of Reference for the role. These include the following outcomes:

- Presence in the public arena with public awareness of the Mental Health Champion and the role;
- Enhanced visibility across Government: presence across the public sector arena with awareness of the Mental Health Champion and the role;
- Influence in decision making and interaction with policy makers;
- A voice for those normally voiceless across the public sector;
- Advocate for awareness of psychological wellbeing, mental health and suicide in the public and independent sector;
- The promotion of increased mental resilience across the population of Northern Ireland; and
- Contribution to an improvement in mental health services.

Presence in the public arena with public awareness of the Mental Health Champion

The Mental Health Champion participated in 259 external meetings during the reporting period. This included:

Meetings with	Number
People with lived experience	18
Political representatives	13
Government/policy teams	86
Professional groups	47
Community and Voluntary sector groups	44
Communications teams	33
Academics	20
Total	259

As the Mental Health Champion takes part in public debate about psychological, wellbeing, mental health and suicide as well as being a champion for those with lived experience of mental ill health, increasing public awareness about the role is essential, so the public can understand all aspects of the work being completed by the Mental Health Champion to improve mental health in Northern Ireland.

Throughout the reporting period, the Mental Health Champion continued to be actively present in the public arena through site visits and by speaking at events, participating in press and media interviews, and also launching a new public awareness campaign focused on crisis intervention.

Visits and events are an important opportunity for the Mental Health Champion to directly engage with the public. Visits in the reporting period included attending the launch of several school wellbeing initiatives which provided opportunity to engage with staff and young people. The Mental Health Champion was also able to meet with services users and staff with visits to Community and Voluntary organisations including PIPS Hope and Support's WELL-Bean Café; Action Mental Health's Foyle Services; and NSPCC's services, as well as Statutory mental health services CAMHS and Beechcroft. These visits are an excellent opportunity for the Mental Health Champion to see mental health services and interventions in action as well as help to inform future policy work.

The Mental Health Champion is regularly invited to speak at a range of events throughout the year and every effort is made to facilitate as many of these requests as possible in line with ongoing commitments. During the reporting period some of the speaking engagements the Mental health Champion participating in included; the launch of the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2023: Experiences of Accessing Mental Health Supports in Northern Ireland, the launch of the Public Account's Committee report following their inquiry into Mental Health Services in Northern Ireland, Counselling All Nations Conference, the launch of the Mental Health Policy Alliance, Youth Assembly Conference, Talk Money Conference as well as Public Awareness Campaign launches for Action Mental Health and Inspire Wellbeing.

The Mental Health Champion regularly participated in radio and TV interviews in the reporting period. Professor O'Neill supported UTV with their Mental Health Special in July speaking about the latest progress with the Mental Health Strategy. Professor O'Neill was interviewed on several topics surrounding mental health to highlight to the public the concerns she has as well as the solutions needed for many. This included the cuts to funding to vital Community and Voluntary mental health services, concerns about the potential implications of the UK government's proposed Welfare cuts and issues with accessing mental health services in NI. The Mental Health Champion is also frequently contacted by the press for her input and comments on stories relevant to her line of work. During the reporting period this included, but was not limited to, media pieces on funding for the Mental Health Strategy, mental health in workplaces, eating disorder services, suicide prevention and RSE.

During the reporting period the Department of Health announced that Professor O'Neill's tenure as the Mental Health Champion would be extended for a further three-year term. The Mental Health Champion used this opportunity to prepare a platform piece that was published in the Irish News, to raise public awareness of the key areas in mental health in NI that she believed the NI Executive should focus on.

Lastly the Mental Health Champion uses public awareness campaigns as an important tool to enhance awareness of the role and to promote positive mental wellbeing across the general public of NI. In this reporting period, the Mental Health Champion launched the 'Take a Moment. Start a Conversation.' campaign. The campaign focused on how simple conversations can interrupt cycles of distressing thoughts and encourage people to talk to anyone who they might be worried about. This was a large mass media campaign using multiple advertising channels to promote the messages and resources around crisis intervention. Channels used included TV and Video on Demand, Radio, Outdoor (posters and transit ads) as well as Social and Digital advertising. The campaign went through initial user testing with the general public as well as those with lived experience of mental ill-health which helped to inform the campaigns messages and imagery. The Office of the Mental Health Champion also commissioned a post-campaign evaluation, the results of which showed that nearly half of NI are aware of the campaign (44%). The evaluation also highlighted almost 4 in 5 (81%) claimed to have taken action as a result of seeing the

campaign whether it was thought more about their own mental health (45%), thought more about someone else's mental health (43%), thought more about mental health crisis (34%), talked with friends or family about their / my own mental health (15%) or talked with friends or family about the mental health crisis in general (7%).

Enhanced visibility across Government

During the reporting period, the Mental Health Champion has sought to enhance awareness of mental health issues throughout the public sector, with a focus on the five key themes identified in the Terms of Reference for the MHC role:

1. Prevention and early intervention
2. Suicide prevention
3. Children and young people
4. Alcohol and drugs
5. Service improvement.

