

BEING OPEN FRAMEWORK FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ'S)

Introducing the Being Open Framework

What is the Being Open Framework?

The Department's Being Open Framework for Health and Social Care Northern Ireland (the Framework) is aimed at supporting a culture of openness, honesty, and transparency across Health and Social Care (HSC) organisations in Northern Ireland.

The Framework is a standardised regional approach to help create the conditions where a culture of openness and trust can flourish between those who use our services, their families and carers, HSC staff and leaders and HSC organisations.

What is the Purpose of the Framework?

The Framework aims to promote and support a culture of openness, transparency and accountability reflected through compassionate communication with staff, patients, service users and their families and carers, and where ongoing learning enhances and improves patient safety and quality of care.

The Framework will help ensure that all staff understand the expectations and responsibilities upon them to operate in an open, just and learning culture, and that they are supported to do so by HSC organisations, leaders and managers. It is designed not only to guide staff when things go wrong, but also to promote openness, transparency and honesty as part of everyday practice and patient care, and to create a supportive and psychologically safe environment for all. By supporting an open, just and learning culture, patient safety, public confidence and support for staff will be improved.

What are the anticipated benefits of the Framework?

Anticipated benefits of Framework include:

- Improved learning, patient safety and enhanced quality of care.
- Enhanced open communication in all staff and team interactions between colleagues, and with those who use services, their families and carers.
- Ensuring those who use services, their families, carers and staff are listened to and are treated openly, fairly and with compassion and respect.
- A psychologically safer, more supportive environment for staff to speak up, to raise concerns and to learn and help improve services.
- Supporting system wide learning from when things go wrong, and when things go right, leading to improvements in patient safety and care.
- Enhanced transparency and restored public trust in care delivery.

The Framework aims to improve patient safety and quality of care, staff wellbeing, and public trust by promoting an open, compassionate, and psychologically safe culture that encourages and supports honest communication, learning from when things go wrong and when also when they go right, to improve services.

How will the Framework help prevent past failings in HSC open culture as identified by Public Inquiries?

The Framework promotes and supports an open and transparent culture through a strong emphasis on psychological safety and a just culture. The Framework supports the move away from a culture of blame and instead promotes system-based learning, balanced accountability, and compassionate treatment of staff, service users and their families. Through a clear focus on supporting staff to speak up, raise concerns and report incidents without fear of punishment, it reduces defensiveness and encourages transparency.

Leaders at all levels are expected to model curiosity, empathy and openness, reinforcing a non-punitive environment where transparency and learning – and not defensiveness - is the norm.

The Framework aims to help prevent poor communication by embedding open, honest and compassionate communication as a core organisational expectation. It sets out clear standards for communication across all levels - leaders, staff, multidisciplinary teams and with service users and their families - requiring respect, accuracy, updates and the use of appropriate language and methods. It also promotes training, preparation and support for staff so they can communicate effectively, especially in sensitive situations.

The Framework requires HSC organisations to build structures and narratives aimed at making openness the norm, not the exception. It requires organisational systems - governance, audit, reporting, supervision, learning processes - to actively support openness as part of everyday work. Reflection, sharing experiences, learning from near misses, and highlighting examples of openness help normalise openness and transparency. Openness when things go wrong should be easier and more natural as part of a culture in which openness is the norm throughout all aspects of everyday service delivery.

Scope of the Framework

What is the Scope of Framework – which organisations will it apply to?

The intention of the Framework is to define, support and promote a culture of openness to be achieved across the full range of Health and Social Care delivery organisations in Northern Ireland. In that context, it is intended to be expansive in its reach and scope, and that all individuals and organisations involved directly or indirectly in the provision of Health and Social Care delivery and support services embrace and adopt the requirements of the Framework.

The Framework applies to all staff, independent contractors and organisations providing care and services as part of, or on behalf of, the HSC system in Northern Ireland. All Departmental Arms-Length Bodies and Special Agencies are within scope (see Appendix 2 of the Framework itself), as are those organisations that are commissioned, funded or contracted by HSC bodies or by the Department for the purpose of contributing to the provision of HSC services in Northern Ireland.

This includes but is not limited to:

- HSC Trusts;
- Public Health Agency;
- Business Services Organisation (known as BSO. This includes HSC staff employed by BSO who work under the direction of the Department of Health within the Department's Strategic Planning and Performance Group);
- Special Agencies: Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service; Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency; and the Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland;
- Patient and Client Council;
- Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority;
- The Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery;
- The Northern Ireland Social Care Council;
- Independent/Community/Voluntary sector organisations commissioned, funded or contracted to provide care; and
- Family Practitioner Services and Primary Care (commissioned/contracted through the Department's Strategic Planning and Performance Group).

Department of Health civil servants are not within scope of the Being Open Framework. Civil servants in the Department of Health, along with those in other core Civil Service Departments, are subject to the existing Northern Ireland Civil Service Code of Ethics

which includes a commitment to carrying out their role in accordance with the core values of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality.

Duty of Candour

Does the Being Open Framework introduce a Duty of Candour?

The Being Open Framework **does not introduce** any new form of statutory or legal duty of candour in Northern Ireland.

HSC professionals across the UK already have an individual duty of candour to be open and honest in their professional codes and standards. The requirements set out in the Framework align with such codes and standards and do not in any way change or amend them.

