

2026 NURSE OF THE YEAR

AWARDS PROGRAMME

THURSDAY 4TH JUNE 2026
CULLODEN HOTEL
HOLLYWOOD



Royal College
of Nursing
Northern Ireland

A CELEBRATION OF NURSING



On behalf of the Royal College of Nursing in Northern Ireland, it is my great pleasure to welcome our finalists, their guests, our sponsors, RCN members and distinguished guests to the 2026 Nurse of the Year Awards ceremony. It is good to be back here at The Culloden once again for what, I am sure, will be another memorable and inspirational occasion.

These awards provide the opportunity to highlight excellence within nursing in Northern Ireland and the contribution that nursing staff make to the health and well-being of the people of Northern Ireland. Despite the increasingly challenging environment, this year's finalists demonstrate once again how nurses in Northern Ireland continue to deliver high quality, innovative and person-centred care, contributing to and leading the strategic objectives of transformation, modernisation and co-production, as embodied in the Department of Health's HSC reset plan. I am also delighted, as ever, to see that our finalists continue to be drawn from a broad range of health and social care settings across Northern Ireland, reflecting the many different areas of practice in which nursing staff serve.

We all know the challenges as we continue to address the escalating crisis in our health and social care system. However, as this evening will highlight once again, we have a world class nursing workforce here in Northern Ireland, with talented, highly educated and deeply committed staff delivering, often in the most difficult circumstances, high quality and safety critical nursing care to some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Recognising, supporting and appropriately rewarding our brilliant nursing staff and students, wherever they practise, makes an invaluable contribution to meeting these challenges in the interests of those we are all, ultimately, here to serve - the people of Northern Ireland.

I would like to express my gratitude to all our sponsors. You are most welcome here this evening and I hope you will find the occasion rewarding. I would encourage all our guests to discover more about our sponsors through reading the information in this programme and by talking to the representatives who are here with us tonight. I am delighted to welcome, as a new sponsor, the Ulster Independent Clinic, which is supporting the Leadership Award. Many thanks, also, to Kingsbridge Private Hospital, the new sponsor of the Patient's Choice Award. I am also most grateful, as ever, to the judges of the various award categories, who have once again contributed their time and expertise to ensure that we appropriately reflect the excellence, innovation and diversity that exist within nursing in Northern Ireland.

I convey my admiration, gratitude and very best wishes to all our finalists and their nominators. I wish you all a most enjoyable evening.

Briege Quinn
RCN Northern Ireland Board Chair



The Open University

The Open University is proud to once again sponsor the RCN Northern Ireland Nurse of the Year Learning in Practice Award. This award celebrates excellence in teaching and learning across a wide range of acute and community healthcare settings throughout Northern Ireland. Clinical placements are a vital part of every student nurse's journey, providing invaluable hands-on experience and professional development. This learning is made possible through the dedication and expertise of mentors, practice supervisors, managers and practice education teams, who play a critical role in shaping the next generation of nurses. The Open University works in partnership with the Department of Health, Health and Social Care Trusts and the independent sector, to offer an alternative, accessible route into nursing. This flexible pathway enables healthcare assistants and other support staff to study part-time while continuing in their substantive roles - building skills, confidence and to progress their careers within the health sector workforce.



Public Health Agency

The Public Health Agency drives the public health and social well-being agenda in Northern Ireland. It provides a sustained focus on achieving key public health goals and reducing health inequalities. The broad functions of the Public Health Agency include improving and protecting the health of the population; reducing inequalities with a focus on the most vulnerable in our society; improving the quality, safety and experience of health care services through commissioning and sharing learning; leading R&D programmes; and supporting personal and public involvement.



Marie Curie

Marie Curie is dedicated to supporting people living with life-limiting illnesses and their loved ones, and we strive to offer both compassionate care and practical support at every step. Our services include a Marie Curie in-patient hospice facility, as well as a community out-patients service tailored for those who require specialist palliative care. In addition, we deliver integrated hospice care at home services in every HSC trust area. This home-based care is further enhanced by our volunteer companion service, ensuring that patients and families receive not just medical support but also emotional companionship. Marie Curie's services operate across the 24-hour period to support both patients and their families. Every year, we are privileged to provide care to more than 6,000 patients, offering them choice and dignity in how and where they are cared for. Our focus is to guide and comfort patients, families, and carers at every stage of their journey.



Balmoral Healthcare

Balmoral Healthcare is delighted to sponsor the RCN Northern Ireland Nurse of the Year Independent Sector Award for 2026. Balmoral Healthcare is one of Northern Ireland's leading health care recruitment agencies. Acquired by registered nurse Kieran McCormick in 2021, he runs the company with the same dedication and passion for nursing which first inspired the establishment of the business in 2000. For the past 26 years, we have been building on our excellent reputation for recruiting only the highest calibre of registered nurses, paramedics, doctors, senior care assistants and health care assistants. High nursing standards and values, along with a committed focus to patient safety and person-centred care, are at the heart of Balmoral Healthcare. We take great pride in the excellent service and support we provide to our public and private sector clients.



Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery

The Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery [NIPEC] is delighted to sponsor once again the prestigious Kathleen Robb Award for Outstanding Contribution to Nursing. NIPEC aims to improve standards of practice, education and professional development for nurses and midwives in order to facilitate their delivery of safe, effective and person-centred care. NIPEC also provides advice and information on matters relating to nursing and midwifery. NIPEC is committed to effective positive partnership working and establishing, forming and maintaining collaboration and strategic alliances with a wide range of stakeholders, partners, agencies and sectors in order to meet its aims.



Ulster University

Ulster University's School of Nursing and Paramedic Science has been leading graduate nurse education for half a century, celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2025. The School has a strong culture of research, scholarship and high-quality education, framed within a healthful culture. The School is widely recognised for its pioneering nursing research, which improves the care of people, their families and communities, as well as producing inspirational nursing graduates who become major leaders in their profession. A unique focus of the School is underpinning their culture and curricula with person-centred frameworks that promote human flourishing for students, staff and society. The Institute of Nursing and Health Research at Ulster University, which forms a key component of the School of Nursing and Paramedic Science, is involved in world-leading research and development that enhances the knowledge, expertise and engaged scholarship of nursing, midwifery, public health and the allied health professions. The School is a Gold Athena Swan Award holder and has a wide range of success in educational and research awards. The RCN Northern Ireland Nurse of the Year Nursing Research Award, which is proudly sponsored by the School of Nursing and Paramedic Science at Ulster University, celebrates the achievements of nurses who have undertaken high quality research that has a positive impact on people in our care.



The Queen's University of Belfast

The School of Nursing and Midwifery at the Queen's University of Belfast [QUB] offers an award-winning educational and research experience that seeks to provide a skilled workforce of innovative thinkers, leaders and catalysts for change. Our nurses and midwives drive the highest standards of patient care with a strong value system that is inclusive, respectful and solution focused - making them capable of transforming modern health care. The largest School of Nursing and Midwifery on the island of Ireland, QUB provides a comprehensive suite of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in all disciplines of nursing and midwifery. This includes an innovative two-year graduate entry masters pathway that is inclusive of NMC registration, tailored for applicants with an existing degree. Students are educated in state-of-the-art facilities, learning from an outstanding faculty that works collaboratively with practice partners and members of our Patient and Carer Educational Partnership to enhance the student experience. The school is honoured to celebrate the achievements of exceptional students once again through sponsorship of the RCN Northern Ireland Nurse of the Year Student Award.



HSC Clinical Education Centre and Business Services Organisation

The HSC Clinical Education Centre [CEC] is a regional service of the Business Services Organisation [BSO] which delivers high quality post-registration education to meet the learning and development needs of nurses, midwives and allied health professionals in Northern Ireland. By working collaboratively with customers and stakeholders, the CEC delivers an extensive range of education programmes across different clinical practice settings to support the provision of safe and effective care. A team of highly skilled, professionally registered teaching staff design, deliver and evaluate evidence-based programmes, maximising the use of modern educational approaches to enhance the learning experience for participants. The CEC also offers consultancy services to other organisations from the statutory, voluntary, community and independent sectors. As a BSO service, the CEC is immensely proud to sponsor the RCN Northern Ireland Team Manager of the Year Award for 2026.