The Mental Health Champion has provided guidance and expertise to government Departments and organisations regarding each of the key themes when required, and when specifically requested.

In addition, the Champion is a member of, or has contributed to the following government advisory groups in order to meet senior departmental officials and to influence policy:

- PeacePlus Programme Monitoring Committee;
- PeacePlus Steering Committee 1;
- Mental Health Strategic Reform Board;
- The Regional Mental Health Service Collaboration Board;
- Promoting MH through Public Awareness, Early Intervention and Prevention Steering Group;
- Regional Mental Health Outcomes Framework Steering Group;
- Towards Zero Suicide Board;
- Project Life 2 Steering Group;
- Criminal Justice Healthcare Oversight Group;
- ICS Strategic Outcomes Framework (MH & Emotional Wellbeing Focus Group);
- DfE Advisory Group to Oversee the FE Policy Review of Student Support;
- DE's Joint Restraint and Seclusion Working Group and Reference Group;
- DoH's Digital Health Forum;
- Age NI's Good Vibrations Programme Advisory Committee; and
- Water Safety NI.

Influence in decision making and interaction with policy makers

The Mental Health Champion is available to provide advice and guidance to the NI Executive and political representatives and to participate in discussion with all NICS Departments and Ministers in order to raise the profile of Mental Health and Wellbeing in Northern Ireland. During the reporting period, the Champion had various meetings (13 in total) with Political Representatives including a meeting Minister Fleur Anderson MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Northern Ireland Office. In addition, the Mental Health Champion provided written and oral evidence to the Northern Ireland Public Affairs Committee, the Health Committee, and participated in various All Party Groups relating to Mental Health and Suicide Prevention. The Mental Health Champion also met directly with a large number of Officials and policy makers (86 in total) from a number of NI Government Departments and Agencies to discuss a wide range of areas that impact on mental health, wellbeing, resilience and suicide prevention. In addition, the Mental Health Champion met with a

number of organisations with a view to influencing policies in relation to mental health issues. The Champion also provided written input to:

- The Department of Health's review of the Protect Life 2 Action Plan
- ICRIR: Implementing a Trauma Informed Approach Consultation
- OFCOM Protecting Children Online consultation
- Review of Civil Legal Aid Services in Northern Ireland
- Safe leave consultation
- Review of School Uniform Policy
- The Department of Justice's Victim and Witness Strategy
- Mental Capacity Act: acts of restraint
- Review of free school meals and uniform grant eligibility
- Hospitals – Creating a Network for Better Outcomes
- Valuing Medicines – A Strategy for the Sustainable Use of Medicines in Northern Ireland
- Draft PHA Corporate Plan 2025-2030 consultation
- Consultation on a new Fuel Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland
- Being Open Framework Consultation
- Independent Review of the NI curriculum

A voice for those normally voiceless across the public sector

The Mental Health Champion seeks to be a voice for those normally voiceless across the public sector by representing this proportion of our population at policy level and through discussions with politicians and policy makers to ensure that this group is considered at all times. The Mental Health Champion is unable to provide medical advice, and is unable to support individuals who are seeking access to services, or progress complaints about services. Where a member of the public contacts the Office of the Mental Health Champion regarding a personal issue, advice and signposting is offered with due regard to the specific circumstances that have been raised by the individual.

During the reporting period, the Mental Health Champion met with various statutory and charity and voluntary organisations and individuals regarding a wide range of issues. This included discussions on specific Serious Adverse Incidents where learning from individual cases could be implemented in order to improve mental health services throughout the province. In addition, the Champion met with a number of individuals who have been bereaved by suicide and/or homicide by patients with mental ill health in order to ensure learning is derived from these tragic incidents and avoidable deaths.

Advocate for awareness of psychological wellbeing, mental health and suicide in the public and independent sector

The 2023/24 MHC annual report outlined a number of pieces of work which commenced in the 2023/24 but were due to complete in 2024/25. These include:

- The non-testing year study was detailed in the MHC 2023/24 annual report. The report "Transfer Talks" (available [here](#)), completed by Stanmillis University College, was launched during this reporting period; and
- The 2023 Northern Ireland Life and Times Study contained a MHC module focused on accessing Mental Health Services in NI. The OMHC and ARK co-produced a research report "Access to mental health supports in Northern Ireland" (available [here](#)) was also launched during this reporting period.

During the reporting period the Mental Health Champions office undertook a program of work seeking to address and support prioritised actions within the Mental Health Strategy, capturing the views of marginalised priority groups and communicating the attitudes and

opinions of the NI population on mental health matters. The Research Officer, Policy Officer or Communication Officer led on the programmes of work outlined below with Mental Health Champion oversight. The Office of the Mental Health Champion worked in partnership with external organisations to participate in existing lines of research.

