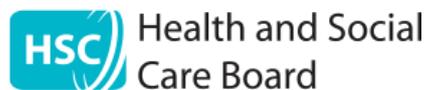




Social Work Workforce Review

Northern Ireland

2022



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Demographic changes, a steady rise in the number of families in need of social work intervention, an aging population, pressures on mental health services for adults and children, and a rise in domestic violence and poverty have all resulted in increased demand for social work services. Transformation initiatives in HSC, new legislation, innovations in service delivery and recent developments in the Justice and Education sectors have added to that demand.

The Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated pressures upon the social work workforce with vacancy data collated from, for example, HSC children's services, indicating significant workforce deficits in all of the Trusts.

Reviews are also underway in different HSC programmes of care to consider the best methods of delivery and the most appropriate mix of professions required to deliver more effective services, which will have inevitable consequences for the social work workforce.

For some years, the Department of Health has commissioned 260 places on the Degree in Social Work programmes in NI. In 2021, additional funding was secured to commission an additional 15 places on the Open University (NI) Degree in Social Work course. This newly developed programme is intended to attract and retain staff already working in social care roles in statutory and voluntary sectors organisations. Demand for the Open University training places has been encouraging and there is clearly an appetite among employers and staff for more diverse routes into social work training.

The Social Work Workforce Review has identified the pressing need to commission an increase of 60 student social work places in NI universities, however this is wholly dependent upon significant additional funding becoming available.

The data analysis and projections undertaken as part of the Review provide an evidential basis for the need for additional social workers, however it is also essential for employers to address current recruitment and retention processes to ensure newly qualified staff are adequately supported and enabled to remain in their posts.

A robust process to collate, analyse and report information on the entire social work workforce, using regionally agreed data collection methodology should be established in NI. Having access to comprehensive and accurate data sets will enable social work employers to better forecast future needs and inform regional workforce planning and decision making in the future.

Effective workforce planning is key to ensuring essential social work services are sustainable, and delivered to an appropriate and safe standard. The Department of Health, HSC Workforce Strategy 2026: Delivering for Our People aims to develop and sustainably fund, an optimum workforce model for a reconfigured health and social care system. The Strategy requires that all workforce planning follows the principles of the Regional HSC Workforce Planning Framework.

The Social Work Workforce Review has identified six **Strategic Themes** and seven **Strategic Recommendations** with 53 **Actions** to be undertaken.

The six Strategic Themes set out the key areas which will be critical to ensuring the provision of a social work workforce able to meet future challenges. These are;

- **Supply**
- **Safe Staffing**
- **Workforce Planning**
- **Workforce Business Intelligence**
- **Retention**
- **Workforce Development**

These themes inform the recommendations and the proposed actions, which will be timetabled and scheduled once the report has been approved.

An **Implementation Board**, comprised of senior social work leaders, will be established to provide the strategic leadership required to ensure all of the actions identified in the review are achieved. At the outset, a scoping exercise will be undertaken to capture work which has already been undertaken, to enable shared learning and inform future progress.

The Social Work Workforce Review relates to social work services delivered across all sectors in Northern Ireland, including Health and Social Care, Criminal Justice, Education and the Voluntary, Community and Independent service providers.

Operational workforce planning is a responsibility of employers; either HSC or other statutory organisations, and independent, voluntary or private sector

organisations from whom services are commissioned. This includes ensuring effective service delivery and safe staffing levels, vacancy management and recruitment, skills or 'band' mix, career progression pathways and workforce design to support newly developed models of care within organisations.

The Review report clearly sets out the challenges ahead. It articulates a strategic vision and provides an action plan which is intended to secure sufficient supply, and the effective recruitment and retention of social workers for the future. It is not a detailed account of the many actions which have already been undertaken by social work employers to address their immediate staffing needs.

The delivery of that strategic vision will require determined and decisive leadership at all levels within the social work profession. Leaders will have to work collaboratively and proactively to achieve the changes necessary to secure the confident and competent workforce which will be needed to meet future challenges.



Jackie McIlroy
Director of Social Work Strategy
and Social Care Workforce Strategy



Philip Rodgers
Director of Workforce
Policy

Abbreviations

Adult learning disability	ALD
Adverse childhood experience	ACE
Allied health professional	AHP
Approved Social Worker	ASW
Assessed Year in Employment	AYE
Business services organisation	BSO
Care Quality Commission	CQC
Child and adolescent mental health	CAMHS
Child Protection Support Services	CPSS
Continuous Assurance of Quality Enhancement	CAQE
Continuous Professional Development	CPD
Core Minimum Data Set	CMDS
Delegated Statutory Functions Report	DSF
Department of Education	DoE
Department of Health	DoH
Department of Justice	DoJ
Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards	DOLS
Designated Adult Protection Officer	DAPO
Education Authority	EA
Education Welfare Officer	EWO
Emergency Department	ED
Further Education Collaborative Management Board	FECMB
General practice/practitioner	GP
Health and Care Professions Council	HCPC
Health and Social Care	HSC
Health and Social Care Board	HSCB
Integrated Care Team	ICT
Investigating Officer	IO
Looked After Children	LAC
Mental Capacity Act	MCA
Mental Health Order	MHO
Multi-Disciplinary Teams	MDT
Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership	NIDSWP
National Health Service	NHS
Newly Qualified Social Worker	NQSW
Northern Ireland Social Care Council	NISCC
Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency	NISRA
Open University	OU
Probation Board for NI	PBNI
Queens University Belfast	QUB
Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority	RQIA
Relevant Graduate Route	RGR
Scottish Social Services Council	SSSC
Strategic Resourcing Innovation Forum	SRIF
Undergraduate Route	UGR

University of Ulster	UU
Whole time equivalent	WTE
Youth Justice Agency	YJA

SECTION 1: Introduction

1:1 Strategic Context

The Department of Health has been progressing a ten year transformation programme of health and social care in Northern Ireland as set out in **Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together, 2026** to ensure services can meet the challenges of the future including population changes, advances in technology, treatments and medicines and improve health and social wellbeing outcomes for all.