Healthcare Ireland

Healthcare Ireland is proud to sponsor the RCN Northern Ireland 2026 Nurse of the Year Health Care Support Worker Award, celebrating the outstanding dedication, skill and compassion of nursing and care assistants across Northern Ireland. As a leading provider of residential, nursing and specialist care, Healthcare Ireland operates a growing network of homes across the region, offering high-quality services tailored to the needs of our residents since 2015. At the heart of our organisation is a deep respect for the nursing and social care profession and a firm belief in investing in our team. We are committed to the ongoing professional development of our nurses and care team, supporting them with access to continuous training, career progression opportunities and a nurturing working environment. The RCN Northern Ireland Nurse of the Year Awards are a chance to shine a light on the exceptional contributions that nursing staff make every day. We are honoured to support this celebration of their compassion and excellence, which are central to the care we provide.



Defence Relationship Management

Every day, nursing reservists in Northern Ireland give twice over, to their patients in civilian health care and to the UK's armed forces, ready to deploy at home and around the world. The Defence Nursing Reservist Award celebrates that extraordinary dual commitment, and we are delighted and proud to sponsor it. Defence Relationship Management [DRM] works to strengthen the connection between defence and employers across Northern Ireland, championing the skills, leadership and resilience that those who serve bring to the workplace. Nurses are the largest professional group within the Defence Medical Services, trained to the highest standards across a comprehensive range of specialisms; from emergency and critical care to primary care, burns and plastics, perioperative practice, paediatrics and mental health. They stand ready to deploy worldwide, whether on military exercises or humanitarian missions across diverse environments. In Northern Ireland, nursing reservists serve across Navy, Army and Air Force reserve units, reflecting the breadth of reserve nursing capability across all three services in the region. Tonight, we celebrate those who wear two uniforms with equal pride. It is a privilege to recognise the very best of Northern Ireland's reserve nursing community.



Macmillan Cancer Support

Macmillan Cancer Support has spent more than 100 years helping people living with cancer. We know that cancer can disrupt your whole life. And it can be made worse simply because of who you are and where you live. But we're here to change that. The number of people diagnosed with cancer is growing, and every one of them needs the best support to meet their unique needs. That's why we'll do whatever it takes to help everyone living with cancer across the UK get the support they need right now and transform cancer care for everyone who will be diagnosed in the future. Macmillan is delighted to sponsor the 2026 RCN Northern Ireland Nurse of the Year Cancer Nurse Award and is delighted to be able to celebrate the achievements of the entire nursing workforce across Northern Ireland.



Kingsbridge Private Hospital

Kingsbridge Private Hospital is proud to support this year's RCN Northern Ireland Nurse of the Year Awards. As part of the Kingsbridge Healthcare Group, we are Northern Ireland's largest private health care provider. Since 2004, we've been delivering high quality medical and surgical care, both privately and in collaboration with the HSC in Northern Ireland and the HSE in the Republic of Ireland. With two state of the art hospitals in Belfast and additional locations in Ballykelly and Sligo, we provide accessible health care across Northern Ireland. We have also recently expanded our footprint with the addition of our Newry Private Clinic facility, further enhancing access to high-quality diagnostics, consultations, and out-patient care for patients in the surrounding region. Our services range from consultations and diagnostics to complex surgeries across a wide variety of specialties. The Lisburn Road hospital is also home to Northern Ireland's first private cardiac surgery and intensive care unit. Beyond our hospital network, the group includes Kingsbridge Training Academy, Kingsbridge Opticians and Hearing Care, and 3fivetwo Healthcare. Through our charitable arm, The Kingsbridge Foundation, we have raised over £1 million to support local causes. With over 1,200 staff and 400 consultants, we remain dedicated to delivering patient-centred care and supporting the communities we serve.



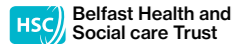
The Ulster Independent Clinic

The Ulster Independent Clinic is pleased to support the RCN Northern Ireland Nurse of the Year Awards 2026, recognising the commitment, leadership and professionalism of nurses throughout Northern Ireland. Every day, nurses make a lasting difference to patients and their families. Through their leadership, they support those around them, advocate for the profession and help shape how care is delivered. At the Ulster Independent Clinic, patient care has guided everything we do for more than 45 years, and we see first-hand the compassion and expertise nurses bring to each moment of care. Congratulations to all nominees and winners on their achievements and the positive contribution they continue to make to healthcare in Northern Ireland.

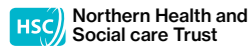


Department of Health

The Department's mission is to work with colleagues across the HSC to improve the health and social well-being of the people of Northern Ireland. It has a statutory responsibility to promote an integrated system of health and social care designed to secure improvement in physical and mental health, the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of illness, and the social well-being of the people in Northern Ireland. The Department is currently working with these partners to develop a new neighbourhood model for primary, community and social care, which will deliver greater levels of care for citizens, including children and families, in their communities, this is an important enabler for the commitment to shift care out of hospitals and provide support closer to home. This model will see Community Pharmacy, GPs and their Federations, Voluntary and Community organisations, HSC Trusts, Nursing, independent providers, other statutory bodies and Local Government working closely together in formal partnership to provide integrated care. It will facilitate a preventative approach to healthcare and help to manage demand more effectively. The shift left to a Neighbourhood Model of Health and Wellbeing will realise benefits for patients, service users and the system by caring for more people closer to home and reducing duplication. The promotion and support of nurses and midwives remains one of the key aspects for the Department and forms the backbone of the health and social care system in Northern Ireland. The Department's Chief Nursing Officer Group, under the leadership of the Chief Nursing Officer [CNO] Maria McIlgorm, provides professional advice and direction on all issues relating to nursing and has recently launched the Refreshed Delivering Care Policy Framework which strengthens guidance for Trusts and commissioners on workforce and workload planning across all Nursing and Midwifery settings. It supports a culture of safety, improves staff wellbeing, and promotes a more evidence-based approach to determining staffing requirements and closely aligns with the implementation of CNOs vision, Shaping our Future: A Vision for Nursing and Midwifery in Northern Ireland.



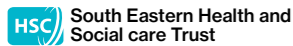
Belfast Health and Social Care Trust



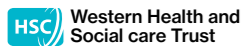
Northern Health and Social Care Trust



Southern Health and Social Care Trust



South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust



Western Health and Social Care Trust

The Directors of Nursing in the five health and social care trusts created an award to recognise nurses and midwives in leadership roles who have demonstrated a passion for developing their leadership, professionalism, innovation and creativity alongside effective influencing skills. The five health and social care trusts provide integrated health and social care services across Northern Ireland. Each trust manages and administers hospitals, the delivery of health care in community settings, health centres, residential homes, day centres and other health and social care facilities, providing a wide range of services. The Director of Nursing of each trust is responsible and accountable for the delivery of nursing and midwifery care, and the RCN is grateful to them for supporting the Directors of

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STUDENT AWARD

Sponsored by the Queen's University of Belfast

Judges: Kenda Crozier, The Queen's University of Belfast; Katy Rennick, Department of Health; Maureen Dolan, RCN Northern Ireland Board



Andrew Adair
The Queen's University of Belfast

Andrew has demonstrated exceptional leadership, innovation and compassion through the development of a personal and sexual relationship education programme for people with learning disabilities. This was initiated in response to a significant rise in adult safeguarding referrals to community nursing teams. Many of these referrals highlighted gaps in individuals' understanding of relationships, consent, online safety and personal boundaries. Recognising this unmet need, Andrew designed a programme aimed at improving safety, autonomy, and confidence. The programme is structured around four accessible themes; relationships, consent, online safety, and sexual health. Each has been carefully adapted using simple language, visual resources, and relatable scenarios to enhance accessibility. Patients report that they value the safe and supportive environment that Andrew fostered and particularly appreciate the social aspect, including meeting peers, learning together and sharing experiences. This has reduced anxiety, built confidence, and strengthened relationships. Staff working with the patients describe the programme as highly beneficial. They have noted improvements in understanding of personal safety, clearer awareness of boundaries, and increased confidence in identifying unsafe situations. They also report that patients are now engaging in more open and honest conversations about personal and sexual relationships. Other student nurses who supported the programme commend Andrew for his inclusive approach, strong organisation, and the supportive learning environment. Andrew's nominator adds: "His portfolio demonstrates critical thinking, strong research skills, and a clear ability to translate theoretical knowledge into meaningful, practical outcomes".