Kids Life and Times and Young Life and Times

ARK is a research collaboration between Ulster University and Queens University that aims to provide open access survey data that reflect the views and opinions of people in NI across a range of social and policy areas. They conduct the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey, the NI Kids Life and Times (KLT) Survey and Young Life and Times (YLT) Survey annually. Each year potential funders can add modules to the survey to ask this target group questions relevant to their research area or policy interest. The Mental Health Champion funded modules in both KLT and YLT 2024/25 survey which focuses on Benevolent Childhood Experiences (BCEs, which capture those experiences evidenced to be effective in protecting against or mitigating the impact of adversity in childhood, subsequently improving mental health outcomes) and young people's level of hope. Both, alongside measures of wellbeing, seek to adopt a strength-based view of mental health among young people in NI. It expands on previous modules funded by MHC in KLT/YLT 2023 which focused on the key worries and stress impacting young people in the region. KLT and YLT data is weighted and representative of the NI population. Participating in the 2024/25 KLT and YLT surveys offered the Mental Health Champion Office the opportunity to gather high quality data from a large representative sample, using an existing established resource. Fieldwork for both surveys has been completed, and findings will be published on the ARK website later in 2025. Once the funders dataset is made available, the Office of the Mental Health Champion will produce a research report in collaboration with ARK as in previous years.

Persons Seeking International Protection, service improvement project

The Department of Health commissioned a project from Personal and Public Involvement (PPI) service. This project focused on understanding the experience and barriers in accessing health services, including mental health services, for persons seeking international protection. For the purpose of the project, the term 'people seeking international protection' is used to capture people seeking asylum; refugees; UK Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) participants; Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) participants; and Ukraine Scheme visa participants. The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust led the regional steering group in partnership with the other HSC Trusts, as well as input from the Public Health Agency and the Office for the Mental Health Champion. The PPI approach sought to engage with women seeking international protection on their experiences of accessing Health and Social Care services, specifically Maternity Services, Public Health Nursing, Social Services and Mental Health Services, in relation to their own experience or the experience of accessing for children. The focus was placed on women and children as there was an identified gap in the knowledge base for this group and a recognition that they face barriers when accessing services. It is expected that the report "Make my Voice Heard: Experiences of Women Accessing Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland" will launch on 21st May 2025.

Economic argument for investing in a regional crisis intervention service

The Mental Health Champion has been a key advocate for the full funding and implementation of the NI Mental Health Strategy which, to date, has yet to receive funding on par with the published funding and implementation plan. Budgetary constraints have been felt across the NI Executive inclusive of the DoH budget for all health care including mental health service. To address these constraints, efforts have been made to focus the available funding onto key development areas. During the reporting period, the Mental Health Champion has made a series of recommendations for where available funding should be prioritised, primarily the development of the regional crisis intervention service to ensure

that everyone in NI can access effective support with the appropriate professionals in a safe and consistently available setting.

Crisis services provide help and support to some of the most vulnerable people in our society, at some of the most difficult points in their lives. Crisis services provide immediate help and support; it is a service that saves lives. Implementing the new regional crisis service is a commitment in the Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031, set out in the following actions:

Action 12: *Create clear and regionally consistent urgent, emergency and crisis services for children and young people that work together with crisis services for adult mental health.*

Action 27: Create a Regional Mental Health Crisis Service that is fully integrated in mental health services and which will provide help and support for persons in mental health or suicidal crisis.

A policy paper entitled “A Regional Mental Health Crisis Service for NI” was published in August 2021 and set out the need for a Regional Mental Health Crisis Service. It also highlighted that accessing Mental Health Crisis Services should be regionally consistent with the following four components:

1. Primary Care and Interagency Partnership
2. Community Crisis Service
3. Mental Health Liaison Service
4. Crisis Resolution Home Treatment Team

People in crisis require help and support and no-one should have to wait longer than necessary for that help. This reflects the right person, right place and right time approach and the focus on person-centred care.

Economic impact perspective

The development of services will take a substantial amount of investment, however as evidenced by Dr David McDaid, and Dr. A-La Park (both from the London School of Economics), investing in mental health produces greater economic returns across sectors. Dr. McDaid and his team have completed similar studies across the UK looking at mental health care as a whole and considered its individual components. The Mental Health Champion met with Dr. McDaid to discuss if it was possible to apply such economic modelling to Actions 12 and 27 of the Mental Health Strategy in this context, with consideration for the current operations of the crisis intervention services across NI HSC trusts and the proposed model for the regional crisis intervention service.

As a member of the strategic board, the MHC was aware that SPPG completed a mapping of the proposed new service. Speaking with SPPG directly, they advised that economic modelling would be useful but advised they were not in a financial position to commission this work. The Mental Health Champion felt that it is essential for this modelling be completed independently to ensure that it can be used to advocate for service development, whilst not being influenced by budgetary pressures within departments. As such, the Mental Health Champion decided to commission Dr McDaid and Dr A-La Park (and their team) to

complete the work, assisted by the Office of the Mental Health Champion's Research Officer.