This Review has been commissioned to support the transformation agenda and as part of the HSC Workforce Strategy 2026¹ to deliver successful transformation and a more sustainable health and social care system for the 21st century. As stated in the strategy; ***“At present there are significant pressures on social workers in several areas within the HSC including adult mental health, child protection and services for looked after children. Other factors which will increase the demands on social work services in the coming years include the NI Executive’s target to improve social wellbeing through person –centred care, community development, self -directed support and co-production. New legislation such as the Mental Capacity Act and the Adoption and Children’s Bill will also mean additional statutory roles and responsibilities”***

Social workers have a vital role in the delivery of front line services to individuals and communities impacted by Covid-19. Responding to the longer

¹ Health and Social Care Workforce Strategy 2026 :Delivering for Our People

term impacts on physical and mental health and wellbeing, will undoubtedly impact on workforce demands in the future

Social Workers have key roles within the education, justice and voluntary sectors. Each of these sectors are currently experiencing workforce challenges compounded by significant change. The social work role is fundamental to future developments and to enhanced service delivery.

The Review supports the strategic priorities of 'Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing: A Strategy for Social Work (2012 – 2022)'² to 'strengthen the capacity of the workforce' and support the social work profession to be at the forefront of addressing new and emerging issues in society.

The Department of Health is responsible for commissioning professional training places for social work students in Northern Ireland. This review is tasked with identifying the numbers of social workers needed over the next five to ten years to meet projected need, which will, in turn, inform the numbers of professional training places required to ensure an adequate supply of social workers for all sectors.

As such, this review includes all sectors delivering social work services in Northern Ireland.

The review will make recommendations to strengthen the supply, recruitment and retention of social workers with the objective of meeting the needs of the workforce and securing a stable workforce to deliver safe, high quality social work services.

Social Work is a regulated profession with graduate entry level, protection of title and professional development requirements for maintaining registration.

1:2 Purpose, scope and ownership

The **purpose** of the review is to ensure there is sufficient capacity in the future to deliver safe, sustainable social work services across all fields of social work,

² Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing: A Strategy for Social Work 2012-2022

in justice, education and the voluntary sector, **and** able to meet the demands of a transformed Health and Social Care Service.

The Departments of Justice and Education are fully aware of and supportive of the review and fully endorse the report and its recommendations.

The review will produce information, data and analysis on the current capacity and availability and anticipated numbers for the future, as well as outlining developments and changes likely to impact on the workforce in the future. It will include recommendations on the workforce profile required to ensure sustainable social work services regionally, on recruitment and processes required to maximise capacity of the workforce and on workplace supports to improve retention and ensure safe high quality social work practice. (Terms of reference Appendix 2)

A project group consisting of professional representatives and key stakeholders was set up and a project coordinator appointed to assist and progress the review. The group was co-chaired by Christine Smyth (Strategy Director for Social Work) and Andrew Dawson (Director, Workforce Policy Development) and work was progressed through a number of work streams or subgroups with individuals co-opted to the group as required. A writing group was established, comprising of representatives from the HSC Board, Northern Ireland Social Care Council, (Social Care Council) and the Department of Health, to assist with the development and drafting of the report. (Member ship of the project group is listed in Appendix 1)

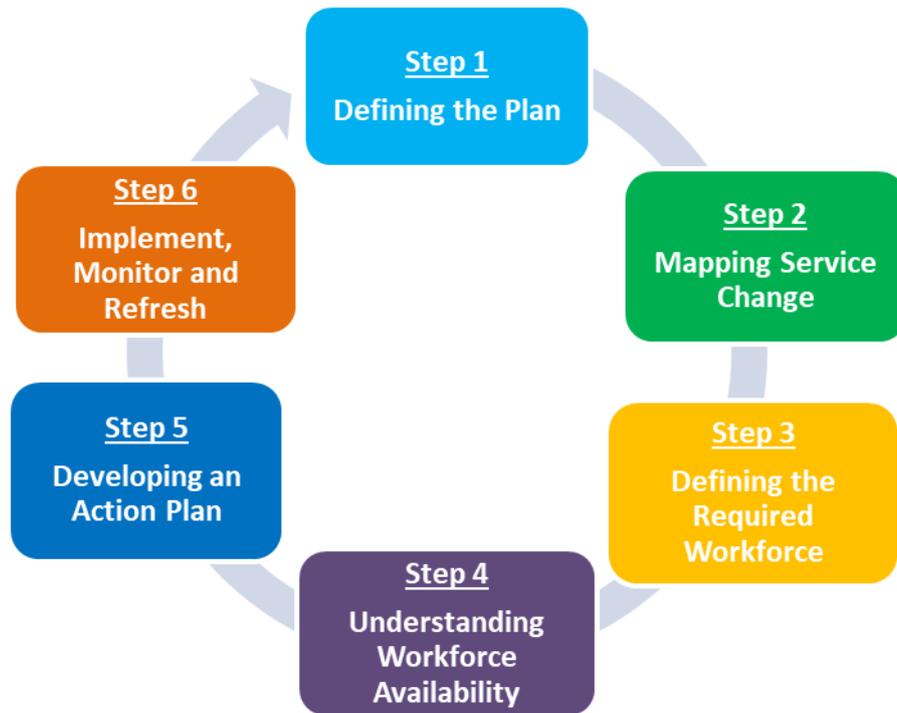
The Project Group reported to the Workforce Strategy Programme Board who, in turn, reported to the Top Management Group in the DoH.

Engagement events were held in early 2020 to consider stakeholder views and to help inform recommendations and actions.

Recommendations with any cost implications are subject to affordability and prioritisation and Ministerial approval.