Michaela Devine
Ulster University

Michaela's commitment to person-centred care is rooted in her community involvement and leadership, before and throughout her nursing programme. Michaela founded a local young women's group, which evolved into a cross-community and cross-border initiative. It promotes inclusion, confidence and mutual understanding among young women from diverse backgrounds. Through leading this initiative, Michaela strengthened her ability to advocate and challenge inequality, principles that are central to person-centred practice. In recognition, she received a Young Woman of the Year award from Derry City Council. Michaela remains committed to being a voice within her community, advocating for people and challenging the inequalities they face. Earlier in her journey, Michaela also volunteered with Foyle Search and Rescue, supporting families and communities during times of crisis. This experience deepened her compassion, resilience and understanding of the emotional impact of sudden loss and trauma. These qualities were developed during her nursing studies, reflected in assessments commending her dignity, communication and sensitivity in vulnerable situations. She works closely with Foyle Hospice, raising funds to support palliative and end of life care for patients and their families. This reflects her commitment not only to addressing clinical need but also to recognising and responding to the wider social determinants of health and well-being. Michaela has achieved the Dean's List award for two consecutive years in recognition of her academic excellence. More recently, she received the Agnes Jones Gift of Nursing Award at Ulster University. Michaela's nominator comments: "Her journey has shaped the nurse she aspires to be; dedicated to supporting individuals holistically and delivering care with integrity and compassion".

NURSING RESEARCH AWARD

Sponsored by Ulster University

Judges: Professor Tanya McCance, Ulster University; Gillian McCorkell, RCN Northern Ireland Research and Quality Network; Simon Higgs, RCN Northern Ireland Board



Dr Sophie Crooks
Lecturer
The Queen's University of Belfast

Sophie's research represents the first all-Ireland study comprehensively to explore public awareness, perceptions and stigma associated with Parkinson's Disease, alongside the lived experiences of people with the disease, their carers and specialist nurses. Despite being the fastest growing neurological condition globally, little was known about how the public in Ireland understands the condition or how this influences the daily lives of those living with it. Sophie's research included a published international scoping review, and subsequent systematic review, exploring stigma and the psychosocial impact of Parkinson's Disease, a public survey, qualitative interviews with patients and carers, and interviews and focus groups with specialist nurses. This revealed significant knowledge gaps, persistent misconceptions (including the belief that Parkinson's Disease is contagious and a normal part of ageing), and substantial psychosocial consequences, including stigma, social withdrawal and loss of autonomy. The research also identified public sympathy and readiness for engagement, highlighting opportunities for targeted education and policy development. Sophie's findings provide a framework for reducing stigma and improving the quality of life for people living with Parkinson's Disease across Ireland. She has also demonstrated that, despite knowledge gaps, public attitudes are not uniformly negative. Many respondents expressed sympathy and willingness to support people with Parkinson's Disease, suggesting that structured education and awareness campaigns could meaningfully reduce stigma and improve community inclusion. Sophie's findings also reinforce the role of Parkinson's Disease nurse specialists in advocacy and community education.



Dr Andrea Shepherd
Senior lecturer and Deputy Head of School of Nursing and Paramedic Science
Ulster University

Andrea's nomination focuses on her pioneering person-centred research that advances understanding of families' experiences of brain-computer interface [BCI] technology. Her research explored how families experience the use of this technology for people living with disorders of consciousness or locked-in syndrome. As neurotechnology becomes increasingly visible in specialist services, nurses are centrally involved in supporting families through assessment processes, communication attempts and complex decision-making. However, prior to Andrea's study, family experience during real-time BCI use had not been examined. For families, the possibility of re-establishing communication represents hope for reconnection, even when communication is uncertain. This generates hope and vulnerability, alongside the distressing awareness that such potential might not materialise or could be withdrawn. Family members recorded video and audio diaries during their relative's BCI sessions. Analysis was undertaken and the findings were further developed through a workshop including family and professional participants. Andrea identified four themes: tension between the known and unknown; movement from sorrow to hope; reconnection to the person and personhood; and planning for the future. The findings led to the development of a new nursing and education-relevant conceptual framework providing guidance for ethically grounded and person-centred practice in this area. She determined that nurse-led person-centred frameworks can successfully guide practice in emerging and technically complex fields. Andrea also showed how nurses play a critical interpretive and supportive role when technology mediates communication. Finally, she demonstrated that the family voice must be embedded in neurotechnology service design, evaluation, and governance.

2026 NURSE OF THE YEAR AWARDS PROGRAMME



DIRECTORS OF NURSING AWARD

Sponsored by the HSC trusts

Judges: David Robinson, South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust; Grace Hamilton, Southern Health and Social Care Trust; Anne Campbell, RCN Northern Ireland



Mary Jo Thompson
Assistant Director of Cancer
South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mary Jo's nominator describes her as a passionate leader who is committed to supporting collective leadership within her teams. Mary Jo not only understands whole system population health needs but plans services around them. This was demonstrated when she co-led the trust flow work and establishment of a robust site co-ordination model, as well as the transition of Thompson House from a learning disability facility to providing specialist medical care. Mary Jo has championed senior nurses in all her areas of responsibility to ensure that professional standards are maintained, also building the capability of nursing staff and creating new pathways for learning and development. She is leading and championing a new red flag nurse-led service for dermatology, recruiting three new consultant nurses and with plans to recruit a wider team of specialist nurses, staff nurses and health care assistants to support the new service. Mary Jo empowers her teams. Her ability to communicate effectively and influence through partnership working has helped her lead the trust-wide modernisation of out-patient services, generating increased capacity and greater accountability. Mary Jo also led a number of high profile estates projects, such as the Macmillan state of the art chemotherapy unit and the refocusing of dermatology and neurology services, repurposing the previous emergency department into a unit that is integral to these services. Her nominator adds: "There is no doubt that one of Mary Jo's strongest skills is her ability to communicate clearly, influence others constructively, and demonstrate leadership impact at team, organisational or system level."



Claire Kerr
Lead nurse, adult mental health services
Western Health and Social Care Trust

Claire's nomination focuses on her role in enhancing mental health services across the Western Trust. She established a senior nurse forum to share learning and improve patient outcomes. The forum also allows senior nurses to address professional nursing issues collaboratively. Adult mental health services within the trust are experiencing challenges, both in terms of the level of demand and the acuity of patients. To help address this, Claire led the development of Rathview House Assessment Unit, a six-bedded unit designed to improve the assessment of patients experiencing an acute mental health crisis and thereby avoid unnecessary hospital admission. The unit admits between 200-250 patients annually, 78% of which are successfully discharged to a community pathway. Claire has implemented a successful induction and preceptorship programme for newly-qualified nurses. She has also strengthened multidisciplinary team structures within adult mental health services to ensure that patients receive care appropriate to their individual needs. Claire led the development of a business case to secure investment in nursing roles to meet current pressures and reduce reliance on agency staff. This resulted in the creation of 24 additional nursing posts, with 18 already filled. She played a leading role in a recent Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority [RQIA] review of acute in-patient services, which produced positive feedback. The RQIA particularly commended the visibility of acute mental health nursing leadership across the trust. Claire also represents adult mental health nursing both within the trust and regionally.