The Mental Health Champion's Research Officer engaged with a series of stakeholders to better understand how they define crisis, and how each respond and support a person when in crisis. Stakeholders included: GP Federations MDT representative, Homelessness support services (Homeless Connect and Simon Community), Primary Care Unit DoH, Royal College of GPs, NI Ambulance Service, Reimage Collective, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, Non-Statutory Youth Service. Information on current pathways and mapping of the proposed regional model were shared by SPPG for the purpose of this work. Relevant information on CAMHS and Emergency Department waiting lists were gathered from existing data sources, while information presented at meetings not arranged for the sole purpose of this work were shared with the project team when appropriate and with permission. The research team aims to look separately at the current and proposed new system for adults and children/young people and apply economic models to estimate the potential return on investment from a new Regional Crisis Service relative to the existing service model. They will also estimate impacts on quality of life if data is available. It is expected that the final report will be launched in the 2025/26 reporting year.

Influencing Policy Development and Implementation (MHS, EIP, EHWWBF, PL2)

The Mental Health Champion continued to support the implementation of the Department of Health's 10-year Mental Health strategy throughout the reporting period, while raising awareness of the ongoing difficult funding position and calling for additional resources to mitigate against this. The Mental Health Champion continues to participate in Mental Health Strategic Reform Board meetings and met with Department of Health Officials to inform the prioritisation of elements of the Mental Health Strategy for the 2025/26 fiscal year with consideration to its reduced budget. The Champion also participates in the regional mental health outcomes framework, the regional mental health service collaboration board, and the regional mental health crisis intervention strategic board.

Actions 1 and 2 of the Mental Health Strategy have seen some progress in the past year. The Mental Health Champion sits on the regional EIP steering group with subgroups/working groups and Task & Finish Groups attended by Office of the Mental Health Champion staff. The Mental Health Champion has contributed to the development of a suite of resources through the EIP data and outcomes working group that aids in the identification and use of Mental Health and wellbeing measurement tools for use as population and programmatic outcome indicators. This work is led by the PHA, and the reports will be available in early summer 2025. The Office of the Mental Health Champion has also contributed to the efforts of the public mental health learning network in delivering ECHO sessions, arranging seminars focused on social determinants of mental health and contributed to the annual EIP conference, held in May of 2024 and again in May of 2025.

As a member of the Department of Education's Emotional Health and Wellbeing Programme Board, the Mental Health Champion continued to provide advice and information on how best to allocate limited funding in an extremely challenging environment to gain best value for money and to target the young people in most need of support. The Mental Health Champion will continue to support this work as it seeks to consider evaluation of the framework projects commenced to date.

The Mental Health Champion continues to support and advocate for the Protect Life 2 Strategy. During the reporting period the Mental Health Champion provided feedback and insight during PL2 steering group meetings and responded to all public consultations linked to this policy area. The Mental Health Champion and Research Officer provided an updated review of academic literature for the [Review of Protect Life 2 Action Plan - Report & Recommendations](#) report launched in September of 2024.

Contribution to an improvement in mental health services

During the reporting period, the Mental Health Champion supported specific service improvements within HSC Trusts and visited various facilities delivering mental health services in order to hear the views of service providers and to establish how services are currently being delivered in practice. The Mental Health Champion continued to participate in regular meetings with the NI Mental Health Policy group, and the Royal College of Psychiatrists (including sub-faculties), and the NI Branch of the British Psychological Society, to discuss policy priorities.

In addition, the Mental Health Champion participated in 47 meetings with professional groups and bodies and 20 meetings with academia.

2024/25 Budget summary

The Mental Health Champion budget for the reporting period totalled £495k and comprised two components: salaries and operational expenditure. At the start of the reporting period the Mental Health Champion budget was forecasted to spend £360k on salaries and £135k on operational expenditure. Actual spend for the reporting period was as follows:

Components	Actual (£'000)
Salaries	371
Operational expenditure	134
Total	504

As indicated above, there was a small overspend of £10,000 in the reporting period. This represents an overspend of 2.0% and was attributable to unanticipated staffing costs. Steps were taken throughout the reporting period to minimise the overspend once it was identified. An analysis of each component is provided below.

Salaries

The Office of the Mental Health Champion was fully staffed by four permanent personnel for the entire reporting period. In addition, the Mental Health Champion and the Senior Accounting Officer agreed to extend the provision of a Research Officer for the duration of the reporting period given the added value that the position brought to the previous reporting period. This additional post continues to enhance the office's internal and external research capability to assist the Mental Health Champion with research activities, increase the volume of publications and augment the current capabilities within the Office of the Mental Health Champion. This position will continue to be kept under review.

The Mental Health Champion is seconded from the Ulster University which invoices the Department of Health on a regular basis under the terms of a Secondment Agreement.

Salary costs during the reporting period exceeded those forecasted as the office intended to run with a vacancy at AO level for the majority of the year. Several unexpected delays occurred meaning that the office had the additional benefit of this member of staff for a short period of time (approximately 4 months).

Operational expenditure

The operational expenditure was allocated during business planning and was spent as demonstrated in the respective columns below:

	£
Comms activity *	79,054
Participation in external research **	54,832
Professional fees	387
Hospitality	148
Totals	134,421

* During the reporting period, the Office of the Mental Health Champion ran the “take a moment – start a conversation” campaign as detailed above.

