

From the Director of Quality, Safety and
Improvement
Kieran McAteer



BY EMAIL

For Action
Chairs and Chief Executives of HSC Trusts

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Dear Colleagues

Being Open Framework for Health and Social Care

I am writing to advise you that the Minister of Health, Mike Nesbitt, has today launched the *Being Open Framework for Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland*. A copy of the Framework and an accompanying *Frequently Asked Questions* can be found [here](#).

Launch of the Framework follows a public consultation undertaken by the Department in 2025 which has demonstrated overwhelming support for the Framework and its underlying intent and objectives. A copy of the Consultation Analysis Report is also published today by Minister Nesbitt and can be found [here](#).

You are also asked to note that the Minister has issued a Written Ministerial Statement today providing an update on a range of other policy measures including publication of a Consultation Analysis Report following a public consultation exercise in relation to Redesign of the Serious Adverse Incident Procedure, and on HSC Trusts' work to establish dedicated Patient Safety and Quality Committees. A copy of the Statement can be found [here](#).

Purpose of the Being Open Framework

The Being Open Framework aims to provide a standardised, regional approach to help create the conditions where a culture of openness and trust can flourish between those who use health and social care (HSC) services, their families and carers, HSC staff and leaders, and HSC organisations. The Framework aims to provide a structured yet flexible approach to supporting openness and candour across the HSC system.

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. By supporting such a culture, patient safety, public confidence and support for staff will be enhanced. The Framework is designed not only to guide organisations and staff when things go wrong, but also to promote openness as part of everyday practice and patient care, and to create a supportive and psychologically safe environment for all.

Who does the Framework 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, 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.

As such, I would be grateful if you can bring the Framework to the attention of those organisations that are commissioned, funded or contracted by your organisation to provide HSC services and use existing contractual and governance arrangements to

monitor and achieve compliance. The *Frequently Asked Questions* section sets out some initial guidance for smaller organisations.

Implementation

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.

As with any new policy initiative, the Department recognises 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.

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.

Duty of Candour

The Being Open Framework does not introduce any new form of statutory or legal duty of candour in Northern Ireland. As you will be aware, 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.

Most responses to the Being Open consultation reflected the importance and need for introduction of a statutory Duty of Candour. Separate to the Being Open Framework, the Department is currently 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 Department will keep you and other stakeholders updated in a timely manner in relation to Duty of Candour legislation as this work develops.

Next Steps in relation to the Being Open Framework

While recognising the importance of local ownership to ensure successful organisational implementation, the Department remains committed to supporting the HSC in the period ahead to achieve full implementation of the Being Open Framework. The Department is establishing an Implementation Oversight Group which will consider how best this support can be achieved, for example enabling a focus on consistent training and consideration of other practical supports, and the best approach to measure and evaluate the impact of the Framework in practice.

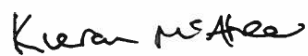
The Department recognises that the cultural change promoted by the Being Open Framework is a journey and will take time to fully realise, and that measuring and evaluating the achievement and impact of such change is not straightforward. The Department also recognises that to develop the best approach to measuring and evaluating impact requires joint working with HSC Trusts, and recognises the importance of taking some time to develop the most effective approach. As such, the Department will work with HSC organisations, including the RQIA, early in the implementation phase to consider assessment and evaluation methodology and tools.

I would be grateful if you can nominate a representative from your organisation to join a Being Open Framework Implementation Oversight Group. Please provide these nominations to Jan.Plunkett@health-ni.gov.uk by Friday 6 March. Should you require

any further information at this stage please also direct any queries to Mr. Plunkett in the first instance.

The Department looks forward to working collaboratively with you and your teams 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.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kieran McAteer". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

KIERAN MCATEER
Director of Quality, Safety and Improvement