

Office of the Mental Health Champion



2025/26

Annual Report

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Mental Health Champion: 2025/26 Annual Report

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Mental Health Champion: 2025/26 Annual Report

Foreword and introduction

Professor Siobhán O'Neill has served as Northern Ireland's Mental Health Champion since 8 September 2021, providing independent leadership and guidance on mental health and wellbeing. In accordance with the Terms of Reference for the role, the Mental Health Champion is required to submit an annual report to the Minister of Health within three months of the close of the reporting year, following which the Minister updates the Executive on progress against the role's key performance indicators. This report outlines the core business and activity undertaken during the 2025/26 financial year, which is referred to throughout this document as "the reporting period". Professor O'Neill's current term is due to conclude in September 2027, marking the final phase of her tenure in the role.

The primary purpose of the Office of the Mental Health Champion is to advise and support the promotion of mental health and wellbeing across all policies and public services. Established in 2020, the role reflects the Northern Ireland Executive's continued commitment to improving mental health outcomes for the population across every aspect of daily life. Central to this commitment is the ambition to embed a mental health promoting approach across all areas of policy and service delivery, informed by the Champion's advice and engagement. Demonstrating sustained, collective support for the role, funding continues to be provided on a cross-departmental basis, reinforcing the collaborative intent for the Office of the Mental Health Champion to achieve lasting impact.

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.

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 until her tenure as Mental Health Champion concludes in September 2027.

Governance statement

The Terms of Reference for the Mental Health Champion's role authorises the Champion to with the authority to exercise independent judgement over the strategic focus of their work, as outlined within the annual business plan. A clear governance and accountability framework sets out how the Department of Health and the Champion engage with one another, ensuring that robust governance arrangements are maintained alongside the operational independence of the role. The Office of the Mental Health Champion operates in line with the host organisation's established governance structures and systems, including

those relating to IT, finance, human resources, risk management, procurement and estates. In this context, the Office's management team upholds the principles of sound Corporate Governance and continues to enhance its arrangements through ongoing self-assessment against recognised best-practice standards. The governance arrangements for the organisation were reviewed by the Department of Health and the Office of the Mental Health Champion in the reporting period to ensure that they remained relevant and fit for purpose.

As Principal Accounting Officer of the Department of Health, the Permanent Secretary is accountable for issuing funding to the Office of the Mental Health Champion. To reinforce the independence of the role, the Principal Accounting Officer has designated the Senior Policy and Research Officer within the Office as Senior Accountable Officer for all expenditure incurred by the Champion's Office. The Senior Accountable Officer carries formal responsibility for governance, decision-making and the management of financial resources within the Office. They also remain available to the Principal Accounting Officer and the Minister of Health to provide advice, assurance and explanations in relation to the stewardship of public funds entrusted to the Office of the Mental Health Champion.

The Senior Accountable Officer is satisfied that all expenditure incurred during the reporting period was appropriate, justified and aligned with the stated objectives of the Mental Health Champion role.

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 undertakes the role of Mental Health Champion on a four-day-per-week basis, having been seconded from Ulster University. Her established academic profile, alongside her continuing position within the University and the Terms of Reference governing the Mental Health Champion role, provide important assurance of the Champion's independence. This independence is further reinforced through the governance arrangements of the Office, including the appointment of a Senior Accountable Officer, who plays a key role in safeguarding the autonomy of the Mental Health Champion's work.

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); and
- 1 x Temporary Research Officer (DP).

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 2025/26 is provided below under the section titled "*2025/26 Budget summary*".

Gifts register

The Office of the Mental Health Champion adheres to the Department of Health's policy regarding 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 2026/27

A summary of the Business Plan for the Mental Health Champion for the 2026/27 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 316 external meetings during the reporting period. This included:

Meetings with	Number
People with lived experience	23
Political representatives	22
Government/policy teams	99
Professional groups	56
Community and Voluntary sector groups	47
Communications teams	44
Academics	25
Total	316

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, by authoring a number of platform pieces and by making public statements on a wide range of areas that impact on mental health and wellbeing in Northern Ireland. The MHC Office also delivered the second phase of the public awareness campaign, Take a Moment. Start a Conversation.