** The Office of the Mental Health Champion participated in the research projects detailed above.

Forward look to 2025/26

Business planning is an ongoing activity within the Office of the Mental Health Champion and business planning will include the requirements as set out in the Terms of Reference for the Mental Health Champion role. The following are some of the additional planned activities that have been identified at the start of the 2025/26 financial year:

- Continued employment of a dedicated resource to conduct independent, in-house research to inform policy (position to be reviewed on an ongoing basis);
- 2025/26 communications activities;
- Launching and promoting procured research into the economic cost effectiveness of crisis services;
- Promotion and involvement in awareness days;
- Preparation and provision of age appropriate and factual mental health information for schools and EOTAS;
- Participation in external research activities (to include, subject to available funding, the 2025/26 NI Life and Times Survey and an investigation into the implications on funding cuts to the Community and Voluntary Sector);
- Site visits to statutory and voluntary & community service providers; and
- Providing/presenting evidence at relevant NI Assembly Committees as and when required.

The Mental Health Champion will continue to be available to the NI Executive, individual Ministers, departmental officials, the community and voluntary sector and individual members of the public in order to fulfil the obligations within the Terms of Reference for the Mental Health Champion role.

Within the 2025/26 business plan, the Office of the Mental Health Champion has renewed its commitment to remain agile and take steps to address social determinants of poor mental health as and when these are identified.

The Business Plan for the Mental Health Champion for the 2025/26 financial year is as shown in Annex B.

Acknowledgements

Professor O'Neill would like to acknowledge the role of the NI Executive in the creation of the Mental Health Champion role and thank them, along with Departmental Permanent Secretaries, for their continued support and the funding commitments from their respective Departments.

Annex A**Terms of Reference for the Mental Health Champion's Role*****Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland******Terms of Reference*****1. Background**

1.1 *In April 2020, the Minister of Health, Robin Swann MLA, secured cross-departmental support through the NI Executive to formally establish the role of a Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland (the Champion).*

1.2 *Mental ill health affects a large number of people every year and is an issue that is key to all Departments. It therefore requires coherent and co-ordinated working to ensure mental ill health effects are addressed.*

1.3 *The Champion's role is fully supported by the NI Executive, which is committed to improving the mental health of everyone throughout all aspects of life. There is a desire to weave a mental health friendly ethos into all policies and services, which have been advised and assisted by the Champion. As a signal of the collaborative will for the role to succeed, funding for the role has been secured on a cross-departmental basis.*

2. Statement of Purpose

2.1 *The overall purpose of the Mental Health Champion is to:*

- *Further the mental health agenda across Northern Ireland;*
- *Promote emotional health and wellbeing;*
- *Access evidence-based support and services; and*
- *Promote recovery.*

2.2 *To deliver against this purpose, the Mental Health Champion will:*

- (a) *Take part in the public debate around psychological wellbeing, mental health and suicide and will champion these issues to improve the experience of people experiencing mental ill health or who have experience of mental ill health;*
- (b) *Have a person-centred focus, understand the experience of people with lived experience and be a voice for those otherwise voiceless;*
- (c) *Take part in policy development across the whole of Government in areas around psychological wellbeing, mental health and suicide. The Champion will also challenge decisions where it is appropriate to do so; and*
- (d) *Engage with people with lived experience and others, acting as a focal point for the discussion around wellbeing, mental health and suicide.*

3. Role

3.1 The role of the Mental Health Champion is to:

- (a) *Help to integrate a mental health friendly ethos across all policies and services developed and delivered by the NI Executive. This includes enhancing the level of collaborative working across Government in relation to psychological wellbeing, mental health, suicide and recovery. The role is also to be a voice for people with lived experience; those who are often not heard in the public debate.*
- (b) *Champion and enhance mental health in all aspects of public life. This includes proactively seeking to increase the visibility of the role across Government Departments in this work.*

3.2 In particular, the Mental Health Champion will be:

- **A public advocate for mental health**
The Champion will be a public advocate for mental health, communicating the collective voices of people with lived experience, their families and carers, and communities impacted by mental health inequalities.
- **A Government advocate to help and support government Departments and officials**
The Champion will support the day-to-day functions of Government and act as a positive conduit between Government and service delivery.
- **A consensus builder to integrate mental health and wellbeing across Government**
The Champion will work across Government and the independent sector, to help the integration of mental health considerations into all policies.
- **An adviser to senior stakeholders and a constructive challenger of decisions and policies**
The Champion will work together with Government and others to further mental health and to be a positive voice. The Champion will also provide constructive challenge and a critical voice in the public debate.
- **A network hub for the development of positive mental health across Northern Ireland**
The Champion will promote, through a network hub, meaningful contact between people with a role in progressing mental health in Northern Ireland. This will include accessing leaders across the UK and internationally in wider strategic developments.

