

A guide to writing NHS award entries

About us

NHS Employers is the employers' organisation for the NHS in England. We support workforce leaders and represent employers to develop a sustainable workforce and be the best employers they can be. We also manage the relationships with NHS trade unions on behalf of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.

This guide will support anyone involved in selecting, writing and submitting award entries. It will help you to think about:

- your strategic approach to award entries and how to develop and implement it
- whether you've considered the 'what, when, why and who' underpinning your entry
- areas to consider when putting together an award entry
- how to impress the judges and showcase your initiative
- creating an advantage, and warning signs for when not to enter.

Many NHS teams are keen to enter awards. Even being shortlisted is a great boost for staff morale and patient confidence. But as a time-consuming and expensive activity, focusing on the right awards to enter and ensuring your submission has winning potential is crucial. NHS Employers has teamed up with expert awards consultancy Awards Writers to produce this comprehensive guide containing all you need to know to maximise your chances of success.

Before you start, here are some key points to consider

- Any awards entries you produce should fit within the context of your organisational strategy.
- It doesn't matter whether you focus on an award you want to aim for or the project you want to get an award for. What matters is your achievements match the criteria.
- Entering awards is time intensive. You should prioritise those which will make the most impact with your key stakeholders.
- Most of the work involved in putting together an award submission happens before you put pen to paper. There's lots of information to gather to make writing the entry much quicker, but you'll also need to think about the story you want to tell.
- There are things you can include in your entry which aren't required in the criteria but will likely garner you extra points. Links to a national agenda, details on how your project has influenced best practice or even what you'll do to continue the great work could all make the difference to getting shortlisted.

- The cost of entering an award doesn't stop with the entry fee. Costs may include hotel bills and travel for any presentation days as well as tickets, travel and accommodation for the awards event itself.
- Saying no to an award entry is just as important as perfecting the craft of writing one. Writing award entries is hugely time intensive; you need to be clear on the benefit of putting in that time against the work you'll have to delay in order to complete it.

The benefits of entering awards

“Seeing the pride on the face of a maintenance engineer as he brandished our team of the year trophy above his head on stage was an absolute joy.”

Jason Dawson, former director of capital, estates and facilities, The Christie NHS Foundation Trust.

Awards create moments like this. They allow teams to feel a sense of pride and to know their achievements have been recognised. They improve the connection between employees and organisations, strengthening employee engagement.

In a health and social care context, research tells us that improved employee engagement leads to better patient outcomes. Even being shortlisted for an award can drive:

- internal kudos
- improvements in morale
- additional project funding
- a raised profile for the project and people involved
- recruitment benefits linked to improvements in your employer brand.

“We secured £12.5 million for a new learning campus. Being a winner and finalist for some awards when bidding really helped raise our profile and strengthened the case for the additional funding.”

Multi-award-winning Nav Sharma, Aspire lead, Birmingham Women’s and Children’s NHS Foundation Trust.

“Winning awards demonstrates you’re best in class and what you’ve delivered is gold standard. It gives you a sense of pride and reinforces your motivation to deliver interesting, innovative programmes that make a difference.”

Edna Boampong, multi-award-winning director of communications and engagement, Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin Integrated Care System.

Getting extra value from your entry

The benefits of entering awards aren’t confined to whether you make the shortlist. Doing the work on an award entry can create a strong start on a case study which can be used in multiple ways to raise awareness of your project or organisation.

The process of putting together an award entry can help you reflect on your project, spotting opportunities for refinements or changes. And distilling your achievements for the judges can help

you better describe the impact of your project, which could give you a head start on funding applications.

“Doing the award entry allowed us to really focus on the impact of our project. We used it as a case study on our website, parts of it in our annual report and shared it with partners. There was so much more value in putting together the entry than just entering the award.”

Veena Murray, head of Leeds Health and Care Academy.

A strategic approach to awards

Why you should have an awards strategy

Entering awards costs money; the resource used to write the entry, taking part in any additional judging processes, the cost of entering and potential costs of attending the ceremony.

You should be clear on:

- why entering awards is a good thing for your organisation, aligned to your organisational or team objectives
- why particular awards are the right ones to enter.

Ideally you will have clearly identified the audience you intend to impress by entering the award. You should also be certain that awards are the right vehicle to achieve that outcome. Is there something else you could do with a more guaranteed chance of success that would impress those stakeholders just as much?

Are winners born or created?

The answer is both.