Visits and events provide an important opportunity for the Mental Health Champion to engage directly with members of the public and with those delivering services across both the statutory and voluntary sectors. During the reporting period the Mental Health Champion attended the launch of a range of wellbeing projects, enabling engagement with new and diverse audiences. This included the launch of several school-based wellbeing initiatives, which provided valuable opportunities to engage directly with both staff and young people. The Mental Health Champion also met with service users and frontline staff through visits to a wide range of community, voluntary and statutory services. These included community and voluntary organisations such as the Derry support hubs, Inspire support services, the SEHSCT Loneliness Network, MYMY (Mind Your Mate and Yourself: a community based mental health and well-being charity) and Counselling All Nations service users, as well as statutory mental health services including CAMHS and Beechcroft. These visits provide valuable insight into mental health services and interventions in practice and help to inform the Mental Health Champion's ongoing work.

The Mental Health Champion is regularly invited to speak at conferences and events throughout the year, reflecting the breadth and scope of her role across the five priority themes of prevention and early intervention, suicide prevention, children and young people, alcohol and drugs, and service improvement. Every effort is made to accommodate these invitations alongside ongoing commitments. During the reporting period, the Mental Health Champion spoke at the Supporting Women in Public Life, Farm Safety and Wellbeing, HIRA NI, NICON and infant mental health conferences. She also participated in the Shared Learning *Our Generation* and Children and Young People Take 5 Celebration events, and the Family Voices Forum. In addition, she contributed to the launch of the Right Support, Right Time project.

The Mental Health Champion regularly participated in a wide range of media interviews for press, TV and radio throughout the reporting period. Topics addressed included, but was not limited to, mental health impacts on children and young people, suicide prevention, crisis services including the inquiry into deaths related to the Foyle Bridge, the Mental Health Strategy, and the Deliverability Review. Professor O'Neill authored several opinion pieces including on the debate surrounding young people's mental health being impacted by social media, her analysis of the Deliverability Review of the Mental Health Strategy and what more the Executive needed to do to address the causes of poor mental health. Professor O'Neill also wrote a piece for Fact Check NI which detailed why the scale of poor mental health in NI was higher than other UK regions due to individual cases here tending to be more severe. The Mental Health Champion also wrote a blog for Pivotal called, *Trauma and mental health in NI: what are the Executive doing to address the burden?* The Mental Health Champion regularly publishes pieces to the MHC website and social media about her ongoing work including creating videos updating the public on recent meetings she's attended or address key issues concerning her.

The second phase of the public awareness campaign, Take a Moment. Start a Conversation, sought to highlight how simple conversations can interrupt cycles of distressing thoughts and encouraged people to reach out to anyone they are concerned about. This campaign is relevant to suicide prevention and reminds people of the importance of connecting with people who may be vulnerable and using services such as Lifeline. It addresses some of the myths that people can hold regarding discussing suicide. Despite

operating with a smaller budget than the first phase, post campaign research showed a positive shift in public behaviour: 29% of those surveyed reported having a conversation about mental health following the campaign, compared with 22% in the first phase.

In February, the Office hosted the Building Wellbeing in Young People conference in Riddel Hall, Belfast. The event explored the pressures faced by young people, reviewed current support systems, and identified effective approaches and areas for improvement to create environments where young people can thrive. More than 200 attendees from across the mental health and the children and young people sectors participated, and the feedback received was highly positive.

Enhanced visibility across Government

During the reporting period, the Mental Health Champion continued 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;
- 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;
- DoH's Digital Health Forum;
- Age NI's Good Vibrations Programme Advisory Committee (programme concluded during reporting period);
- Water Safety NI.
- DAERA Championing Rural Communities Working Group;
- DE's Joint Restraint and Seclusion Working Group;
- UU Community Partnership Framework;
- MHS Student Mental Health;
- Public Mental Health Learning Network;
- MHS Data and Outcomes Working Group;
- MHS Conference Taks and Finish Group;
- MHS Campaigns Research Subgroup; and
- Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework programme board.

