

Northern Ireland 2027: Four steps for a healthier nation



Four steps towards a healthier Northern Ireland

Earlier occupational therapy helps people live well at home

Rising demand and long waits are preventing people from getting the support they need at the right time.

More than 20,000 people in Northern Ireland are waiting for an occupational therapy assessment, with over 13,000 waiting longer than 13 weeks. In some services, people are waiting more than three years.*

The Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) is clear: this is not sustainable. When people cannot access occupational therapy at the right time, their health can worsen, everyday activities can become more difficult and pressure on health and social care services increases.

The next Northern Ireland Executive must strengthen the occupational therapy workforce to reduce waiting

times and accelerate the shift towards prevention and early intervention.

Occupational therapy is part of the solution, helping people to participate in education, employment and community life, while supporting them to live safely at home. Providing people with the right support at the right time helps them stay well for longer and live well in their communities.

It also eases pressure across the health and social care system by reducing avoidable hospital admissions and supporting timely discharge.

*<https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/printquestionssummary.aspx?docid=449858>

RCOT is calling on the next Northern Ireland Executive to:

1

Shift investment towards prevention and community-based care

Invest in early intervention and community services to improve outcomes, reduce pressure on hospitals and support people to live well at home.

2

Grow the occupational therapy workforce to meet rising demand

Expand workforce capacity through increased training places, alternative routes into the profession, investment in new posts and high-quality practice learning opportunities.

3

Support occupational therapists to build and sustain careers in Northern Ireland

Create clear career pathways and development opportunities to attract, retain and enable occupational therapists to thrive in Northern Ireland and improve health outcomes for citizens.

4

Strengthen occupational therapy leadership, research and innovation

Support leadership, research and innovation capacity to improve services, demonstrate impact and shape the future of health and social care.



Shift investment towards prevention and community-based care

1

What must the next Northern Ireland Executive do?

Embed occupational therapy within primary care and neighbourhood care services to help people stay well and connected to their communities for longer.

What action is needed?

- Invest in occupational therapy-led prevention and early intervention services that reduce demand on hospitals and specialist care.
- Ensure occupational therapists are embedded within neighbourhood care teams, supporting people to access timely support closer to home.
- Expand occupational therapy roles within primary care and general practice so people can access support earlier, without needing referral to secondary care services.
- Expand access to vocational rehabilitation and work-focused occupational therapy services, supporting people with health conditions and disabilities to remain in, return to or access employment.
- Embed occupational therapy support across Northern Ireland's education system, giving every school access to occupational therapists to help children participate, learn and thrive.
- Develop and implement a Community Rehabilitation Framework for Northern Ireland and embed rehabilitation across the whole pathway, from prehabilitation to long-term self-management, to prevent decline and support recovery, independence and wellbeing.
- Invest in occupational therapy equipment and assistive technology to support people remaining safely at home.

The issue

Despite long-standing policy commitments to prevention and care closer to home, services in Northern Ireland remain heavily focused on responding to crisis rather than preventing it.

Demand for occupational therapy continues to grow, while workforce and financial pressures limit the ability of services to provide timely early intervention. There's still a gap between the ambition set out in health and social care policy and the reality of service delivery on the ground.

Occupational therapists must play a bigger role in primary care and neighbourhood services if Northern Ireland is to shift from crisis response to prevention.



Why this is vital in Northern Ireland

Investing in preventive and community-based occupational therapy enables people to stay well for longer, manage long-term conditions, remain connected to work and education, and avoid unnecessary reliance on acute health and social care services.

When children and young people can access occupational therapy at the right time, they are more likely to engage in learning, participate fully in school life, and reach their full potential.

Occupational therapists play a vital role in supporting people with health conditions to stay in, return to and thrive in work. Expanding access to these services will improve health and wellbeing, reduce pressure on health and social care services, and support a healthier, more productive economy.