You can either identify the award you want to win and plan a project or initiative to align with the criteria, or you can identify a great project and find the right award to enter it for. Either approach is valid if the award meets the objectives of your communications strategy.

However, taking a medium-term and trust-wide view of awards would be a much more strategic approach and would mitigate pressure from within the trust/service to enter certain projects into awards on an ad hoc basis.

There are a lot of awards suitable for NHS entries, so it's better to choose a small number of awards and direct resource to doing a brilliant job on writing entries, than spread resource too thinly and not have enough time to craft a compelling submission.

“When considering an award, I recommend being selective and only going for a category you can really tick the boxes for. Writing awards and pulling together the detail takes time, so focusing on a limited number of key categories is best.”

Veena Murray, head of Leeds Health and Care Academy.

What to look for in awards

Here are some considerations to help you decide which awards are right for your trust, project or team.

- What's important to your stakeholders? Is a general local award likely to be better received than a technical but national one? Would an award for your people carry more weight than one for a piece of software you've implemented?
- Transparency of judging – Many awards ceremonies are simply a vehicle for making money and others depend on relationships to create winners, so you need to assess the judging process to ensure it is robust and transparent. A judging panel containing

industry experts is generally a good sign or you could look for the Awards Trust Mark, an independent awards standard.

- Budget – Consider any entry fees, ticket costs, travel and expenses for attending the ceremony and any additional judging stages, although many of these are now carried out online.
- Categories and criteria – Can your project fit into more than one category? Is one category likely to be less popular than another or could you enter it into more than one? If so it's good practice to make adaptations rather than submit exactly the same entry into multiple categories.

Before writing your entry

Before you start to write an award entry you need to gather all the relevant information about your project/initiative and the award you want to enter.

Things to consider about your project or initiative

The narrative

The most compelling stories involve a transformation, often of an underdog to a hero. Another great plot is one where you beat a monster. Think of a monster as a challenge or obstacle you needed to overcome. What's important is the difference you have made to others – whether that's patients, internal stakeholders, suppliers or the local community.

Headline statistics

Do you have the most current data and do the numbers support the narrative? Crucially, data should show the impact of what you've done. Volume measures, while useful, often don't do this, so look for ways of demonstrating the quality of your project.

Testimonials

Ideally, you'll source these before you start writing so they can be woven into the content. Someone else saying you're great is always stronger, so think about who you can ask. Patients would make brilliant testimonials, but what about partner organisations or other teams who have been helped by your project?

Sign off

Can you do it, or your manager? Does it need director or external sign off? It could be worth putting time in relevant diaries now to make sure your entry is signed off before the deadline.

Information about the award you want to enter

Criteria

What boxes are you trying to tick? If your project doesn't seem to match the criteria, you need to look at other categories.

The layout of the entry

Are they asking specific questions, or do you just have 1,000 words to make your pitch?

Extra information

Can you supply extra information as appendices? Are there size limits?

Additional requirements

What additional requirements are there? Some awards want you to produce a video, others need a high-resolution logo and team photo submitted with the entry.

How do you submit the entry?

Most entries are submitted online, but some still ask for hard copies in triplicate to save photocopying for the judges. In this case you'll need to factor in the time and cost for posting entries.

How to pay for your entry

Is a PO number acceptable or do you need access to a company credit card?

Additional judging requirements.

Is there a presentation day, and are you and anyone else critical to the project free on that day?

The deadline

When is the deadline and what are the chances of an extension? Usually, one or two weeks is offered and this can help you manage timescales.



Top tip: Make a call to the awards organisers to check their policy on deadline extensions. Most will tell you whether they tend to offer an extension even months in advance, even if they can't confirm what it will be. Call again about two weeks before the deadline if you need to request an extension. The more people who ask, the more likely it is the deadline will be extended.

Putting pen to paper

There are two further key stages to consider before you start writing:

- getting clarity on your key messages
- creating a long list of potential evidence.

Key messages

Ensure you have three key messages for your project or initiative. These are the three things you want the judges to know, regardless of what questions the award entry needs you to answer.

Your comms team might be able to help or you could write some down and ask a colleague whether they make sense. Don't worry about the criteria at this stage, just make sure you're clear what you want the judges to know.

Potential evidence

An evidence brainstorm can work well with a whole project team to get the broadest view of what metrics might be available to support your entry. One proof point per key message is ideal.