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 Mental Health Champion provided written and oral evidence to Health and Education Committees, attended the Executive Working Group on Mental Health, Suicide, Wellbeing and Resilience, met with a number of MLAs from various political parties along with their constituents, 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 (99 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:

- Vision 2030, a strategy for integrated Education
- DfC Disability Action Plan 2025-30;
- DoH Framework for learning and improvement from patient safety incidents;
- Private members bill banning conversion therapy;
- DoH Equality action plan and disability action plan;
- Pathways to work: reforming benefits and support to get Britain working again;
- DE 16-18 Legislation;
- DoJ Court-ordered community sentences for children;
- DoJ Victims and witnesses of crime strategy 2025-30;
- Private members suicide prevention training bill;
- DfC NI Executive Anti-poverty strategy;
- DoH HSC children and young people's emotional health and wellbeing framework;
- DE The future of CCEA qualifications;
- DoH Learning Disability Service model;
- Revised code of practice for the Mental Health NI Order 1986;
- DE Pupil attendance strategy;
- DfC NI Executive Disability Strategy;
- DE Restrictive Interventions: Guidance for educational settings; and
- DE ELC Strategy.

A voice for those normally voiceless across the public sector

During the reporting period, the Mental Health Champion continued to advocate on behalf of individuals whose voices are often underrepresented across the public sector. This role involves representing this section of the population at a policy level and engaging with politicians and policymakers to ensure their needs and experiences are consistently taken into account.

The Mental Health Champion does not provide medical advice, nor can the office intervene in individual cases seeking access to services or in the progression of complaints. Where members of the public make contact regarding personal circumstances, the Office offers guidance and signposting tailored to the issues raised.

During the reporting period, the Mental Health Champion engaged with a broad range of statutory, voluntary, and community organisations, as well as individuals, on a variety of matters. This included discussions relating to Serious Adverse Incidents, with a focus on identifying learning that can contribute to the ongoing improvement of mental health services across the region. The Champion also met with individuals and families bereaved by suicide and, in some cases, by incidents involving individuals with mental ill health. These

engagements are vital in ensuring that lessons are learned from such tragic events, with the aim of reducing preventable harm and improving outcomes in the future.

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

During the reporting period the Mental Health Champion's 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.

The 2024/25 MHC annual report outlined a number of pieces of work which commenced in the previous reporting period and completed in this one. These include:

- The Kids Life and Times (KLT) and Youth Life and Times (YLT) survey contained an MHC module that focused 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. The summary reports for [KLT](#) and [YLT](#) launched in the summer of 2025.
- [Make my voice heard](#) report focused on understanding barriers to access health services for persons seeking international protection launched in May of 2025.
- The economic argument for investing in a regional mental health service report completed by Associate Professor David McDaid and Dr A-La Park was received in May of 2026 and will be launched on the 24 June 2026.

In 2025/26 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 such as:

- *Early intervention and prevention data and outcomes rapid review of international approaches, QUB and Impact Research Centre. MHC informed research through steering group* [Rapid review report - Early Intervention and prevention data and outcomes - August 2024.pdf](#)
- Mind the Gap: Tackling Mental Health Inequalities – Conference Report [Mind the Gap Tackling Mental Health Inequalities - Conference report 2025.pdf](#)

In addition, the Mental Health Champion's office undertook a programme 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.

Mental Health in Northern Ireland, Current Services and Strategic Priorities

The Mental Health Champion sought to create a report which summarised the key learning on mental health in NI. Grant Thornton was commissioned to assist in the development of this report, which combined desk top research with MHC knowledge and supported by engagement sessions across relevant NICS Departments. Grant Thornton took lead in the engagement session to allow for independent representation of participants valuable

feedback. The report itself follows the 2023 publication, Mental Health in Northern Ireland: Fundamental Facts, which MHC produced in partnership with the Mental Health Foundation. It includes all relevant data across the life course but goes further to and include additional analysis of the policy context, contemporary challenges and policy contexts. It provides a high-level overview of mental health services in Northern Ireland, drawing together evidence on historical influences, factors affecting service provision, and future direction.