The Regional HSC Workforce Planning Framework³ is the recommended methodology (see diagram below) for all workforce reviews and has been used for this review.

³ HSC Workforce Strategy 2026, Theme 3, Action 6).



The 6 steps, particularly steps 2, 3 and 4 are not sequential and the work has been reiterative and dynamic to fully understand the connections and dynamics impacting on the workforce from a systemic perspective.

1:3 Assumptions and Constraints

Due to the challenging nature in completing this social work workforce review it was important to consider any possible assumptions, constraints and/or risks early in the process. The main assumptions and constraints are tabulated below.

Assumptions	Constraints
Scope - the focus of this review is professionally qualified social workers across the whole spectrum of social work in NI	Financial – professional training places and workforce numbers are and will continue to be impacted by fiscal pressures.

Engagement – key stakeholders were able to input into this review at each stage of the process and to co-produce recommendations.	Meetings of the Project group were less frequent and took place online due to the impact of the COVID pandemic
Demographic/population data /information – use of robust sources of demographic or population data for Northern Ireland will be used including data from NISRA, DE and the DoH.	Social work data/information – the lack of a regionally agreed data set across sectors and systems may make accurate projections and comparisons difficult to achieve.
All members of the project group are able to input into each stage of the process.	The impact of the pandemic on the delivery of services may have limited the ability of the project group to input at each stage of the process.
Future population, health and social care needs and the impact of technological advances and predicted demographic trends will inform the demand for services, type of service models and subsequent workforce required for the future	The full extent of Transformation service developments, in particular information on the impact on future workforce needs, are not fully detailed, however need to be included in the predictions of workforce needed for the future.
Time frame-completion within 12-18 months	
Implementation of the Agreed Action Plan – recommendations from the Social Work Workforce Review will need to be implemented to support the achievement of the Transformation agenda and to provide a sustainable social work workforce in NI for the next 10 years.	Financial – the implementation of the recommendations will be impacted on by availability of resources (personnel and financial).

SECTION 2: Understanding Current Workforce

As outlined in ‘Delivering Together’ foreword, the World Health Organisation defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”

‘Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing’ is the primary purpose of social work as set out in ‘The Social Work Strategy 2012-2020⁴. This outlines five key social work roles that align with the over-arching aims of ‘Delivering Together’. They are to improve the quality of life and outcomes for people and assist in reducing the need for more expensive targeted or specialist services in the immediate or longer term:



Social workers carry out these roles in a range of settings and sectors, in the community, in hospitals, in schools and prisons, with individuals, and families, children and adults.

Social workers enable and help individuals, families and communities to live safely, purposefully and well, play an active and productive part in society, have better life chances and outcomes and build social cohesion and capital.

Social workers, (Probation Officers) in the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) have key roles in challenging offending behaviour and in

⁴ Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing: A Strategy for Social Work in Northern Ireland

supporting rehabilitation⁵ as their core work. In addition they work alongside partner agencies to develop and deliver Problem Solving Justice initiatives that seek to tackle the root causes of offending behaviours and reduce harmful behaviours within families and communities.⁶

Social Workers in YJA deliver services to vulnerable children with complex needs as well as working with partners to develop and deliver early intervention policies and practice to divert children from the formal justice system. Proposals for a new Care and Justice Campus reflect the complexity of work and needs.

Social Workers within the Education Authority (EA) assist the EA with the discharge of its statutory functions, protecting and safeguarding children, and supporting children and families to get the best out of the education system. The service provides a regional service to schools and other provisions through the Education Welfare Service (EWS) and the Child Protection Support Service (CPSS).

Social workers within the voluntary sector deliver a range of vital services and resources, many of which are commissioned by HSC Trusts, to vulnerable children, adults and families, through organisations such as Barnardo's, Praxis Care, NSPCC, Action for Children and Extern, helping to create safer communities and supporting individuals and families with complex needs.

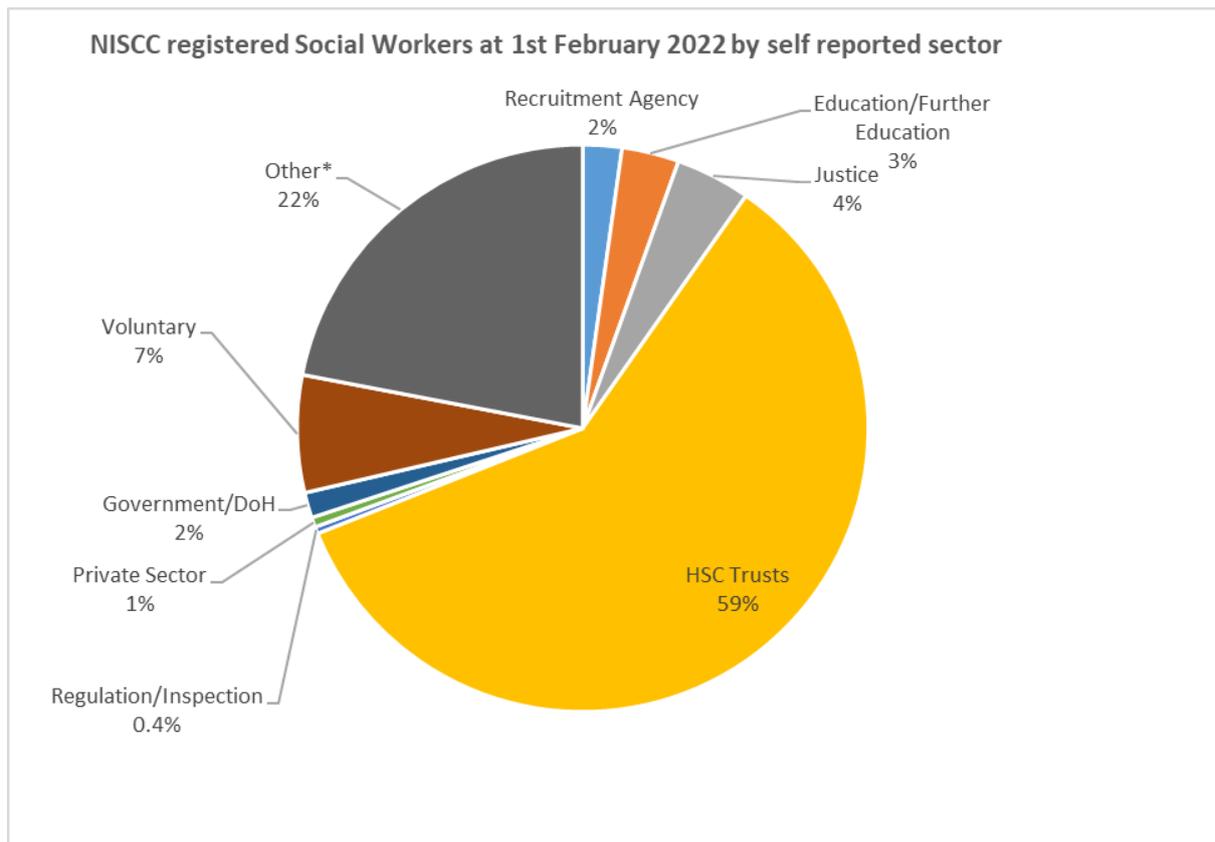
Effective social work practice is informed by continuous professional development (CPD), is evidence based and incorporates and promotes research to ensure high standards of practice.

