County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust achieves a 2025 Recognition Award for its work growing Occupational Health capability through its people

Recognising the growing pressures on Occupational Health (OH) services and the need for sustainable workforce solutions, County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust took a proactive approach to developing talent. By rethinking the skills mix and investing in progression pathways, the Trust has strengthened its OH service while creating career development opportunities for staff.

Developing people from within

Helen Frankland began her career in the Trust's OH department as an administrator, later progressing into a Nurse Assistant role. With encouragement and support, Helen completed her Nurse Associate training, qualifying and registering with the NMC.

Rather than losing this newly developed expertise to another part of the organisation, the Trust made a deliberate decision to create a new role within the OH team. Designed in line with the NMC Nurse Associate Standards and Proficiencies, the role enabled Helen to apply her enhanced clinical skills while complementing the wider OH team.

Designing a role that adds value

A key challenge was ensuring the Nurse Associate role sat clearly between Nurse Assistants and Qualified Nurses, adding value without duplicating or encroaching on existing responsibilities. The job description was co-designed by Helen and her manager, carefully aligning her strengths and expertise with the operational needs of the OH service.

This approach ensured job satisfaction for Helen while strengthening team capability. Over time, she became an integral link between Nurse Assistants and Qualified Nurses, supporting assessments, monitoring care and helping the service operate more efficiently.

Improving systems and processes

Helen quickly became a central figure in improving OH processes. She took the lead on pre-employment clearances, working closely with the Trust's Resourcing and International Recruitment teams to streamline processes, particularly for large-scale recruitment campaigns and international staff.

As part of a wider collaboration with neighbouring Trusts, a new IT system was procured. Helen played an active role in regional meetings to align pre-employment processes and documentation and was instrumental in embedding the new system locally. Her understanding of clinical workflows meant she could set up clinics efficiently, support colleagues with system training and ensure better use of OH capacity.

Broadening the impact of the role

Looking beyond traditional processes enabled the Trust to further maximise the Nurse Associate role. Helen supported flu vaccination campaigns, administered venepuncture clinics and contributed to wellbeing initiatives, freeing up Qualified Nurses to focus on more complex interventions.

Building confidence and capability

Over the past three years, Helen has grown into a confident and highly capable professional, shaping a unique Nurse Associate role within OH. She now leads and oversees the pre-employment programme, conducts audits that have improved KPIs and supports students attending the department by developing tailored induction resources based on her own experience.

Beyond her operational impact, Helen has helped raise the profile of OH as a career destination. She has represented the Trust in work with Health Education England, promoting the value of Nurse Associates, and actively encourages other Nurse Assistants to consider the training pathway. Her contribution was recognised when she was awarded Covid Apprentice of the Year.

Consultant Occupational Health Physician, Clare Leeds adds:

“The role of the nurse associate within occupational health has been of great value to our team. Both Helen and Carolyn have demonstrated innovative thinking in creating greater efficiencies within our work and supporting the principle of continuous improvement.

Helen has demonstrated effective leadership within her role and has harnessed partnership relationships with other colleagues within and outside of the Trust. It has been a delight to witness the growth of a colleague leading to her own sense of achievement and fulfilment within occupational health.”

Lasting impact and learning

This initiative has demonstrated the value of investing in people and rethinking traditional workforce models. By creating space for progression, County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust has strengthened its OH service, improved efficiency and created a replicable development pathway for others.