Supporting people to return to or remain in work

Challenge

Many people with long-term health conditions face barriers to sustaining employment or preparing for work, often struggling to balance health needs, wellbeing, and the demands of work and daily life.

Approach

The occupational therapy-led Condition Management Programme supported 1,761 participants to better manage their health, work and wellbeing through practical interventions that built confidence, resilience, self-management skills, and strategies for maintaining or progressing towards sustainable employment.



84%
of employed
participants reported
improved work
sustainability

Impact

Among unemployed participants, 71% reported increased work readiness, while 84% of employed participants reported improved work sustainability. Across the full cohort, 89% reported enhanced ability to manage their health and wellbeing, demonstrating strong programme outcomes.

Why it matters

By improving health management, work readiness, and job sustainability, the programme enables people to participate more fully in employment and society. It highlights the value of occupational therapy in supporting economic participation, wellbeing, and long-term independence.

Grow the occupational therapy workforce to meet rising demand

2

What must the next Northern Ireland Executive do?

Grow and sustain the occupational therapy workforce by expanding training and development capacity, strengthening practice placement infrastructure and creating new routes into the profession.

What action is needed?

- Increase pre-registration occupational therapy training places in Northern Ireland in line with growing demand.
- Develop alternative routes into the profession, including occupational therapy degree apprenticeships and Master's level programmes.
- Increase investment in occupational therapy posts, particularly for newly registered occupational therapists.

- Provide dedicated investment in practice placement infrastructure, including funding for one full-time Practice Education Coordinator in each health and social care Trust, to increase placement capacity and deliver high-quality practice learning experiences.

The issue

The current route to becoming an occupational therapist in Northern Ireland is limited to a three-year undergraduate degree.

Expanding training places and introducing degree apprenticeships and postgraduate pre-registration routes would attract a more diverse workforce, widen participation and increase the supply of occupational therapists needed to meet growing demand.

Why this is vital in Northern Ireland

Investing in workforce growth, supported by high-quality practice placements and sufficient placement capacity within health and social care Trusts, is essential to improve timely access to occupational therapy, promote independence and reduce pressure across health and social care services.

Mental Health Practitioners

Challenge

Mental ill-health places growing pressure on general practice, driving high demand for GP appointments. People often present with complex needs, requiring longer consultations and highlighting gaps in community-based support.

Approach

Senior occupational therapists working as Mental Health Practitioners within Primary Care multidisciplinary teams provide early intervention, prevention and recovery-focused support. Using specialist mental health expertise, they help people manage challenges before problems escalate, improving wellbeing and daily functioning.

One occupational therapist delivered

2,430

appointments in
2025/26

Impact

In the Down GP Federation, in a GP practice serving 12,000 people, one occupational therapist delivered 2,430 appointments in 2025/26, providing timely mental health support through evidence-based interventions. This improved access to care, strengthened self-management, promoted resilience and helped people participate more fully in everyday life.

Why it matters

Investing in occupational therapists within primary care delivers earlier support closer to home, reduces pressure on GPs and specialist services, and helps people stay well and engaged in work, education, family life and their communities.





Support occupational therapists to build and sustain careers in Northern Ireland

3



What must the next Northern Ireland Executive do?

Invest in recruitment, retention and career development to build a sustainable occupational therapy workforce and ensure equitable access to services across Northern Ireland.

What action is needed?

- Implement targeted recruitment and retention measures to build a sustainable occupational therapy workforce, including improving graduate retention and attracting occupational therapists to practise in Northern Ireland.
- Develop clear career pathways, specialist training, advanced practice and consultant-level career pathways, ensuring occupational therapists have clear progression routes to develop expertise, lead innovation and deliver high-quality, evidence-based care.
- Fund dedicated occupational therapy learning and development posts to build workforce capability and support continuous professional development.
- Publish comprehensive occupational therapy workforce vacancy data, including long-term and unfunded vacancies, for accurate workforce planning and commissioning decisions.
- Strengthen support worker development by expanding access to training, supervision and structured career pathways for occupational therapy support workers, enabling them to fully support the delivery of timely, high-quality occupational therapy services.