2:1 Current Capacity

There were 6,417 social workers registered with the Social Care Council at 1st of February 2022 working primarily in the statutory sector, in Health, Justice and Education, and in the voluntary/community (or 3rd sector), as set out below:

⁵ DOJ Corporate Plan 2019-22 +Business Plan 2020-21

⁶ For further information on Problem Solving Initiatives see <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/problem-solving-justice>



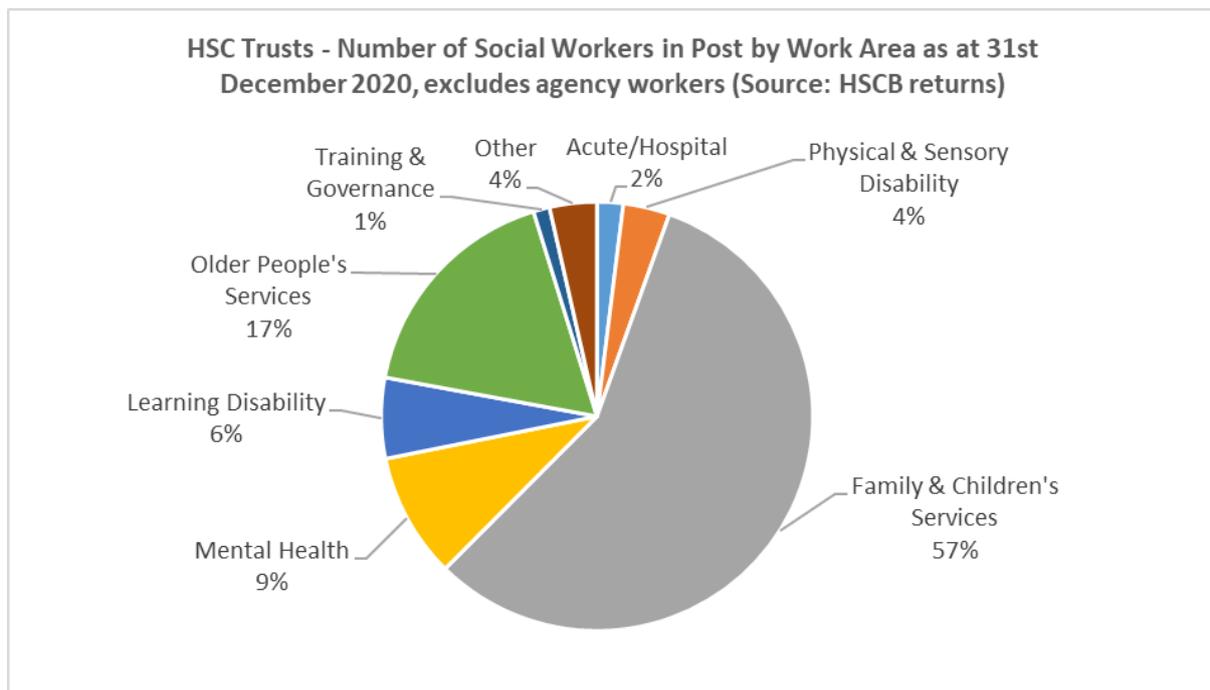
* Other Category - covers social workers who have noted that they work outside NI, are unemployed or retired but still maintain their registration.

There were over 270 social workers working in justice, over 200 in education and 1410 ,(22%) of registrants in the ‘other’ category, which includes self-reported as ‘retired’ , unemployed , self -employed, and working outside NI or UK.