HEALTH CARE SUPPORT WORKER AWARD

Sponsored by Healthcare Ireland

Judges: Mandy Mitchell, Healthcare Ireland; Professor Michael Brown, RCN Fellow; Donna Gallagher, RCN Northern Ireland Board



Jacqueline Williams
Health care support worker
South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Jacqueline joined the cancer services Macmillan unit nursing team in the South Eastern Trust in 2020. As an indispensable member of both the nursing and wider multidisciplinary teams, her commitment to delivering high-quality person-centred care for people affected by cancer is unwavering. Jacqueline demonstrates compassion, professionalism and a deep respect for the dignity and individuality of every cancer patient and their family. She recognises the complex and emotional impact of cancer, not only on patients but also on their families, to whom she provides holistic person-centred care and support. Jacqueline also refers patients and their families as appropriate to services such as the Macmillan information and support team. Patients frequently express how her kindness, reassuring manner and compassion have helped reduce their anxiety and enabled them to access additional information and support. Jacqueline understands the increased vulnerability of cancer patients and takes personal responsibility for minimising risk, while also role modelling and actively encouraging colleagues to maintain best practice and high standards. Her dedication and passion for ensuring the highest standards of infection prevention and control is exemplary, proactively ensuring that the clinical and patient environments remain clean, safe and comfortable. Jacqueline is deeply committed to her own personal development, actively seeking opportunities to expand her knowledge and skills. She has undertaken additional training to support patient care in areas such as delirium, domestic abuse and anaphylaxis. Jacqueline's nominator cites her "passion for delivering the highest standards of person-centred care" and "her dedication, professionalism and heartfelt commitment to improving care for cancer patients".



Micky Glenn
Health care assistant
Western Health and Social Care Trust

Micky's nomination reflects his exceptional standards of care and unwavering commitment to the dignity, comfort, and well-being of every patient. These qualities are reflected whether assisting with mobility, navigating a difficult conversation, or simply sitting with someone who needs a moment of reassurance. His nominator describes Micky as a genuine advocate, consistently alert to signs of discomfort, confusion, or distress, and quick to communicate these to nursing and medical staff in order to ensure prompt attention. His vigilance is particularly important with older and more vulnerable patients, for whom feeling unheard or overlooked can profoundly affect their experience of care. In moments of uncertainty or distress, he offers family members appropriate reassurance, information and emotional support, understanding that when a loved one is unwell, the people around them need care too. Micky fosters mutual respect, generosity, and co-operation within the team. He became a super user for the implementation of the Encompass system, working proactively to ensure that his departmental colleagues felt supported and prepared, as well as arranging a successful dedicated teaching session. His nominator concludes: "Micky represents the very best of what a health care assistant can be. He brings skill, compassion, advocacy, and leadership to every aspect of his role. He makes patients feel safe, colleagues feel supported, and the department a better place to work and to receive care. He is, quite simply, an outstanding individual."



HEALTH CARE SUPPORT WORKER AWARD

Sponsored by Healthcare Ireland

Judges: Mandy Mitchell, Healthcare Ireland; Professor Michael Brown, RCN Fellow; Donna Gallagher, RCN Northern Ireland Board



Charlene Miller

Health care assistant
Western Health and Social Care Trust

Charlene is a member of the ophthalmology team at Altnagelvin Area Hospital. Her nominator describes her as the “epitome of what a health care support worker should be” and praises her compassion, dedication, professionalism, teamwork and unwavering commitment to excellence in ophthalmic care. Charlene goes above and beyond for patients, staff and families on a daily basis, while going about her work quietly and efficiently. Her attention to detail and calm approach inspire the confidence of patients, carers and her colleagues. She is a supportive and reliable team member who contributes positively to the caring environment. Working within ophthalmology can be particularly challenging. Many patients and carers arrive feeling anxious, vulnerable and frightened about their vision, uncertain about their diagnosis, procedures or the possibility of sight loss. Charlene has a remarkable ability to put patients at ease. Beyond providing high quality patient care, she anticipates and pre-empts the needs of her colleagues during busy clinics. She maintains high infection control standards and ensures that all equipment and clinical areas are prepared efficiently. Her reliability and strong work ethic help the department run smoothly, even under pressure. Her nominator says: “What truly sets Charlene apart is her understanding that ophthalmic care is not just about eyes but the whole holistic pathway of the patient, which includes their independence, confidence and quality of life. She has built up a rapport with patients who have frequent appointments and look forward to seeing her on every visit.”

PALLIATIVE CARE AWARD

Sponsored by Marie Curie

Judges: Wendy McGowan, Marie Curie; Paula Henaghan, Marie Curie; Anne Campbell, RCN Northern Ireland Board



Marie Donnelly

Marie Curie advanced nurse practitioner in palliative care
Western Health and Social Care Trust

Marie identified a gap in service provision whereby patients who were approaching the end of life did not always have timely access to anticipatory medication for pain and symptom management in the primary care setting. Her motivation was to reduce the resulting distress, discomfort and unnecessary hospital admissions for patients in the community. In 2021, Marie led the formation of a group of stakeholders with the aim of developing and embedding the ‘Just in Case Service’, using a quality improvement approach to develop resources and education. This service focuses upon the early identification of need, collaborative team working, individualised evidence-based care, patient autonomy, the timely management of symptoms at the end of life, supporting the person to die at home if that is their wish, and proactive planning. Marie delivered partnership working and engagement throughout the initiative, responding and listening to patients and providing professional feedback. Marie has faced many challenges but has been innovative in overcoming them. She subsequently developed a bespoke ‘Just in Case’ booklet, a resource that has now replaced standard regional documentation in order to meet more effectively the needs of service users. She climbed Mount Kilimanjaro to raise funding for the booklet and is linking with the HSC Business Services Organisation to secure sustainable procurement. The initiative has been successfully evaluated and implemented across community care settings since 2023. It is now being implemented more widely across the HSC.



Maria Betts

Advanced nurse practitioner in district nursing
Northern Health and Social Care Trust

The Northern Trust covers the largest geographical area in Northern Ireland, with the highest number of people aged over-65 and over 1,000 more deaths last year than any other HSC trust. Marie Curie estimates that the community could account for over half (55%) of all deaths by 2040. Maria supports district nurses in their palliative care keyworker role, ensuring that care is co-ordinated and individualised, based on the needs of the patient and their family. She manages a range of conditions, including motor neurone disease, dementia, cancer and frailty. Maria facilitates advanced care planning conversations, understanding what matters most to the patient. She collaborates with GPs, Marie Curie, hospices, allied health professionals and other voluntary organisations. Maria is an autonomous practitioner, with advanced assessment, diagnostic, analytical and clinical judgement skills, providing symptom management, cultural sensitivity, and spiritual and emotional support. She supports district nursing teams to identify when someone may be approaching the end of life and initiates sensitive conversations about anticipatory prescribing. Maria prescribes palliative medicines in collaboration with the patient, using shared decision-making to agree person-centred care plans to manage their symptoms. The ability to assess and prescribe at home reduces carer stress and unnecessary suffering. Maria works with unpaid caregivers, enabling them to keep their loved ones at home. Positive feedback from her district nursing colleagues, patients and their families demonstrates the impact of the support and knowledge she provides. Maria’s commitment to quality palliative and end of life care ensures that patients and their families experience positive palliative journeys.

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Royal College of Nursing
Northern Ireland

PATIENT'S CHOICE AWARD

Sponsored by Kingsbridge Private Hospital

Judges: Claire Winter, Kingsbridge Healthcare Group; Ashling Green, Kingsbridge Healthcare Group; Loretta Gribben, RCN Northern Ireland Board



Carolann McLaughlin
Breast care nurse
Western Health and Social Care Trust

Carolann has been nominated by a patient at Altnagelvin Hospital who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2025. The impact of this news was heightened as she was 25 weeks pregnant with her first baby at the time. The patient notes how, right from the first day, she found Carolann to be a source of reassurance, very good at explaining everything and offering hope of a good outcome. Since then, the patient has been liaising with a breast care surgeon regarding her surgery options, oncology (as she began chemotherapy whilst pregnant), maternity care and genetics counselling. Throughout this journey, Carolann has kept in constant contact and even checked in with the maternity ward on the day the patient delivered her daughter. The nominator adds how Carolann has highlighted various support options and self-care retreats that are available in Northern Ireland and explains how this had given her something to look forward to now that the baby has been safely delivered. The judging panel noted Carolann's women-centred approach and her readiness to go the extra mile in pursuit of high standards of care and providing reassurance to women and their families.