3.3 While the Champion is not a decision maker with respect to government policy, they will endeavour to influence policy direction, where practicable. In order to be able to influence the policy direction, the Champion will be included in policy drafts for mental health related issues and will have early access to policy documents. This is on the understanding that such documents are still policy in development, should not be shared, commented on in public or used in any research where there is a possibility it will be published ahead of any policy papers.

3.4 The Champion will have a key role in influencing and enhancing the implementation of the Department of Health's Mental Health Strategy 2021-31.

4. Co-Production

4.1 Co-production is essential in the development of mental health policy.

4.2 Co-production means:

- Involving those who need to be involved in the process, and ensuring that all have an equal voice. It also means recognising that different people have different strengths and ensuring that the outcome is what is best for those who are directly impacted.*
- Considering the reality of difficulties for those who suffer from mental ill health or have been affected directly or indirectly by mental ill health and deaths related to mental health. Importantly, it is about ensuring the focus is on bringing the best out of people and focusing on positive messages such as recovery.*

4.3 The Champion will therefore have regular contact with all who have an interest in mental health. This includes persons with lived experience, professionals, Government Departments and agencies, academics and others. The Champion will also engage widely across the public and private sector stakeholder groups.

5. Key Objectives and Reporting Requirements

5.1 Key objectives of the Mental Health Champion are:

- i. To participate in the public debate around mental resilience, suicide, mental health and recovery.*
- ii. To participate in policy development across Government, helping Departments and officials when developing mental health policy and policies that can help to promote psychological wellbeing, resilience and good mental health*
- iii. To promote mental health across all society.*
- iv. To encourage Government to think about mental wellbeing, resilience, mental health and recovery and to help integrate the ideas of mental resilience and mental health in all public policy making.*
- v. To create a focal point for mental wellbeing and mental health discussions and to speak out for those who have lived experience.*
- vi. To challenge decisions where mental wellbeing, suicide prevention, good mental health and recovery are not considered, and where such consideration would be beneficial for society as a whole.*
- vii. To build an evidence base to aid decision making and influence policy, by conducting or procuring bespoke regional research on issues relevant to mental health policy.*

5.2 The Champion will prepare an Annual Business Plan, which will set out their key objectives and outcomes to be delivered during the year. The Champion will also

produce an Annual Report for the Minister of Health and the Executive, which will outline their work in the previous year and outcomes achieved against the Business Plan.

5.3 Outcomes on which the Mental Health Champion is expected to report, include:

- Presence in the public arena with public awareness of the Mental Health Champion and the role;*
- Enhanced visibility across Government: presence across the public sector arena with awareness of the Mental Health Champion and the role;*
- Influence in decision making and interaction with policy makers;*
- A voice for those normally voiceless across the public sector;*
- Advocate for awareness of psychological wellbeing, mental health and suicide in the public and independent sector.*
- The promotion of increased mental resilience across the population of Northern Ireland; and*
- Contribution to an improvement in mental health services.*

5.4 These outcomes are considered to be key performance indicators for the role. This list is not exhaustive but it gives an indication of key work areas.

5.5 Progress will also be considered at regular governance meetings during the year with Department of Health officials. This will provide an opportunity to identify issues and solutions to enable progress against key outcomes.

6. Appointment Arrangements

6.1 The Mental Health Champion's tenure is for three years, with the potential for one extension of up to three years. The appointment process follows the principles of the Public Appointments process and the appointment decision is made by the Minister for Health.

6.2 The Terms and Conditions of appointment for the Mental Health Champion are contained in a separate Secondment Agreement between the Department of Health and Ulster University.

7. Hosting and Organisational Structure

7.1 For the 2024/25 financial year, the Mental Health Champion and her office will be hosted, at arm's length, by the Department making use of and in compliance with all departmental IT, Finance, HR and office services.

7.2 This arrangement will be reviewed on an annual basis.

7.3 The Champion will be supported by the following staff:

- 1 x Senior Research / Policy Support Officer (Grade 7);*
- 1 x Research / Policy Support Officer (Deputy Principal);*
- 1 x Communications / Media Support Officer (Deputy Principal); and*
- 1 x Administrative Support Officer (AO).*

8. Finance

- 8.1 *The annual budget for the Champion's office has been agreed as up to £500k, which is to cover staffing costs, office overheads and other programme expenditure.*
- 8.2 *The Champion will develop an annual budget plan for the office to accompany the Annual Business Plan. Expenditure should be authorised and incurred within the NICS delegated budgetary limits, and must adhere to general accounting rules and public procurement principles. The Champion will monitor expenditure against the budget profile and will provide monthly returns to the Sponsor Branch in the Department of Health.*