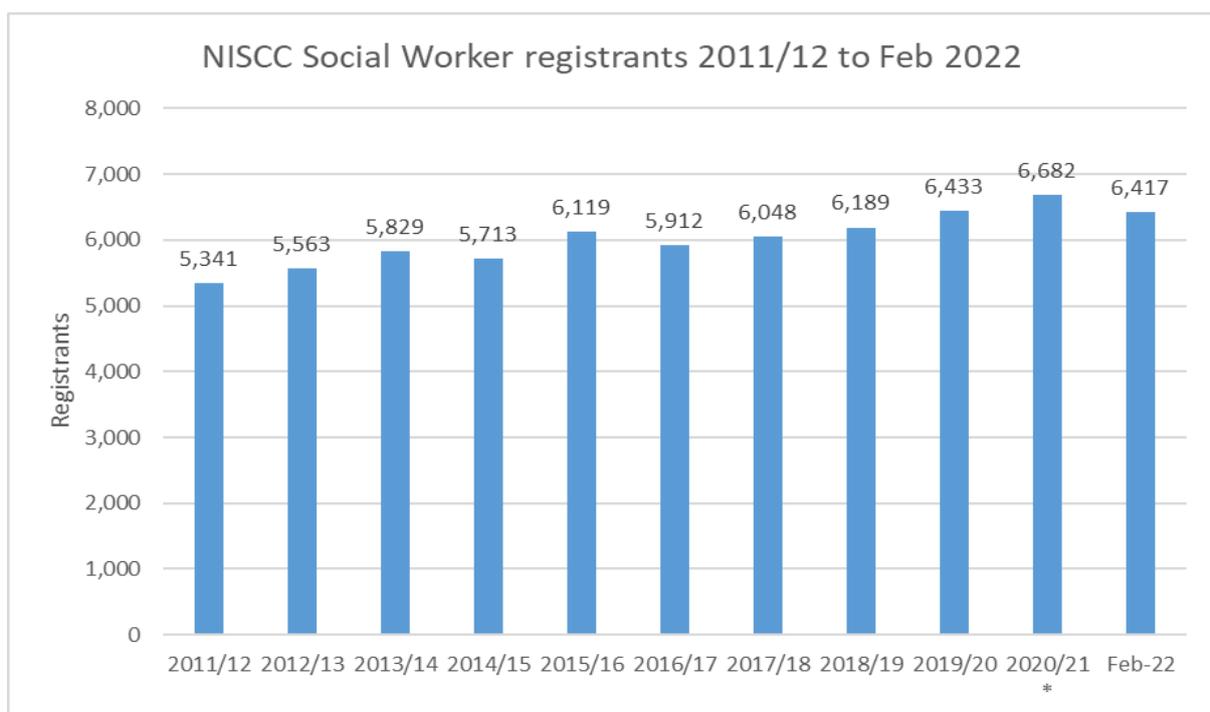
It would be useful for workforce planning to have more details on the employment status of this group, and an understanding of the reasons for remaining on the register, if related to employment and whether there is potential for utilising within the workforce if required

Registrants have the option to update their work details at any point in time as part of the Social Care Councils Live Register.

Almost six in ten of registered social workers work within the HSC Trusts, the breakdown across each sector is as follows, according to the annual HSCB data collation at 31st December 2020.

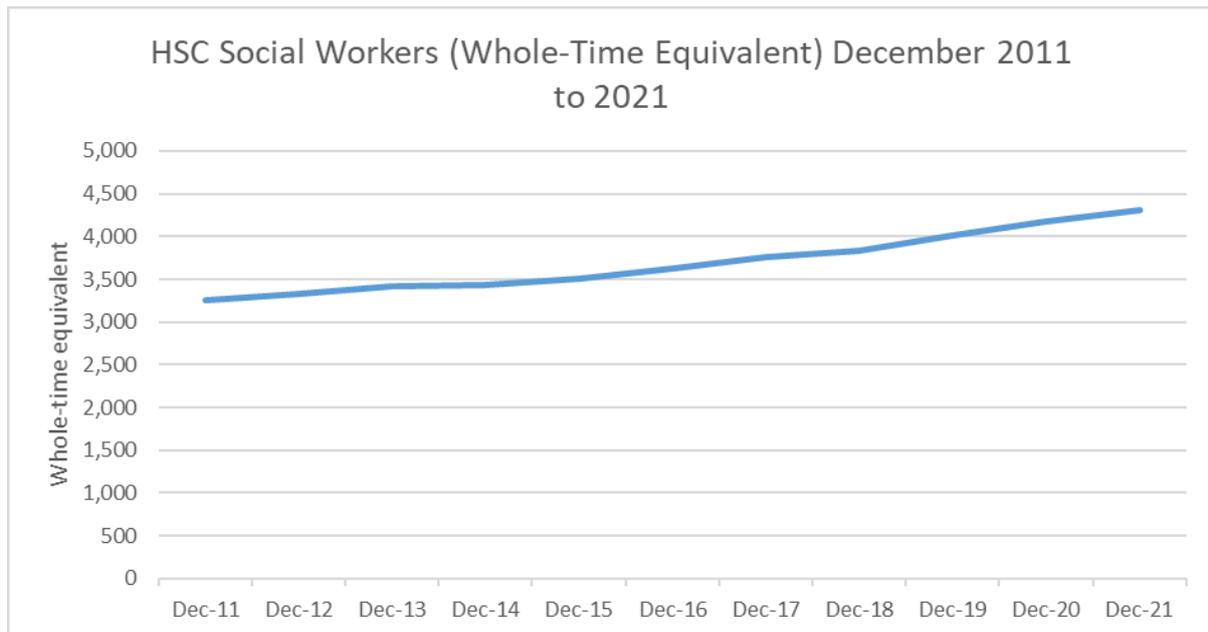


Trend data from the Social Care Council shows a 20% increase in Social Work registrants (1,076) over the period 2011/12 to February 2022.



***Note figures for 2020/21 are inflated due to the pandemic emergency register and the directive from the DOH not to remove anyone from the register.**

The HSC workforce data source shows an increase in whole time equivalent social workers trend from December 2011 to 2021 (32.5 % increase).



Within PBNI reductions in budget from 2011/12 to 2016/17 necessitated a reduction in staff and greater use of agency staff, however an expansion in business, particularly the DOJ’s problem solving initiatives led to gradual budget increases. Whilst some of this funding is permanent and allowed PBNI to increase its workforce, in recent years, project funding of this nature is often temporary which has caused difficulties with agency staff being recruited to short term posts.

The Youth Justice Agency report that staffing levels have remained fairly static.

There are approximately 208 social workers in the EA working primarily in Education Welfare, the Child Protection Support Service and the Inter-cultural Education Service.