Kathy Soutar
Mental health nurse
Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Kathy has been nominated by a patient who commends how the care she provided was shaped around the patient as an individual, rather than around a system, a checklist, or "what was expected". The patient comments: "In mental health care, you can be surrounded by medication, therapy and services, yet still feel unseen. What I learned through Kathy is that one of the most empowering parts of recovery is the relationship itself; the patience, consistency and genuine care it takes to build trust. Kathy understood this instinctively." The patient explains how she felt listened to and respected. This enabled her to seek the treatment she needed. She comments. "I never felt rushed, judged, or reduced to a diagnosis. Importantly, I didn't feel shame with her; something that so often accompanies mental health experiences. Instead, I felt accepted and treated with dignity, which allowed me to engage in my care in a way I had not been able to before." The patient concludes: "Mental health nursing is not always visible, but it is profoundly demanding work. It requires emotional strength, patience, and the ability to sit with distress, uncertainty, and deeply personal life stories, often without immediate answers. The importance of this work cannot be overstated. Kathy carried this responsibility with compassion, gentleness and grace. I am not sure Kathy ever truly knew the impact she had on me, and I am certain I am not the only person she has supported in this way." The judging panel commended Kathy's capacity to put the patient at the centre of care and her determination to build and sustain trusting relationships with those to whom she provides support.

PUBLIC HEALTH AWARD

Sponsored by the Public Health Agency

Judges: Mary Frances McManus, Department of Health; Amber McLoughlin, Public Health Agency; Briege Quinn, RCN Northern Ireland Board Chair



Roisin Curry, consultant nurse, public health
Victoria Page, specialist community public health nurse
Western Health and Social Care Trust

Roisin and Victoria identified a significant gap in services for the increasing number of individuals seeking international protection within the Western Trust in recent years. During 2024, they developed a nurse-led service providing health assessments for new entrants to ensure the early identification of needs and appropriate referral for health protection and/or screening. During 2024-2025, 75 assessments were completed, increasing to 108 in 2025-2026. Roisin and Victoria brought together organisations covering health, housing, education, local government and justice to share expertise and discuss the management of complex cases. They support and encourage integration within communities by striving to create and implement a neighbourhood model of care, as envisaged in the Department of Health's HSC reset plan, working directly with communities to reduce health inequalities. Roisin and Victoria collaborate with community groups to plan and deliver programmes promoting health and well-being, integration and inclusion. Health needs assessments identified that more than half of the women needed advice on cervical screening. This led to a wider focus on women's health, with screening and education related to female genital mutilation, a cervical cancer screening information day, and breast care awareness campaigns. Victoria holds regular drop-in health clinics in two locations. Roisin and Victoria also offer support and advice for trust staff and external organisations. Their nominator points out that their work is greatly appreciated by all those whom they support and quotes a service user who said: "I would not have been treated with such kindness in my own country as you are doing for us".



Sandra Aitcheson
Strategic lead for health care (ageing well)
Public Health Agency

Sandra is an exceptional nursing leader whose career has enhanced the health and wellbeing of older people across Northern Ireland through her strategic vision, collaborative working and commitment to improving outcomes and experience of care. Her pioneering work in stroke care positioned Northern Ireland at the forefront of evidence-based practice. She founded the Northern Ireland Multidisciplinary Association of Stroke Teams (NIMAST), strengthening collaboration and research-informed practice, and later led the regional stroke strategy, establishing specialist stroke services. Sandra's leadership in health improvement for older people is exemplified through establishing the Northern Ireland Frailty Network in partnership with older people, ensuring evidence and lived experience drive system change. The network has enhanced health and well-being through prevention, earlier frailty identification, and workforce education. Building on this, her leadership of the regional falls prevention initiative translated public health evidence into system-wide action, demonstrating that falls, the leading cause of injury-related mortality in people over-75, are preventable. Sandra delivered a targeted care home programme that achieved a 30% reduction in falls. During the pandemic, Sandra co-ordinated support for care homes, providing visible and compassionate leadership to protect residents, and separately led the safe reinstatement of visiting while balancing infection control with emotional well-being. Sandra plays a strategic role in planning, quality improvement, workforce development and service delivery, supporting district nursing transformation and providing oversight of palliative care. Her nominator says: "A unifying, innovative and compassionate leader, Sandra continues to shape a culture of learning and excellence across Northern Ireland. Her achievements in stroke care, frailty improvement, falls prevention and strategic public health leadership have had a profound and lasting impact."

2026 NURSE OF THE YEAR AWARDS PROGRAMME



INDEPENDENT SECTOR NURSING AWARD

Sponsored by Balmoral Healthcare

Judges: Angela Ballantine, Balmoral Healthcare; Professor Martin Bradley, RCN Fellow; Ann Butler, RCN Northern Ireland Board



Emma Turner
Registered manager
MD Healthcare

Emma is the registered manager of Rathmena House Nursing Home in Ballyclare. Her nomination reflects the vision, clinical excellence and compassion she has demonstrated by leading the development of a specialist respiratory service that supports residents with complex tracheostomy needs, care traditionally delivered in acute hospitals. This innovative model has reduced hospital length of stay and prevented avoidable admissions, while enhancing residents' quality of life, autonomy and well-being. At the heart of Emma's practice is a strong commitment to evidence-based care. She integrates current respiratory and tracheostomy management guidelines into practice, ensuring robust infection prevention, airway management and emergency response protocols. She has led the creation of bespoke care pathways tailored to each resident, combining clinical precision with dignity and compassion. Her approach is underpinned by continuous audit, reflective practice and service evaluation, demonstrating measurable improvements in clinical outcomes, reduced hospital re-admissions and enhanced patient satisfaction. Emma has helped design and deliver comprehensive training programmes and competency frameworks, empowering colleagues with the knowledge and confidence to deliver this highly specialised care. She actively involves residents and their families in decision-making, ensuring that care plans reflect clinical need and personal preference. Families describe the reassurance they feel knowing that their loved one is receiving expert and compassionate care close to home. Emma's nominator says: "Her integrity and commitment have not only improved outcomes for residents and families but have also set a benchmark for respiratory care within the independent sector in Northern Ireland".



Caroline McIvor
Community nurse specialist in palliative care
Foyle Hospice

Caroline's nomination focuses on her achievements in fully utilising her prescribing qualification, demonstrating a positive impact upon care. The last few years have highlighted gaps in the care provided to palliative patients in their own homes. One of the main barriers has been access to the timely prescribing and dispensing of palliative medication. Medical and non-medical prescribers employed in the voluntary and independent sector are unable to issue standard health service prescriptions (known as HS21s) in community settings. Facilitating prescribing in the community by hospice employed qualified staff would facilitate timely access to palliative medicines for patients and therefore prompt symptom management in the end stages of life. Caroline is the only qualified non-medical prescribing nurse within the hospice community team and has been instrumental to the success of a pathfinder project established in March 2024. This involved Caroline issuing HS21 prescriptions to patients living in their own homes or within a care home setting, rather than asking a GP to do so. Caroline contributed to the evaluation of the service and also provided qualitative feedback which gave valuable insights for analysis and reporting. Data shows that HS21 prescribing in the community significantly reduces the time required for a patient to obtain a prescription and their medicines from an average of four hours and 43 minutes to 30 minutes. This reduces the burden for the patient and their family during a distressing time. As a result of the success of the project, HS21 prescribing is now being implemented as standard practice by all hospice settings throughout Northern Ireland.