9. Governance and Reporting

- 9.1 *The Mental Health Champion will work within the strategic scope of their role as detailed in these Terms of Reference and any subsequent amendments approved by the NI Executive.*
- 9.2 *The Champion retains the freedom to make independent decisions on the strategic direction of their work area as set out in the Annual Business Plan.*
- 9.3 *The Champion's office will follow and utilise the hosting organisation's governance processes and systems for the purposes of IT, finance, HR, risk management, procurement and estates. These areas will be covered in regular accountability meetings with the Department in a similar manner to those conducted for other Departmental ALBs.*
- 9.4 *The Champion will share their Annual Business Plan with the Sponsor Branch in the Department of Health no later than the start of the financial year to which it relates. The Champion will provide their Annual Report to the Minister of Health within three months of the end of the reporting year, who will update the Executive in respect of progress against key performance indicators for the role.*
- 9.5 *With regards to the wider governance and accountability arrangements associated with managing public resources and safeguarding public funding, including HR, finance, information governance and risk management, the Champion will report to the Deputy Secretary, Social Services Policy Group in the Department of Health.*

2025/26 Business Plan (summarised)

Objectives/Goals	Tasks	Activities
1. Presence in the public arena with public awareness of the Mental Health Champion and the role	<p>1.1 Update and continue to develop the MHC Comms Strategy</p> <p>1.2 Targeted stakeholder engagement aligned to highlight, promote and implement elements of the MHC's role</p> <p>1.3 Ad hoc involvement in relevant media messaging</p>	<p>1.1.1 This section of the business plan will be updated once the Comms strategy for 2025/26 has been updated. The theme for 2025/26 will be "Big Conversations" (TBC). It is likely to include the following elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Procure Phase II of our 2024/25 "Take a Moment" campaign through our existing media partner;• Organise and run a conference(s) on topics associated with our comms strategy for 2025/26;• Promotion and involvement in awareness days (to include World Mental Health Day and Suicide Prevention Day) in conjunction, where practicable with other Organisations and Government Agencies;• Provision of age appropriate and factual mental health information for schools and EOTAS;• Updating content on the MHC website; and• Continued stakeholder engagement. <p>1.2.1 Strategic meetings with key stakeholders (including Ministers and Departmental Perm Secs) to discuss the need for the full implementation of DoH's MH Strategy.</p> <p>1.2.2 Conduct site visits with statutory service providers to meet senior leadership teams and service providers; to establish what services are available regionally and to establish what is required to improve services.</p> <p>1.2.3 Conduct site visits with charity and voluntary service providers to meet senior leadership teams and service providers; to establish what services are available regionally and to establish what is required to improve services.</p>

		<p>1.3.1 Social media and public messaging around mental health and wellbeing.</p> <p>1.3.2 Preparation and submission of media pieces to support campaigns and awareness events.</p>
<p>2. Enhanced visibility across Government: presence across the public sector arena with awareness of the Mental Health Champion and the role</p>	<p>2.1 Publication of an Annual report for 2024/25</p> <p>2.2 Prevention and early intervention</p> <p>2.3 Suicide prevention</p> <p>2.4 Children and young people</p> <p>2.5 Alcohol and drugs</p>	<p>2.1.1 Submit an Annual Report on the 2024/25 performance of the MH Champion's office by the end of Quarter 1 of the 2025/26 financial year (as per T.O.R. for the MHC role).</p> <p>2.2.1 Provide mental health and wellbeing guidance and expertise to government departments and organisations regarding prevention and early intervention when required.</p> <p>2.2.2 Continued membership and participation in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Criminal Justice Healthcare Oversight Group - Mental Health Strategic Reform Board - PEACEPLUS Programme Management Committee - Age NI Good Vibrations Programme Advisory Committee - Mental Health Strategy - Early Intervention & Prevention Steering Group - Mental Health Strategy - Student Mental Health Early Intervention and Prevention Sub Group - Early Intervention & Prevention Steering Group <p>2.3.1 Provide mental health and wellbeing guidance and expertise to government departments and organisations regarding suicide prevention when required.</p> <p>2.3.2 Continued membership and participation in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Protect Life 2 steering group - Towards Zero Suicide - MHC's Cross Departmental Coordination Action Group

		<p>2.4.1 Provide guidance and expertise to government departments and organisations regarding children and young people's mental health and wellbeing when required.</p> <p>2.4.2 Prepare age appropriate and evidence-based resources for children and young people.</p> <p>2.4.3 Continued membership and participation in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Programme Board for Emotional Health/Wellbeing Framework - DE Reference Group for the Review of Restraint and Seclusion in Educational Settings - DfE Advisory Group to Oversee the FE Policy Review of Student Support <p>2.4.4 High level monitoring of the Still Waiting Action Plan on an ongoing basis and quarterly meetings with relevant DoH Officials.</p> <p>2.4.5 Continue to engage with key stakeholders such as the Children's Commissioner and Children's Law Centre.</p> <p>2.5.1 Provide mental health and wellbeing guidance and expertise to government departments and organisations regarding alcohol and drugs when required.</p>
3. Influence in decision making and interaction with policy makers	<p>3.1 Participate in discussion with all NICS Departments and Ministers</p> <p>3.2 Provide advice and guidance to the NI Executive and/or political representatives</p> <p>3.3 Raise the profile of Mental Health and Wellbeing</p>	<p>3.1.1 Respond to relevant consultations for all NICS Departments that require MHC input.</p> <p>3.1.2 Meet with relevant NI Executive Ministers.</p> <p>3.1.3 Attend NI Assembly Committees (particularly for Health and Education) as and when invited (and where relevant)</p> <p>3.1.4 Meet with NICS Officials as requested/required.</p> <p>3.1.5 Support the implementation of strategies and policies that will impact on Mental Health.</p> <p>3.1.6 Conduct/procure policy and research work.</p>