The largest voluntary sector employer of social workers is Barnardo’s NI with 78 social workers, followed by Praxis with 52, NSPCC 40, Extern 36 and Action for Children with 33. (NISCC Feb 2022)

Staffing levels within the voluntary sector are dependent on adequate funding with decisions regarding numbers, experience and and qualification, influenced by affordability. Many services within the voluntary sector are commissioned by the HSC or Health Trusts, which occasionally have to be

reconfigured to make more use of non social work staff, due to financial constraints.

2:2 Gender

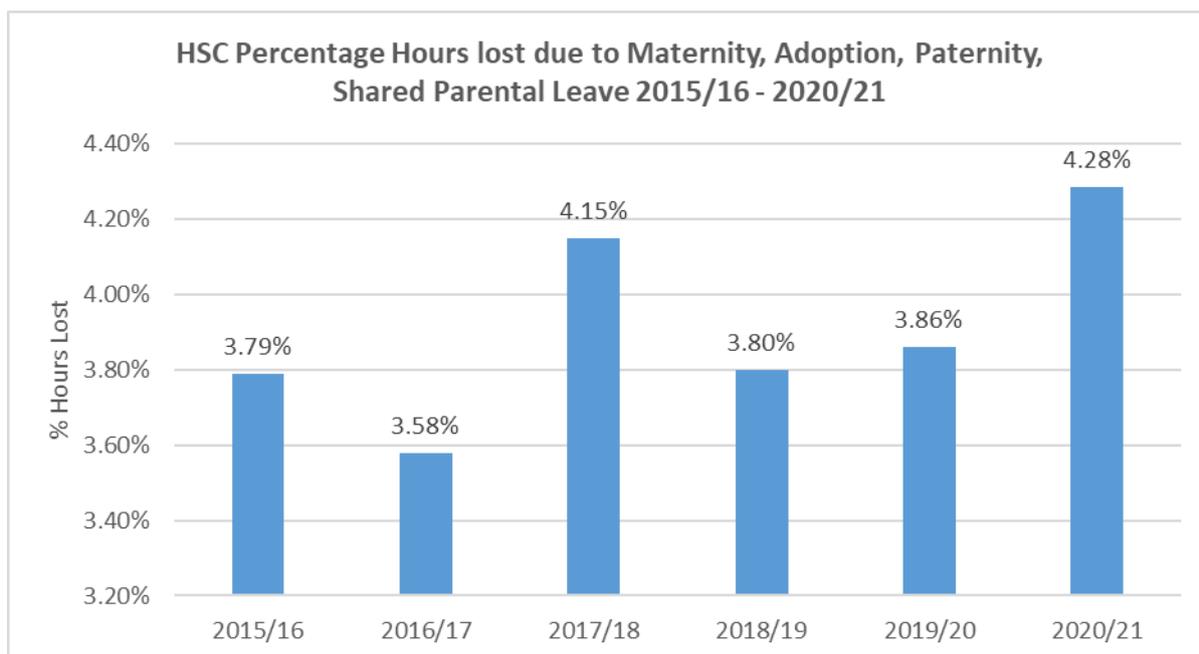
The Social Work workforce is predominantly female. 84% of NISCC registrants are women (85% female in HSC) with higher ratios of males in the older age ranges, as illustrated below. Admissions data from the Universities shows that fewer males are applying to undertake social work courses.

The predominance of a mainly female workforce has implications for workforce planning, for training and development, recruitment and retention and should be clearly understood and analysed.⁷



The level of HSC maternity, adoption, paternity and shared parental leave taken by HSC staff was 4.28% of working hours in 2020/21. The vast majority of this relates to female staff.

⁷ NHS Employers: Gender in the NHS 2019



There are gender variations in different sectors, with traditionally higher ratios of males in the justice and education sectors (PBNI 80% female & YJA 69% female) suggesting that males may be more attracted to certain roles within social work. This is echoed in recent research by David Galley⁸ which explores why there are fewer men in social work and their motivations to join the profession. The reasons for the gender imbalance and motivations are complex but research suggests there are differing motivations and aspirations that could be explored and discussed in order to develop strategies that address the imbalance and inform recruitment strategies. Highlighting the variety of roles and career opportunities for males within social work was part of a successful recruitment campaign in early 2020 by the Social Care Council working in partnership with the NI Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP)⁹ and other stakeholders to attract more applicants into social work. Almost 7% of the social work workforce or 429 (feb 2022) are employed within the voluntary and community sector. A survey carried out by NICVA every two

⁸ Galley, D. (2020) "Social Work is women's work, right?" Amplifying the voices of male social work students entering into a female majority occupation: applying qualitative methods. Thesis (PhD). Bournemouth University.

⁹ NI Degree in Social Work Partnership is an unincorporated association of education institutions and employing agencies –statutory and voluntary. Its main purpose is to ensure regional consistency in the delivery and development of agreed aspects of the Degree in Social Work in line with NISCC standards

to three years¹⁰ collates data on the voluntary community and social enterprise sector and outlines, 71.4% of paid staff (entire sector) are female, with 55% of paid staff between 16-24 (NICVA State of the Sector report). One third sector social work employer, Barnardo's, reports that 83% of their workforce are female.

There is a significant difference in gender across the age groups (23% of registrants over the age of 50 are male compared to 11% under 39).

Analysis of HSC data also suggests that more women (proportionately) leave the profession in the younger age groups compared to men, pointing to a need to ensure women are supported to remain in the profession.

Key findings of a survey of 1000 women returning to work in the UK¹¹ highlighted that alongside flexible working, family friendly policies, and wellbeing initiatives, support and mentoring in returning to work can assist in retention of female staff.

2:3 Age

The table above illustrates that 37% of all registrants, (32% HSC), are aged over 50. The average age at normal retirement on the latest year's HSC data was 61.1 years, indicating that the potential impact of retirements over the next five to 10 years could be significant.