Make sure you have both quantitative and qualitative examples. Especially look for metrics that can be compared, either over time, to industry standards or to your competitors. Also think about what is important to the category you want to enter.

“Evaluation is generally the weakest area. People tend not to think about it from the outset then don’t have data to benchmark against, making it hard to demonstrate any progress.

“Really strong entries consider the methods for proving impact at the start of the programme. Peer-reviewed data is even stronger. And if something hasn’t worked, tell us about it and what you plan to do, rather than trying to gloss over it.”

Experienced judge Kathryn Grayling, director of people, culture and OD at North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board.



Top tip: Work hard on putting numbers against your evidence metrics. Saying ‘increased’ or ‘decreased’ without qualification will not be enough.

The power of stories

Never underestimate the power of a story. While you want to impress the judges with your incredible achievements, focusing on the numbers alone won’t have as much impact as weaving a tale the judges will remember.

Since early humans drew pictures on walls and told tales around a fire, stories have been important. Researcher Paul J Zak, professor of economic sciences, psychology, and management at Claremont Graduate University, and his team discovered that character-driven stories – those with people at the centre – consistently prompt the release of oxytocin in the brain of the listener.

In an article for Greater Good magazine, Zak explains: “Stories that are personal and emotionally compelling engage more of the brain, and thus are better remembered than simply stating a set of facts.”

“Look for the golden thread of your award story then work it throughout your entry. Many entries lose their way and don’t help judges quickly understand what you did or why.”

Kathryn Grayling, director of people, culture and OD at North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board.

In his book *Why We Tell Stories*, Christopher Booker outlines his theory of seven basic plots and suggests all stories follow one of seven formats. You can research all seven if you’re intrigued, but the three to remember when writing an award entry are:



1 Overcoming the monster – a monster can be anything which threatens your project or organisation; any problem or issue you come up against. Having a monster can turn a project from great to most definitely worthy of winning an award.



Rags to riches – the classic Cinderella story, in the context of awards you're looking for anything which went from a low baseline to a very high one. The data will often lead you to this plot, as you'll see unsatisfactory numbers to start with and by the end of your project these should be greatly improved.



Rebirth – a transformation story (think The Grinch or A Christmas Carol). This could be a service transformation or total overhaul of a way of doing things. Whether it applies to a whole organisation or just part of it, the rebirth story is one where the change is fundamental and will affect the organisation for a long time to come.

The story is your USP, the thing that differentiates you from the competition. If you can recognise any of these narrative in the projects you're considering for an award entry, you could be onto a good thing.

Top tips for writing award entries

We all have our own process for writing, but here are our top tips for a tried and tested approach.

Map evidence against criteria

Before sitting down to write, make sure you can tick all of the boxes for the award category you're entering.

Agree in advance who will be involved

Too many cooks can make things difficult. Try to pin down one or two key team members who can review your entry along with sourcing any additional information needed.

Write, then edit

Get everything down without worrying about word count in the first instance. You can edit down or augment with more information where necessary. If you don't have data to hand, leave a gap so you know to include it.

Recruiting a critical friend

Find someone who knows nothing about the project who can read your draft entry and give feedback on what they think the story is and what they'd be interested in hearing more about. Ask them to read the award criteria beforehand so they have all of the information a judge would and encourage them to be cruel to be kind.

Building in at least a week for sign-off

You've already checked who needs to sign off the entry and how long that's likely to take. Allow at least a week before the deadline to make that happen.

“Get input from colleagues to help you refine your award entry. Use people who understand what you’ve delivered so they can point out if you’ve missed a key angle. Leave it for a few days, then come back to it with fresh eyes. You’ll often see something different to improve it.”

Nav Sharma, Aspire lead at Birmingham Women’s and Children’s NHS Foundation Trust.

Creating an extra advantage – and when not to enter

The extra ten points

Once you've ticked all the award criteria, think about creating an extra edge for your entry. What will make it really stand out? In a tie, what will make the judges choose your entry over another? Here are some things to think about.

- Can your project be replicated or adopted across the sector? Does it contribute to the progress or reputation of the NHS? What have you done to share your great practice with others, for example, at conferences, in working groups or via your professional body?
- Does your project make things better for at-risk or vulnerable groups?
- Have you cracked a problem that everyone experiences but no one else has solved?
- Is yours a no/low-budget solution?
- Is it an industry first? If it's never been done before you should be onto a winner (or a shortlist at the very least).
- Have you tackled current issues in your industry? Think about key trends the judges will be aware of. Has your project addressed any of them?