CHIEF NURSING OFFICER RISING STAR AWARD

Sponsored by the Department of Health

Judges: Andrew Webb, Department of Health; Anne Marie Marley, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust; Lidia Teague, RCN Northern Ireland Board



Lucy Duke
Child and adolescent mental health service nurse
Southern Health and Social Care Trust

Lucy chose an area of nursing practice that is physically, intellectually and emotionally demanding, working in child and adolescent mental health services [CAMHS] for children with intellectual disabilities. Many of these children are autistic, do not use words, and are anxious about everyday situations. They often have multiple medical conditions and high levels of concerning behaviour. Lucy's nominator describes her as "a compelling communicator, advocating for children in tense and demanding multi-professional environments, where expectations and stress levels are high". The many tributes from the families of children for whom Lucy has provided care include: "I cannot put into words how grateful we are for Lucy. During an incredibly difficult and worrying time, when our son was out of school, Lucy was a constant source of support and reassurance for our family. Lucy is always mindful of my son's needs and has consistently checked in on him, never letting him feel overlooked. Knowing that Lucy understands him has meant more to us than she will ever know". Lucy builds the confidence and skills of children and their families, which in turn helps to reduce the need for psychotropic medication. She approaches clinical practice with thoughtful analysis and a solution-focused mindset. Her nominator concludes: "The pace of Lucy's professional growth is inspiring, and she stands for the next generation of nursing leadership in Northern Ireland; clinically excellent, values-led, and deeply committed to improving outcomes for those most in need."



Patrina Loughran
Staff nurse
Southern Health and Social Care Trust

Patrina's nominator describes her as "a fabulous role model for learning disability nursing" and "a valued and respected member of the team". Patrina actively and passionately promotes learning disability nursing and embraces opportunities to develop her knowledge and skills, including undertaking a Master's degree in advanced professional practice (intellectual disabilities). Patrina takes pride in supporting others in delivering safe and effective care. She has created a learning disability information file to improve awareness of issues relevant to this area of practice, and is working alongside Queen's University to develop a serious game on autism awareness. Patrina is committed to breaking down barriers and creating positive changes in the lives of people with a learning disability. She has initiated a communication station with resources to support individuals to communicate in an appropriate and accessible format, including a Makaton 'sign of the week' session. She has also co-produced a monthly activity calendar. Patrina ensures that service users are closely involved in any project undertaken. She also strives to support other nurses and nursing students. As co-lead of the RCN Northern Ireland Newly-Registered Nurse Network, Patrina takes an active role in highlighting the needs of these nurses and promotes their contributions to health care. She has researched and subsequently advocated for increased support, including for changes to the current preceptorship programme. Her nominator concludes: "Patrina epitomises what a rising star within the field of learning disability nursing is, and is fully deserving of recognition for the ongoing dedication and commitment she provides to this population".

2026 NURSE OF THE YEAR AWARDS PROGRAMME



TEAM MANAGER AWARD

Sponsored by the HSC Clinical Education Centre, Business Services Organisation

Judges: Heather Finlay, HSC Clinical Education Centre; Louise Van Der Linde, HSC Clinical Education Centre; Linsey Sheerin, RCN Northern Ireland Board



Bernie Farrell
Community services manager
Evora Hospice Care

Under Bernie's leadership, and having led the community team for five years, the out-of-hours nursing service at Evora Hospice in Newry has developed into a compassionate and clinically robust service. Her management has created an environment in which patients receive person-centred care, families feel supported during difficult moments, and staff are encouraged to grow in confidence and capability. Bernie places great importance on the well-being and development of her team, helping nurses feel assured when managing complex symptoms or responding to anxious or distressed families. This has fostered a working culture where staff feel valued and motivated to deliver high-quality care. She encourages the early recognition of deterioration, timely intervention and close collaboration with the multidisciplinary team, reducing avoidable hospital admissions, improving symptom control, and enabling more patients to remain in their preferred place of care. Feedback highlights the reassurance and stability provided by the out-of-hours team, particularly during times of heightened anxiety. Families report feeling informed, supported, and respected, reflecting the culture Bernie has established. Her focus on partnership working and continuous improvement ensures that the service remains responsive and person-centred. Her nominator states: "Bernie Farrell is an exceptional team manager who motivates and develops her staff, demonstrates strong leadership, and has raised the standard of care across the service. Her influence is evident in the confidence of her team, the quality of care delivered, and the trust placed in the service by patients and families."



Nuala O'Connell
Ward sister
Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Nuala comes from a large family of nurses and has a strong sporting background. These factors have been instrumental in forging her as a leader and manager. She manages a team of 40 staff in an acute 21 bedded surgical ward alongside a 24-hour emergency surgical assessment unit at Antrim Area Hospital. Nuala consistently demonstrates her ability to motivate, support and develop staff whilst achieving the delivery of a high standard of care to patients. She launched 'handle with care' an initiative enabling staff who feel, due to personal or work circumstances, that they are struggling on a particular day to speak confidentially to a colleague. This enables them to receive additional support, ensuring they feel safe at work and also having a positive impact on the delivery of patient care. Staff development is at the forefront of Nuala's priorities. She provides daily feedback to staff and is constantly seeking development opportunities for staff, through holding debriefings following an event or an incident, and both leading and facilitating teaching sessions on the ward. Recently Nuala, has initiated the introduction of flexible visiting to benefit the patients and their relatives. She reviewed relevant research and utilised her own personal experience and those of patients. She gathered information from patients, considered and discussed options with the team, and developed information leaflets and posters to promote the flexible visiting model. Her nominator adds: "Nuala truly is an amazing asset to the service and continually champions for patients and staff".

LEARNING IN PRACTICE AWARD

Sponsored by The Open University

Judges: Paul Carlin, The Open University; Karen Templeton, The Open University; Connie Mitchell, RCN Northern Ireland Board



Nerell Browne and Emily Morgan
Practice education facilitators
Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Nerell and Emily support newly-qualified nurses within the Northern Trust's Medicine Division. They were appointed two years ago to enhance preceptorship and thereby help reduce the attrition of newly-qualified nurses. Nerell and Emily have promoted a positive cultural change in attitudes towards preceptorship, and data demonstrates a significant improvement in staff attrition within the first six months in post. Most newly-qualified nurses now complete preceptorship within this period and those that require additional support are afforded the time they need. Nerell and Emily enhance the psychological safety of newly-qualified nurses, ensuring that they can speak openly and safely, with supportive opportunities to voice concerns and issues. They have updated trust policy on preceptorship, ensuring that regional guidelines are applied, and that data and assurance reporting records are maintained. Feedback reflects their professionalism, passion for nurse education and drive to ensure that all newly-qualified nurses receive a rewarding preceptorship experience. A ward manager comments: "Nerell and Emily are very visible on the ward and offer support to all involved in the preceptorship process, including the ward managers. The support that they give is invaluable". A newly-qualified nurse adds: "Emily's support has been amazing and comforting. I've only been in post for two weeks and I am really happy with all the support I have received. Nerell has been very supportive. She shows empathy and compassion, which is very much appreciated".



Gary Mitchell, Director of Postgraduate Taught Education
Kieran McCormick, Honorary Lecturer
The Queen's University of Belfast

Gary and Kieran have been nominated on the basis of the exceptional learning and development support that they provide, outside their core responsibilities, to nursing and midwifery students through co-founding and leading the Ambition to Success programme at Queen's University. Now in its second year, this programme is a competitive and voluntary nine-month enrichment programme for second and third year nursing and midwifery students, delivered in addition to the formal curriculum. Gary and Kieran designed and lead the programme, delivering eight evening workshops and providing mentorship throughout the academic year. Their support goes far beyond structured teaching. They coach student-led teams working on real health and social care priorities, offering guidance on project design, ethical considerations, stakeholder engagement, evaluation methods and public dissemination. They meet regularly with students, providing detailed feedback and remaining accessible during placement and periods of academic pressure. Under their mentorship, students develop leadership capability, resilience and professional confidence, while producing tangible improvements in public health education and longer-term care practice. Within the programme, specific campaigns have addressed smoking and vaping prevention, brain health promotion, restrictive practice education and diabetes management. Four participants have been shortlisted for national nursing awards. Two progressed to MSc programmes and two secured funded PhD fellowships. Participating students have collectively raised around £2,000 for community causes. Their nominator points out: "By investing their time and professional trust, Gary and Kieran have strengthened student retention, built changemakers within nursing and midwifery, and delivered measurable benefits for patients, communities and the future workforce in Northern Ireland".