The report aims to serve as an evidence base for government departments, arm's-length bodies, Health and Social Care Trusts, and community and voluntary organisations. It is also intended to support academics, researchers, and the media in their work on this topic.

Northern Ireland's population has been shaped by a legacy of conflict and violence, resulting in diverse transgenerational experiences. Mental health outcomes reflect a complex interaction of social, economic, historical, and demographic factors, contributing to a high level of need across the population. The ongoing impact of the Troubles continues to manifest in trauma and contributes to political and social challenges.

Awareness of mental health and wellbeing has increased in recent years, alongside greater recognition of the effects of trauma and adversity. Demand for support is rising, particularly among children and young people, with increasing prevalence of distress, situational crises, self-harm, and suicidal ideation.

Adopting a life-course approach, the report highlights how mental health needs and services evolve from early childhood through older age, with particular attention to groups facing heightened challenges. It offers a descriptive, evidence-based assessment designed to support informed discussion and strategic planning.

The findings underline the importance of addressing the wider determinants of mental health, including poverty, education, and inequality. They also emphasise the need for a more integrated, trauma-informed approach to policy development across government. The report is intended to inform decision-making and contribute to improved outcomes for individuals, services, and communities, while also serving as a resource for those with lived experience, carers, and advocates.

The [Mental Health in Northern Ireland](#) report Launched on 23rd March in the Long Gallery, hosted by the co-chairs of the health committee.

Established MHC, UU, QUB and ARK research collaboration group

The KLT/ YLT 2025 MHC module focused on Wellbeing, Hope and Benevolent Childhood Experiences. It used standardised scales to facilitate in-depth analysis and comparison to international samples. In collaboration with ARK, the MHC office produced a research update to summarise the findings in relation to BCEs and Wellbeing which will be published in June of 2026 and followed by a second report focused on Hope later in the year. A core group of researchers at UU, QUB and ARK are interested in understanding children and young people's mental health in NI. In collaboration with these researchers the MHC research officer is producing a series of academic papers analysing this KLT/YLT 2025 data to be published in 2026/27 dependent on the peer review process.

Influencing Policy Development and Implementation

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 difficult funding position and calling for additional resources. The Mental Health Champion continued 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 participated in the regional mental health outcomes framework, the regional mental health service collaborative 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 and finish attended by her staff. The Office of 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 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 information on how best to allocate funding in an extremely challenging environment to gain best value for money and to target the young people in most need of support. The 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. MHC provides feedback and insight during PL2 steering group meetings and responds to all 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 continued to support service improvement initiatives across Health and Social Care Trusts. Visits to a range of facilities delivering mental health services were undertaken to hear directly from service providers and to gain insight into how services are being delivered in practice.

The Mental Health Champion also maintained active engagement with key professional and policy stakeholders. This included ongoing participation in meetings with the Northern Ireland Mental Health Policy Group, the Royal College of Psychiatrists (including its sub-faculties), and the Northern Ireland Branch of the British Psychological Society, contributing to discussions on current policy priorities and service development.

In addition, the Mental Health Champion participated in 56 meetings with professional groups and bodies and 25 meetings with academia.

2025/26 Budget summary

The Mental Health Champion budget for the reporting period totalled £495k and comprised two components: salaries and operational expenditure. Spend for the reporting period over these components was as follows:

Components	Actual (£'000)
Salaries	402
Operational expenditure	93
Total	495

Salaries

The Office of the Mental Health Champion was fully staffed by four permanent members of staff throughout the reporting period. In addition, the Mental Health Champion, in agreement with the Senior Accounting Officer, approved the continuation of the Research Officer role in recognition of the ongoing value it brings to the organisation. This role continues to strengthen both the internal and external research capacity of the Office, supporting the Mental Health Champion in delivering research activities, increasing publication output, and enhancing overall organisational capability. The position will remain under regular 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.