The issue

Occupational therapy services in Northern Ireland are under significant pressure from rising demand, workforce shortages and retention challenges.

Without clear opportunities for career development, advanced practice and leadership, the profession risks losing skilled practitioners at a time when they're most needed. Occupational therapists face unequal access to specialist training, leadership and research opportunities. The Executive must do more to retain early career occupational therapists and create opportunities for occupational therapists to build long-term careers through sustainable and rewarding career pathways within the profession.

Why this is vital in Northern Ireland

A sustainable occupational therapy workforce depends not only on attracting new staff but on retaining experienced practitioners and creating opportunities for them to develop, innovate and lead. Investment in recruitment, retention and career progression will improve access to services, reduce waiting times and support staff wellbeing.

By strengthening leadership, advanced practice, research and innovation, Northern Ireland can build a thriving occupational therapy workforce that improves outcomes, reduces health inequalities and delivers more effective health and social care services.



Strengthen occupational therapy leadership, research and innovation

4

What must the next Northern Ireland Executive do?

Enable occupational therapists to lead, innovate and shape the future of health and social care by expanding access to leadership, research and strategic decision-making opportunities.

What action is needed?

- Remove barriers that prevent occupational therapists from applying for senior leadership positions across health and social care, including the current requirement for Executive Director of Nursing and Allied Health Professions positions within health and social care Trusts to be held by a registered nurse.

- Increase occupational therapy representation within strategic decision-making structures and service transformation programmes.
- Invest in occupational therapy innovation, enabling practitioners to develop and implement new ways of improving care and outcomes.
- Improve access to research, innovation and leadership opportunities at all career stages.

The issue

RCOT believes occupational therapists should be leading service improvement, prevention and rehabilitation at every level of the system.

Occupational therapists have the skills and expertise but are often excluded from some senior management positions and research opportunities, limiting their ability to influence decision-making and drive system-wide change. At the same time, access to advanced practice, specialist training and leadership development opportunities is inconsistent.



Why this is vital in Northern Ireland

Occupational therapy leadership brings expertise in prevention, rehabilitation, independent living and tackling the wider determinants of health. Ensuring occupational therapists can lead at every level of the system will strengthen service design, support innovation and deliver the shift towards more preventative, person-centred and community-based health and social care services.



Innovating to support stroke survivors

Challenge

Too many stroke survivors do not receive the intensity of rehabilitation needed to achieve their full recovery potential. Limited access to repetitive upper limb therapy can lead to avoidable disability, reduced independence and increased pressure on health and social care services.

Approach

Belfast Trust embedded virtual reality within stroke rehabilitation services to increase therapy intensity through engaging, evidence-based practice. The technology enabled personalised rehabilitation, encouraged greater participation and provided real-time data to support recovery and inform clinical decision-making.

Impact

Patients achieved 200–500% more upper limb repetitions than with conventional therapy alone, with higher levels of motivation and engagement. The approach demonstrated how digital innovation can increase rehabilitation intensity, improve patient outcomes and support more efficient delivery of specialist services.

Why it matters

Occupational therapy enables people to live independently after stroke, reducing avoidable disability and reliance on health and social care services. Investing in occupational therapists to deliver proven innovations such as virtual reality can improve outcomes, enhance productivity and support sustainable public services.

Patients achieved
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We're RCOT, the Royal College of Occupational Therapists. We've championed the profession and the people behind it for over 90 years; and today, we are thriving with over 37,000 members.

Then and now, we're here to help achieve life-changing breakthroughs for our members, for the people they support and for society as a whole.

**Help us turn these steps
into meaningful change.**

Visit: rcot.co.uk/NorthernIreland27

**Talk to us about working
together: hello@rcot.co.uk**

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