2026 NURSE OF THE YEAR AWARDS PROGRAMME



CANCER NURSE AWARD

Sponsored by Macmillan Cancer Support

Judges: Rachel Loughins, Macmillan Cancer Support; Lorna Nevin, Public Health Agency; Karen Craig, RCN Northern Ireland Board



Jill Kennedy

Sarcoma clinical nurse specialist
South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Receiving a sarcoma diagnosis is often associated with psychosocial difficulties. Sarcoma patients often have a poor quality of life and can suffer from social isolation. In 2018, Jill was appointed as the first sarcoma clinical nurse specialist within the South Eastern Trust. This innovative service was developed through a regional partnership with the (former) Health and Social Care Board, the Northern Ireland Cancer Network [NICaN], The Boom Foundation and Sarcoma UK. Jill established and now leads the sarcoma clinical nurse specialist service. Her vision, passion and resilience have been instrumental in the development of equitable access to high quality person-centred services. Jill plays a pivotal role in the rapid assessment and treatment of sarcoma patients across the trust and regionally. She delivers comprehensive holistic person-centred care, demonstrating her commitment to ensuring that patients and their families feel supported, informed, and empowered throughout their cancer journey. Jill has helped optimise clinical resources by freeing up consultant appointments for new patients, ensuring continuity of care and providing holistic assessment and support through nurse-led review clinics. She has successfully implemented health and well-being events to support patients and their families, and help them live with their cancer diagnosis. Jill has recently completed a Master's degree, exploring the post-surgical psychosocial needs of patients diagnosed with soft tissue sarcoma. The judging panel commended Jill's person-centred approach and her advocacy for nurse-led clinics.



Edel Aughey

Macmillan consultant nurse
Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Edel has practised within oncology for over thirty years, pioneering advanced nursing roles within Northern Ireland. She was the first oncology nurse practitioner working across HSC trust boundaries to shape new forms of follow-up for patients. Edel began her current post as the first consultant nurse for breast cancer within the Belfast Trust oncology service. At the heart of her practice is a deep understanding that cancer affects every aspect of a person's life, not just their physical health. She takes the time to understand each patient as an individual, considering their emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual needs alongside their clinical care. Whether arranging additional support, providing reassurance during difficult moments, or simply sitting and listening, she ensures that every patient feels seen, valued, and supported. As a leader, Edel promotes this ethos across her team. Working alongside clinical colleagues, she has advanced nursing roles within oncology, driving the delivery of primary and secondary breast cancer care at both service and strategic levels. Edel's leadership has shaped new ways of working, including undertaking patient assessment for chemotherapy, review and follow-up, and also formulating the first oncology nursing consent process for patients receiving chemotherapy. Edel's nominator comments: "Her professional credibility is evident in everything she does. Edel is respected by colleagues for her clinical expertise, professionalism, and integrity. She continually seeks opportunities to develop her practice and improve services, demonstrating her commitment to excellence." The judging panel described Edel as an ambassador for cancer nursing and commended her passion for promoting equality of access to services.

LEADERSHIP AWARD

Sponsored by the Ulster Independent Clinic

Judges: Diane Graham, Ulster Independent Clinic; Professor Sonja McIlfrack, RCN Fellow; Kate Ward Courtney, RCN Northern Ireland Board



Lorna Nevin

Nurse consultant
Public Health Agency

Lorna is an exceptional nurse leader whose influence is felt across every level of cancer services in Northern Ireland. Her credibility, compassion and commitment to improving outcomes for people affected by cancer have earned her deep respect. Lorna's strategic leadership is exemplary. She brings clarity, coherence and vision to regional cancer programmes, ensuring alignment with the Northern Ireland cancer strategy, workforce priorities and wider HSC transformation. Her ability to translate national, regional and local priorities into deliverable programmes demonstrates a strategic insight and an operational understanding. At the heart of everything Lorna does is a deep commitment to engaging and partnering with people affected by cancer. She believes that services are only truly effective when shaped by those who use them, and champions co-design at every stage of planning, delivery and evaluation. Lorna co-chaired the development of the Northern Ireland cancer nursing clinical career pathway, a framework that has defined the cancer nursing workforce and supports expanded roles and professional development. She has played a pivotal role in ensuring that all patients are offered holistic needs assessments and access to a cancer nurse specialist. Lorna provided leadership support to develop regional standards, ensuring that the voices and unique needs of young people with cancer are recognised and prioritised. She continues to support the expansion of advanced communication skills training, helping build a confident, skilled workforce delivering equitable and high quality care. Her nominator adds: "Lorna embodies the very best of nursing leadership and is an outstanding ambassador for the profession, for person-centred care and for the future of cancer services in Northern Ireland".



Laura Gormley-McLaughlin

Mental health liaison service manager
Western Health and Social Care Trust

Laura led the successful implementation of the liaison service across the Western Trust. She manages the multidisciplinary team which connects the service and interfaces with acute hospitals, mental health services, and the community and voluntary sector. Laura has completed the Nightingale global leadership development programme, focused on developing young nurse leaders and bridging the gap between strategic development and clinical practice and leadership. She was part of a team that developed a self help anxiety reduction app and won an award within the trust for this innovation. She was also involved in developing an award-winning virtual library. Laura values reflection and encourages co-production and lifelong learning. She participates in various patient and service user groups and carers groups within the trust area. Laura has also displayed an eagerness to improve her knowledge base. She has self-funded a PHD in health and life sciences, researching the role of digital technology in supporting and communicating with patients referred to the mental health liaison service. Her nominator adds: "Laura prioritises nurturing and developing staff, future proofing services, and succession planning. She is excellent at promoting nursing, mental health in particular, within the acute hospital setting through information stands and promotional events, encouraging others to pursue a career in nursing." The judging panel described Laura as a strategic nurse leader, praising her innovative approach and her capacity to inspire staff.

2026 NURSE OF THE YEAR AWARDS PROGRAMME



DEFENCE NURSING RESERVIST AWARD

Sponsored by the Ministry of Defence and Defence Relationship Management

Judges: Darren Niven, Defence Relationship Management; Commander Tom Wardley, Defence Relationship Management; Professor Martin Bradley, RCN Fellow



Defence
Relationship
Management



Sgt Amy Brice

210 (North Irish) Multi-Role Medical Regiment

Amy's nomination reflects her high standards of professional practice, effective leadership and commitment to patient safety across both military and HSC settings. Within the past year, Amy has moved from intensive care nursing into a specialist role as an infection prevention and control nurse within the South Eastern Trust. She is now incorporating infection prevention and outbreak management expertise into her Army Reserve role. Amy's focus on improving compliance with infection control measures and supporting outbreak preparedness is vital to both civilian health care delivery and Defence Medical Services capability. She has developed her professional competence through education, including a professional diploma in tropical nursing at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Amy's leadership capability was demonstrated during Exercise Global Medic in the United States, where she supported personnel from 210 (NI) MMR while training alongside the US Navy and Marine Corps. Although initially deployed in a clinical role, she was identified to fill a leadership gap and appointed second in command. Her leadership performance was formally recognised when she was awarded a one star Admiral's coin. Amy also deployed during a major training exercise in Oman. She undertook a managerial role, supporting the Medical Emergency Response Team and co-ordinating medical cover across multiple concurrent activities. Amy demonstrated professional judgement by seeking specialist advice in order to resolve unfamiliar challenges, ensuring effective medical support throughout the exercise. Her nominator concludes: "Through her ability to integrate specialist infection prevention practice, operational experience and leadership under pressure, Amy strengthens both Defence Medical Services capability and HSC resilience".



Major Neill Montgomery

210 (North Irish) Multi-Role Medical Regiment, Royal Army Medical Services

Since joining the Army Reserve in 2003, Monty has demonstrated exceptional commitment to both his military and nursing careers, building extensive knowledge, skills and experience across each. He deployed to Afghanistan in 2007 and 2010, serving as team leader in the intensive care unit at Camp Bastion, then the busiest trauma unit in the world. In this demanding operational environment, Monty and his colleagues delivered high-quality critical trauma care to casualties under intense pressure. He has participated in numerous national and international military medical exercises with NATO allies, joint defence and wider medical outreach. In his civilian career, Monty works as a resuscitation officer within the Belfast Trust. Striving to share his knowledge and experience, he identified the need for courses that would benefit both military and civilian practice whilst reducing the time and expense associated with travelling to England for mandatory training. Demonstrating initiative and determination, Monty worked with trust colleagues and military contacts to create and deliver courses in Northern Ireland within approved military establishments. The resultant qualifications are transferable into civilian practice and provide valuable development opportunities that many participants may otherwise have been unable to access in their civilian roles. Monty supports defence engagement for 210 (NI) MMR, regularly providing teaching at student and potential officer events. Through life support scenarios and discussions on innovation, training and technique, he inspires others to consider service in the Reserves. His nominator adds: "Monty is a dedicated, innovative and highly respected Nursing Officer who has made a profound contribution to defence nursing through leadership, education and service".