Operational expenditure

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

	£
Comms activity *	67,376
Participation in external research **	20,075
Professional fees	5,612
Hospitality	175
Totals	93,238

* During the reporting period, the Office of the Mental Health Champion ran phase two of 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 2026/27

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 2026/27 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);
- 2026/27 communications activities;
- Launching and promoting a new MHC report: Mental Health in Northern Ireland: Current Services and Strategic Priorities;
- Launching and promoting procured research into the economic cost effectiveness of crisis services;

- Promotion and involvement in awareness days;
- Publish research update focusing on results from the Kids Life and Times, Young Life and Times surveys in 2025;
- Participation in external research activities (to include, subject to available funding, fieldwork for the 2026/27 NI Life and Times Survey);
- Preparation for the 2027/28 Kids Life and Times, and Youth Life and Times Surveys;
- 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 accessible to the Northern Ireland Executive, individual Ministers, departmental officials, the community and voluntary sector, and members of the public in order to fulfil the responsibilities set out in the Terms of Reference for the role.

Within the 2026/27 Business Plan, the Office of the Mental Health Champion has reaffirmed its commitment to maintaining a responsive and flexible approach, taking action to address the social determinants of poor mental health as they emerge.

The Business Plan for the Mental Health Champion for the 2026/27 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.

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:

- To participate in the public debate around mental resilience, suicide, mental health and recovery.*
- 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*
- To promote mental health across all society.*
- 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.*
- To create a focal point for mental wellbeing and mental health discussions and to speak out for those who have lived experience.*
- 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.*
- 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 2025/26 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.*

2026/27 Business Plan (summarised)

Objectives/Goals	Tasks	Activities
1. Presence in the public arena with public awareness of the Mental Health Champion and the role	1.1 Update and continue to develop the MHC Comms Strategy 1.2 Targeted stakeholder engagement aligned to highlight, promote and implement elements of the MHC's role 1.3 Ad hoc involvement in relevant media messaging	1.1.1 This section of the business plan will be updated once the Comms strategy for 2026/27 has been updated. The theme for 2026/27 will be "Big Conversations" (TBC). It is likely to include the following elements: • The selection and award of a new media partner, awarded through a CPD guided contract. The media campaign will target children and young people (ages 11-19) and will focus on resilience and building wellbeing and coping strategies; • Organise and run events and/or conferences on topics associated with MHC comms strategy for 2026/27; • 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; • Updating content on the MHC website with current information; • Continued stakeholder engagement. 1.2.1 Strategic meetings with key stakeholders (including Ministers and Departmental Perm Secs) to discuss the elements of DoH's MH Strategy for priority implementation. 1.2.2 Conduct site visits with statutory service providers to meet leadership and operational teams and service providers; to establish what services are available regionally and to establish what is required to improve services. 1.2.3 Conduct site visits with charity and voluntary service

		providers to meet leadership teams and service providers; to establish what services are available regionally and to establish what is required to improve services. 1.3.1 Social media and public messaging around mental health and wellbeing. 1.3.2 Preparation and submission of media pieces to support campaigns and awareness events.
2. Enhanced visibility across Government: presence across the public sector arena with awareness of the Mental Health Champion and the role	2.1 Publication of an Annual report for 2025/26 2.2 Prevention and early intervention 2.3 Suicide prevention 2.4 Children and young people 2.5 Alcohol and drugs	2.1.1 Submit an Annual Report on the 2025/26 performance of the MH Champion's office by the end of Quarter 1 of the 2026/27 financial year (as per T.O.R. for the MHC role). 2.2.1 Provide mental health and wellbeing guidance and expertise to government departments and organisations regarding prevention and early intervention when required. 2.2.2 Continued membership and participation in: - Criminal Justice Healthcare Oversight Group - Mental Health Strategic Reform Board - PEACEPLUS Programme Management Committee - Mental Health Strategy - Early Intervention & Prevention Steering Group - Mental Health Strategy - Student Mental Health Early Intervention and Prevention Sub-Group 2.3.1 Provide mental health and wellbeing guidance and expertise to government departments and organisations regarding suicide prevention when required. 2.3.2 Continued membership and participation in: - MHC's Cross Departmental Coordination Action Group - Protect Life 2 steering group - Towards Zero Suicide