Analysis of HSC leavers in 2020/21 saw a slight reduction in terms of actual numbers and percentage of staff at 197 leavers (4.45%) the joiner's rate for the same period was 8.8%. Of the 2020/21 HSC leavers, 61% were aged 50 and over, 25% were aged under 40 and 13% were aged 40-49. These are not necessarily leavers from the profession and may not be permanent leavers from HSC either.

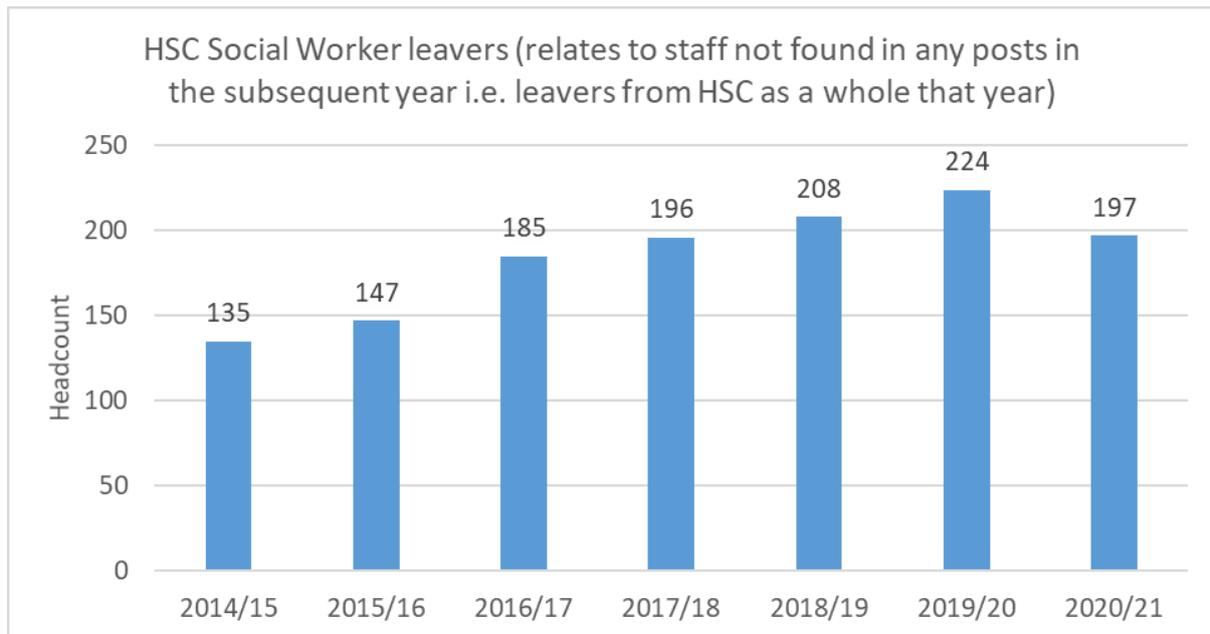
Building workforce business intelligence is one of the key themes of the HSC Workforce Strategy with the roll out exit interviews one of the actions planned to achieve this¹². While this will assist decision making and workforce planning in the HSC, consideration should be given to gathering data on leavers from

¹⁰ State of the Sector :NICVA report on the size, scope and finances of the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector

¹¹ A Guide for Employers 'Attracting and Engaging Women Returning to the Workforce' Robert Walters: empowering Women

¹² Action 23: Roll out of exit interviews for all staff leaving the HSC : HSC Workforce Strategy 2026

the social work profession to better understand trends and to inform future strategies on supply and retention.



PBNI report 53% of their workforce is aged over 45, with 28% of staff part time. With around 30 staff leaving per annum, of which around 84% are social workers, they need to replenish the workforce regularly and rely mainly on newly qualified social workers to fill vacancies.

YJA report that over 60% of the workforce is over 45 and 15% of the workforce is part time. A CJINI inspection report in 2018 commented on the ageing workforce particularly in the custodial services directorate.¹³

The working pattern in the HSC as at 31st December 2021 T was 82% of staff were full-time and 18% part-time.

As a relatively aging workforce there is a potential for a significant loss of knowledge and experience in the next 5-10 years across all sectors. As well as increasing supply, there needs to be a focus on retaining social workers including those who may wish to work past the average retirement age, with the appropriate supports to assist this.

Recently published research¹⁴ 'Growing Older in Social Work' highlights the need to consider ageing as a critical matter for the social work profession, in

¹³ An Announced Inspection of Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre: June 2018 CJ I :RQIA

¹⁴ Growing Older in Social Work :Perspective on Systems of Support to Extend Working Lives –Findings from a UK Survey : Paula Mc Fadden, John Moriarty, Heike Shroder, Patricia Gillen, Gillian Manthorpe,&John Mallett

terms of workforce planning. The survey found that perceptions of structural ageism and a lack of support by line managers and organisations influenced retirement intentions by many respondents.

Research carried out in conjunction with Community Care exploring attitudes to ageing and retirement in social work reported that almost 50% of respondents suggested that opportunities for flexible working and /or opportunities to change role, could encourage retention of experienced staff.¹⁵ Specific projects such as the ‘Supporting Staff to Work Longer’ initiative,¹⁶ undertaken in a NHS foundation Trust in England have been shown to reduce turnover of all staff as well as providing resources, tailored support and advice to staff and education for managers in helping to support staff to work longer.

Agencies such as Age UK and the Centre for Aging Better provide advice and guidance on the creation of ‘age friendly’ work places which may help to address the perceptions employees have of aging and assist in the retention of experienced staff.

2:4 Supply

The number of social work students was reduced in 2011 from 300 to 260, due to economic constraints in the public sector at that time. The five year average of social work students completing the social work course is 239 each year (out of 260). They are eligible to join the workforce, (others defer and join at a later date) however it is likely not all join the NI workforce, and some may join the workforce in the Republic of Ireland or elsewhere.