2026 NURSE OF THE YEAR AWARD

Judges: Professor Maria McIlgorm, Department of Health; Linda Kelly, Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery [NIPEC]; Robert Sowney, RCN Fellow; Briege Quinn, RCN Northern Ireland Board Chair



Anthony McShane

Advanced nurse practitioner
Southern Health and Social Care Trust

Anthony practises within the Newry Community Mental Health Team and led a nurse-driven change in practice that has transformed how the service keeps patients safe in the community. Recognising increasing caseload complexity and the risks associated with fragmented monitoring systems, Anthony developed and implemented an automated acuity tracking system to ensure that time-critical care is visible, prioritised, and acted upon. Before its introduction, essential information was dispersed across multiple records, increasing the risk of delays or missed interventions. Anthony worked collaboratively to create a system using existing resources, ensuring that it reflected clinical need at no additional cost. His motivation was simple but powerful; that no patient should deteriorate or be overlooked. The system highlights patients requiring urgent review, enabling earlier intervention and reducing the risk of relapse and hospital admission. The impact was immediate. In the four months prior to implementation, 16 medication-related incidents within the scope of the project were recorded whilst, in the four months following introduction, none occurred. Staff feedback demonstrates how the system improves patient safety. It has standardised practice across the team, reducing variations in follow-up processes and strengthening collective responsibility. The system has also allowed clinicians to spend more meaningful time with patients, reinforcing therapeutic relationships and recovery-focused practice. Anthony's initiative demonstrates how nurse-led innovation can deliver sustainable improvements in safety, well-being and quality of care, ensuring that the most vulnerable patients are seen, prioritised and supported before crisis occurs. The judging panel commended Anthony's vision, understanding of evaluation, and innovative approach to improving patient safety.



Linda Hamilton

Regional ROP clinical co-ordinator and paediatric ophthalmology manager
Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Linda inherited a service in which only 72.5% of at-risk infants were screened on time. Motivated by the risk of irreversible blindness, she overhauled the Retinopathy of Prematurity [ROP] service across Northern Ireland, navigating complex boundaries across every HSC trust. Linda implemented a zero-fail tracking system which achieved a 100% on-time screening rate within three months, a gold standard maintained for seven years. Meticulous co-ordination ensured that the programme reached its full potential, eliminating preventable blindness in neonates in Northern Ireland. By introducing wide-field retinal imaging and a new workforce of nurses and ophthalmic science practitioners, Linda has transformed care delivery. Non-medical imagers can now conduct 77%–94% of screenings, freeing ophthalmologists for complex cases. She challenged the lowering of the screening age from 32 to 31 weeks. An audit identified several infants in Northern Ireland born between 31 and 32 weeks requiring sight-saving treatment. Under the revised criteria, these infants would have been excluded, risking irreversible blindness. Collaborating with ophthalmologists, Linda advocated for the retention of the 32-week threshold regionally. Her foresight was vindicated in June 2024 when an emergency alert was issued following a UK-wide series of missed cases. Linda collaborated with the Encompass team to design and implement a bespoke regional ROP module. This audits and streamlines the pathway from automated triage to bookings. It empowers families to remain active partners in care. The new model eliminates risk and ensures that sight-saving care is delivered in the stability of the neonatal environment. In taking a failing service and transforming it into one that now provides a national benchmark, Linda exemplifies how nurses in Northern Ireland are leading HSC transformation and the implementation of the Health Minister's strategic priorities.



Carrie Hemsley and Amanda Brown

Specialist community public health nurses
South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Through their vision, leadership and commitment to young people, Carrie and Amanda have transformed access to health care within the school setting through the development of drop-in clinics and a health champion model. At the heart of the project is a weekly school drop-in clinic delivered by Amanda and Carrie. Young people in the post-primary setting can attend to discuss their physical health, emotional well-being, sexual health, safeguarding concerns, family difficulties or any emerging risky behaviours. The model ensures that access to health care is immediate and stigma is reduced, help is provided before issues escalate, safeguarding concerns are identified sooner, and vulnerable pupils are supported in a familiar environment. The impact has been significant for young people experiencing emotional school-based anxiety resulting in disengagement from education. Carrie has become the vital link between home and school, facilitating communication and a co-ordinated support plan, resulting in many young people returning to school to complete their education. The health champion programme is an innovative health education model whereby pupils with an interest in pursuing a health care career are trained to work. They support the school nurses by co-delivering health education sessions, supporting health awareness campaigns, signposting peers to the drop-in service, and acting as role models within the school community. Carrie and Amanda have demonstrated that the school nursing service can be a catalyst for supporting lifelong health and resilience. The judging panel commended Carrie and Amanda for developing an excellent example of neighbourhood health care, a concept that is integral to the Health Minister's HSC reset plan.



Kelly Montgomery

Acute liaison learning disability nurse
Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Kelly works across Belfast hospitals to ensure people with a learning disability are recognised, understood and supported when they need hospital care. Her work is guided by a simple belief; when we see better, we care better. Kelly's nomination includes testimonies from colleagues describing her impact on patient experience and outcomes. One senior manager recalled a man who had been unable to walk for over three weeks following major spinal surgery. When Kelly became involved, she supported ward staff to adapt how they communicated with him, enabling better understanding and engagement. On the very same day, the patient walked for the first time. The manager described the moment as "almost miraculous" and said it transformed the patient's recovery. Kelly is also recognised for her skill in challenging situations. A ward sister described a patient who required non-invasive ventilation but was refusing to wear his mask. By using picture boards and taking time to explain the treatment in an accessible way, Kelly reassured the patient and enabled him to accept vital care, improving safety and comfort. Other colleagues commented: "In a busy health service, with an ageing population and complex needs, Kelly is an inspiration to those of us on the wards". Another said: "Kelly is a fantastic nurse with a passion rarely seen for supporting people with a learning disability to access health care." She has increased the visibility of patients with a learning disability through the HSC hospital passport and leads the RAIN project, supporting early recognition of need and practical improvements to care. Kelly's work enhances dignity, safety and confidence, while helping teams deliver better care for everyone.

KATHLEEN ROBB AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO NURSING

Sponsored by the Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery [NIPEC]

2026 NURSE OF THE YEAR AWARDS PROGRAMME



The Kathleen Robb Award for Outstanding Contribution to Nursing is aimed at recognising exceptional service to the nursing and midwifery professions in Northern Ireland. The award is sponsored by NIPEC and the previous winners are:

- 2002 Dr Mona Grey OBE
- 2003 Miss Kathleen Robb OBE
- 2004 Dame Mary Uprichard
- 2005 John Walsh
- 2006 Professor Mary Hanratty CBE
- 2007 Kate O'Hanlon MBE
- 2008 Dame Judith Hill FRCN
- 2009 204 (North Irish) Field Hospital (Volunteers)
- 2010 Carmel Hanna
- 2011 Susan Semple
- 2012 Elizabeth Henderson OBE FRCN
- 2013 Professor Hugh McKenna CBE FRCN
- 2014 Margaret Graham
- 2015 Roberta Brownlee MBE
- 2016 Robert Sowney FRCN
- 2017 Professor Tanya McCance
- 2018 Professor Martin Bradley CBE FRCN
- 2019 Professor Kader Parahoo
- 2022 Mary Hinds
- 2023 Angela McLernon OBE
- 2024 Professor Donna Fitzsimons OBE
- 2025 Professor Owen Barr FRCN



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2026 NURSE OF THE YEAR
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