		- SD1/CRP Strategy Group 2.4.1 Provide guidance and expertise to government departments and organisations regarding children and young people's mental health and wellbeing when required. 2.4.2 Continued membership and participation in: - 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 2.4.3 Continue to engage with key stakeholders such as the Children's Commissioner and Children's Law Centre. 2.5.1 Provide mental health and wellbeing guidance and expertise to government departments and organisations regarding alcohol and drugs when required.
3. Influence in decision making and interaction with policy makers	3.1 Participate in discussion with all NICS Departments and Ministers 3.2 Provide advice and guidance to the NI Executive and/or political representatives 3.3 Raise the profile of Mental Health and Wellbeing	3.1.1 Respond to relevant consultations for all NICS Departments that require MHC input. 3.1.2 Meet with relevant NI Executive Ministers. 3.1.3 Attend NI Assembly Committees (particularly for Health and Education) as and when invited (and where relevant) 3.1.4 Meet with NICS Officials as requested/required. 3.1.5 Support the implementation of strategies and policies that will impact on Mental Health. 3.1.6 Conduct/procure policy and research work. 3.2.1 Participate in relevant Executive Working Groups. 3.2.2 Continued participation in All Party Group meetings. 3.2.3 Lobby parties for the inclusion of relevant mental health and wellbeing related asks/priorities in party manifestos

		leading up to the next general election. 3.2.4 Meet with political representatives on an ad hoc basis as and when required. 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
4. A voice for those normally voiceless across the public sector	4.1 Identify and meet with individuals and groups who are underrepresented in public debates 4.2 Meet with individual members of the public and Mental Health charities and organisations 4.3 Identify and take steps to raise awareness of social isolation and other social determinants that lead to poor mental health	4.1.1 Engage with those who are underrepresented to ensure their views are considered/included - victims groups - LGBTQ+ community - minority groups 4.2.1 Meet with members of the public as required. 4.2.2 Meet with Mental Health charities and organisations as required. 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. 4.3.1 Remain agile and take steps to address social determinants of poor mental health as and when these are identified
5. Advocate for awareness of psychological wellbeing, mental health and suicide in the public and independent sector	5.1 Participate in regional discussions and surveys regarding psychological wellbeing, mental health and suicide	5.1.1 Extend the working arrangements of MHC's temporary Research Officer in order to continue stay abreast of developments and to carry out in depth research into areas impacting on Mental Health. 5.1.2 Launch and promote Mental Health in Northern Ireland, current landscape and Strategic Priorities. 5.1.3 Launch and promote research report into the economic

		cost effectiveness of crisis services. 5.1.4 Participate in BSI launch: suicide prevention standard. 5.1.5 Publish research update focusing on results from the Kids Life and Times, Young Life and Times surveys in 2025. 5.1.6 Field work for the 2026/27 NI Life & Times survey, discussions to be led by the Research Officer. 5.1.7 Publish research findings from the 2025/26 MHC media campaign. 5.1.8 Participate in a collaborative research group between MHC, UU, QUB, ARK to produce a series of papers looking at the protective impact of BCEs on wellbeing and consider the role Hope has in mediating that relationship. 5.1.9 Prepare for participation in KLT/YLT for early 2027/28
6. The promotion of increased mental resilience across the population of Northern Ireland	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 6.2 Participate in regional discussions that present opportunities to influence practices which may impact on resilience	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. 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. 6.1.3 Continued membership and participation in Protect Life 2 steering group 6.1.5 Support the ongoing implementation of the Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework. 6.1.6 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. 6.1.7 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.

		6.2.1 Involvement in public discussions on topics with a MH impact. 6.2.2 Participate in regional discussions regarding resilience in our children and young people.
7. Contribution to an improvement in mental health services	7.1 Support and provide guidance with the implementation plan for the MH strategy 7.2 Participate in regional discussions regarding current and future mental health services	7.1.1 Support the ongoing implementation of the Mental Health Strategy. 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). 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. 7.1.4 Continued membership and participation in the Mental Health Strategic Reform Board. 7.2.1 Continued membership and participation in the Executive Working Group on Mental Wellbeing Resilience and Suicide Prevention. 7.2.2 Work with HSC Trusts to promote and improve MH services and advocate to Trusts for Services for particular high risk groups 7.2.3 Promote awareness and access to available sources of funding for MH services