Separate to the Being Open Framework, the Department is progressing two distinct pieces of legislation which will introduce new statutory duties of candour for the Northern Ireland health and social care system.

Firstly, an *Organisational Duty of Candour Bill* will create a legal requirement for Northern Ireland HSC organisations to act openly and honestly when an unintended or unexpected incident causes, or could cause, harm, ensuring families are informed promptly, compassionately and accurately. Secondly, the *Public Office Accountability Bill* (often referred to as the Hillsborough Law) will introduce a UK-wide Duty of Candour for public organisations and officials, legally requiring candour, frankness and transparency across public services, including in health and social care. These pieces of legislation will enable Northern Ireland to align with the other UK nations in relation to statutory provision for Duty of Candour.

The Being Open Framework is central to enhancing an open culture and is intended to support and underpin legislative provision. Together, these will strengthen accountability and public trust by seeking to embed openness and candour at both organisational and individual levels across the HSC system.

Implementation of the Framework

When will implementation of the Framework begin?

Launch of the Framework marks the beginning of a familiarisation period for HSC organisations, and will allow some time to prepare for implementation which will commence from 1 April 2026.

The launch of the Framework is a significant milestone in supporting the HSC to enhance and strengthen an open culture. As with any new policy initiative, the Department and the HSC recognise that the launch is very much a first step. The priority and focus now moves to embedding and sustaining the Framework in practice across the HSC and to achieving its implementation with energy and sustained commitment.

How will HSC organisations support and deliver effective implementation of the Framework?

HSC organisations are responsible and accountable for ownership, implementation and monitoring of the Framework at organisational level. This local ownership and commitment are fundamental to successful implementation. As such, it is for organisations to establish systems, processes and oversight at local level to ensure effective implementation of the Framework, and that monitoring of implementation is fully integrated into local governance.

The Framework itself sets out a range of *Enablers* and requirements which are designed to support effective implementation. These include for example, making clear that responsibility for embedding an open culture rests with all leaders, including those in the most senior positions. Education, training and support are also key to effective implementation to help ensure that staff have the skills and confidence to practice openness effectively and compassionately. The Framework requires openness training at induction and on an ongoing basis, alongside opportunities for supervision, reflection, team learning and multidisciplinary discussion. Organisations must put in place strong oversight, monitoring and reporting arrangements to ensure the Framework is embedded consistently.

How will implementation of the Framework be monitored and enforced?

HSC organisations are responsible and accountable for ownership, implementation and monitoring of the Framework at organisational level. This local ownership and commitment are fundamental to successful implementation of the Framework.

Organisations must integrate the Framework into their governance and monitoring structures. For Arm's-length Bodies, Boards and senior leaders are required to monitor implementation routinely, document actions taken and demonstrate compliance. A nominated Non-Executive Director will provide independent oversight, and the Chief Executive holds overall accountability for ensuring the Framework is embedded, including through staff training and integration with other relevant policies. These expectations are designed to make openness a formally scrutinised organisational priority, rather than optional.

External assurance also reinforces implementation. Internal and external audits can assess whether the Framework is being properly embedded and whether required cultural and behavioural changes are being achieved. The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) may use its regulatory powers to review and report on organisational compliance. The Department of Health will monitor implementation through existing sponsorship, performance management and accountability arrangements. These mechanisms are designed to ensure that organisations not only adopt the Framework but demonstrate its impact through measurable and reportable progress.

How will the Framework be implemented by smaller HSC organisations?

The Framework is clear that organisations are required to implement the *Enablers* in a way that most effectively creates and supports an open culture. The Framework explicitly recognises that “one size never fits all” and as such supports smaller organisations to be flexible and pragmatic in implementing the Enablers taking account of local setting. In practice, smaller or non-Trust settings can tailor processes and

structures, so they remain workable and proportionate. Local governance systems will ensure effective implementation of the Framework, with leaders remaining responsible and accountable for embedding openness consistently across their services in line with the Framework.

Consultation feedback noted that some elements - such as references to Corporate Boards - do not directly apply to smaller organisations for example primary care, family practitioner services or community and voluntary sector organisations. In response, the Department has clarified that all HSC bodies must adopt the Framework but can adapt how they implement it, taking account of their size, context and local setting. The Department has committed to supporting organisations during the implementation phase, for example through consideration of developing sector-specific guidance where needed.

The anticipated benefits of universal adoption of the Framework across the HSC include improved patient safety, better staff support and wellbeing, and enhanced accountability and public trust. It is important that all HSC bodies - large and small - implement the Framework as a key purpose is to create a consistent, system-wide culture of openness, psychological safety and learning across Northern Ireland's HSC system. It is important that benefits of an enhance open culture are experienced by everyone who uses services and everyone who works in services across different settings.

How will the Department support implementation of the Framework?

The Department is committed to supporting the HSC in the period ahead to achieve full implementation of the Framework and to fully realising the intended cultural change and associated benefits and improved outcomes for those that use services and those who deliver them. The Department will work with partners in the period ahead to consider how best this support can be achieved, for example enabling a focus on consistent training and consideration of other practical supports.

As explained above, local ownership by HSC organisations is key to successful implementation of the Framework and as such it will primarily be for organisations to

establish systems, processes and oversight at local level to ensure effective implementation.