		<p>3.2.1 Participate in relevant Executive Working Groups.</p> <p>3.2.2 Continued participation in All Party Group meetings.</p> <p>3.2.3 Meet with political representatives on an ad hoc basis as and when required</p> <p>3.3.1 Meet with relevant stakeholder groups (incl. physical conditions) and Commissioners (such as the Victims of Crime Commission; the Children's Commissioner; the Commissioner for Older People; the Veteran's Commissioner etc) as required</p>
4. A voice for those normally voiceless across the public sector	<p>4.1 Identify and meet with individuals and groups who are underrepresented in public debates</p> <p>4.2 Meet with individual members of the public and Mental Health charities and organisations</p> <p>4.3 Identify and take steps to raise awareness of social isolation and other social determinants that lead to poor mental health</p>	<p>4.1.1 Engage with those who are underrepresented to ensure their views are considered/included</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - victims groups - LGBTQ+ community - minority groups <p>4.2.1 Meet with members of the public as required.</p> <p>4.2.2 Meet with Mental Health charities and organisations as required.</p> <p>4.2.3 Conduct site visits with community and voluntary MH organisations to meet service providers and leadership teams and to establish what services are available regionally.</p> <p>4.3.1 Remain agile and take steps to address social determinants of poor mental health as and when these are identified</p>
5. Advocate for awareness of psychological wellbeing, mental health and suicide in the public and	<p>5.1 Participate in regional discussions and surveys regarding psychological wellbeing, mental health and suicide</p>	<p>5.1.1 Extend the working arrangements of MHC's temporary Research Officer in order to stay abreast of developments and to carry out in depth research into areas impacting on Mental Health.</p> <p>5.1.2 Launch and promote research report into the economic cost effectiveness of crisis services.</p>

independent sector		<p>5.1.3 Carry out research into the implications (costs and impacts on HSC Services) on cuts to the Community and Voluntary Sector*, discussions to be led by the Research Officer.</p> <p>5.1.4 Consider if participation in the 2025/26 NI Life & Times survey is appropriate for this financial year, discussions to be led by the Research Officer</p> <p>5.1.5 Participate in regional and all island research projects relevant to the MHC Key Themes.</p> <p><i>* The theme of this research is to be considered and agreed and may be subject to change</i></p>
6. The promotion of increased mental resilience across the population of Northern Ireland	<p>6.1 Support the ongoing implementation of the Protect Life 2 Strategy and the Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework the aligned funding requirements</p> <p>6.2 Participate in regional discussions that present opportunities to influence practices which may impact on resilience</p>	<p>6.1.1 Provide advice, guidance and feedback through the PL2 Steering Group regarding what the Mental Health Champion views as priority actions within the PL2 Strategy.</p> <p>6.1.2 Lobby for funding to be made available where there is a risk that work on the PL2 Strategy may not progress as planned.</p> <p>6.1.3 Continued membership and participation in Protect Life 2 steering group</p> <p>6.1.4 Support the ongoing implementation of the Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework.</p> <p>6.1.5 Provide advice, guidance and feedback on observed performance to the Departments of Health & Education (and relevant ALBs) regarding what the Mental Health Champion views as priority actions within the Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework.</p> <p>6.1.6 Lobby for funding to be made available where there is a risk that work on the Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework may not progress as planned.</p> <p>6.2.1 Involvement in public discussions on topics with a MH impact.</p>

		6.2.2 Participate in regional discussions regarding resilience in our children and young people.
7. Contribution to an improvement in mental health services	<p>7.1 Support and provide guidance with the implementation plan for the MH strategy</p> <p>7.2 Participate in regional discussions regarding current and future mental health services</p>	<p>7.1.1 Support the ongoing implementation of the Mental Health Strategy.</p> <p>7.1.2 Provide advice, guidance and feedback on observed performance to the Department of Health regarding what the Mental Health Champion views as priority actions within the Mental Health Strategy to be progressed in year (inputting into yearly implementation plans).</p> <p>7.1.3 Lobby for funding to be made available where there is a risk that work on the Mental Health Strategy may not progress as planned.</p> <p>7.1.4 Continued membership and participation in the Mental Health Strategic Reform Board.</p> <p>7.2.1 Continued membership and participation in the Executive Working Group on Mental Wellbeing Resilience and Suicide Prevention.</p> <p>7.2.2 Work with HSC Trusts to promote and improve MH services and advocate to Trusts for Services for particular high-risk groups</p> <p>7.2.3 Promote awareness and access to available sources of funding for MH services</p>