- Demonstrating what's next – show you have plans to build on what you've already achieved.
- Testimonials – seek testimonials from influential figures in your industry, people who have been positively impacted by the project, clients, suppliers or other independent stakeholders. Use one or two testimonials in the main body of your entry and compile them all into an appendix if you're able to supply additional information.

Knowing when to say no

Not entering an award is as important as entering one. The following are circumstances when you should say no.

- When there's no evidence of impact. Better to wait a year and gather the evidence you need during that time.
- When achievements are below expectations or clearly not as strong as others have achieved.
- When there's no clear benefit to the project.
- When you get different stories from the people involved so there's no clear direction or narrative for the project.
- When you've entered the project many times before and not been successful but nothing has changed. Judges may form an opinion about your entry before even reading it, if you have entered many times before. It's best to take a break for a year or two while evaluating what's driving the desire for an award.

Making the most of being shortlisted

You don't need to win an award to feel the benefits. You can reap huge rewards just by making it onto a shortlist.

“Even just being a finalist gave me something genuine and tangible to say thank you for at staff events. It built a sense of pride and really lifted people's spirits. I also thought it was really important to take lots of different team members to the awards dinners. It was about sharing in something. It really helped build the sense of team at all levels.”

Jason Dawson, former director of capital, estates and facilities, The Christie NHS Foundation Trust.

Once you're announced a finalist you can make the most of your status in lots of ways.

Thank everyone involved

Saying thank you is powerful, especially when you can be specific about what they have done and its impact. Get the most senior person involved in the project to send an email to everyone involved sharing the great news and thanking them for their part in the achievement.

Sharing the news

Get advice from your communications team on how to share the good news internally and externally. Is there a director's or function update it could feature in? Could you have an article on your intranet and mentions on your organisation's social media? Use your personal social media to share the news as well – LinkedIn and Twitter are prime places to mention the accolade, and if you tag the awards organisers they will probably share your update. Take every opportunity to share the news that you're a finalist. If you don't win, you will have missed the boat.

Highlighting your finalist status

If you've been given a finalist's pack of logos, make sure to pass this on to your communications team. If you're allowed, add the badge/logo to your email footer. You could also add it to your LinkedIn cover photo and Twitter biography – just remember to remove it eventually. Saying you were an awards finalist in 2015 won't confer much kudos now.

Adapt your entry into a best practice case study

You should have all the makings of a great case study in your entry, so with a few tweaks you'll have a great piece of content to promote. And now you can say your project/team/organisation is a finalist too!

“Don’t think of your award entry as only that. You’re effectively creating a case study which you should look to use in other ways. Once you’ve put in the effort of creating a great narrative and matching it with data to prove your success, make sure to get the most from it!”

Edna Boampong, director of communications and engagement, Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin Integrated Care System.

Arrange a team celebration

It’s likely not everyone will be able to attend the ceremony itself, so a celebration for everyone involved will help them feel part of the achievement.

Best of luck!

We hope this guide provides practical tips and inspiring advice on getting the most out of any awards entries you choose to commit to.

Once you've submitted your entry, we'd love to hear about your award-worthy projects and of course how you got on in your awards category.

Please do email us at communications@nhsemployers.org so we can learn about your great work, share your story with others and help celebrate your achievements.

Acknowledgements

Awards Writers

This briefing was written by Awards Writers, a team of expert awards consultants and experienced awards writers with backgrounds in communications and PR.

Awards Writers specialises in supporting organisations of all sizes and sectors to enter awards and boasts an impressive record of success. Since 2012, the team has seen 80% of client awards entries shortlisted, with 40% of these home taking a prize.

Contact Louise Turner, at louise@awardswriters.com to find out more.

Our contributors

A big thank you to the contributors who gave their advice and expertise on entering awards to support this guidance:

- Jason Dawson, former director of capital, estates and facilities, The Christie NHS Foundation Trust.
- Edna Boampong, director of communications and engagement, Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin Integrated Care System.
- Veena Murray, head of Leeds Health and Care Academy.
- Nav Sharma, Aspire lead, Birmingham Women's and Children's NHS Foundation Trust.
- Kathryn Grayling, director of people, culture and OD at North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board.



NHS Employers
2 Brewery Wharf
Kendall Street
Leeds
LS10 1JR

0113 306 3000
www.nhsemployers.org
@NHSEmployers