An additional 15 OU places were approved in 2020, bringing the total number of student places to 275, however long term funding arrangements have not yet been agreed.

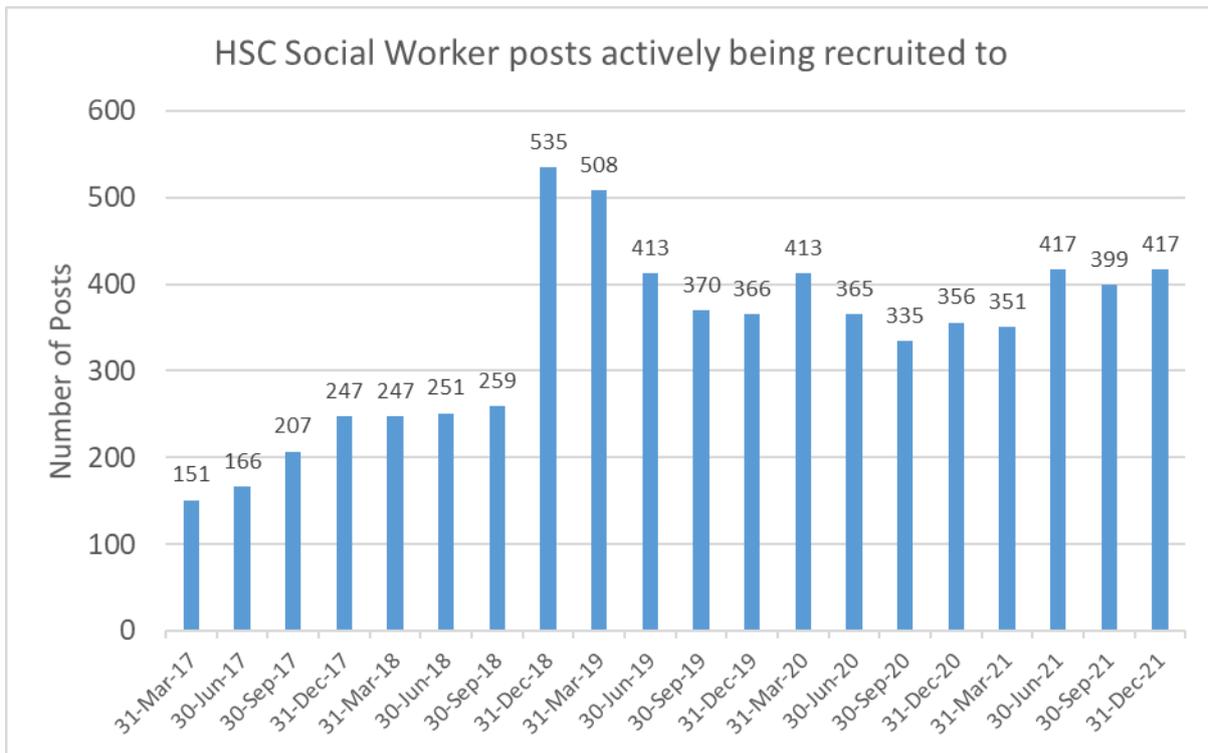
All sectors are reporting workforce issues with increasing difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff.

HSC Trusts have reported supply issues in DSF reports for a number of years, with the past three years showing a marked increase in (actively being recruited) vacancies in general.

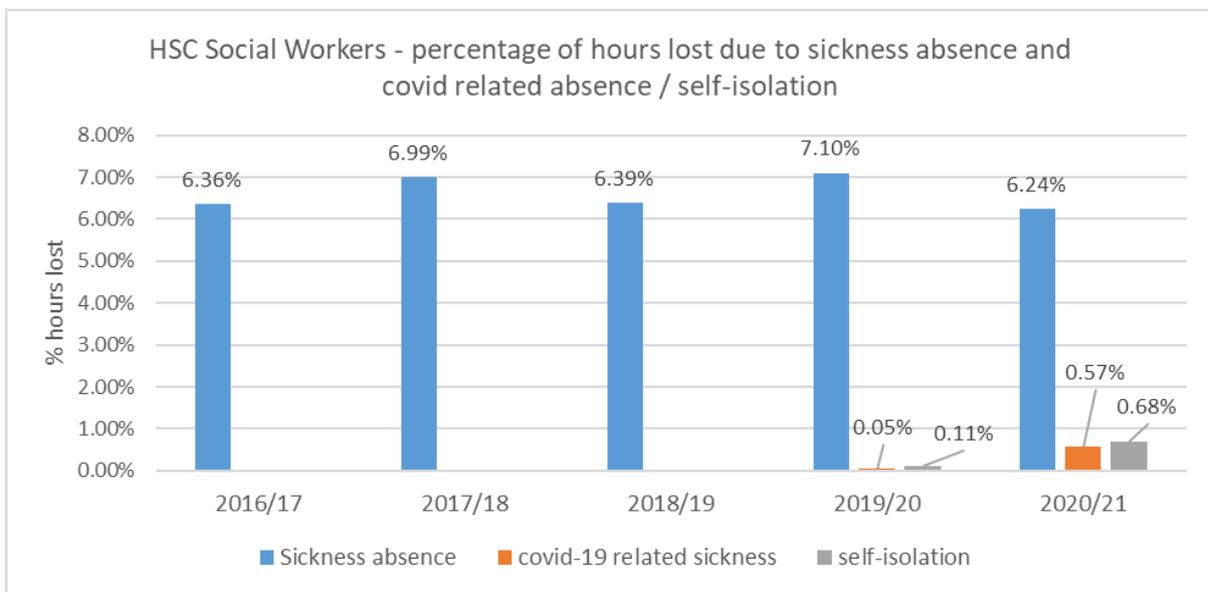
¹⁵ Aging and the Wellbeing of UK Social Workers :Dr P.McFadden et al

¹⁶ Supporting Staff to Work Longer project: University of Derby and Burton NHS Foundation :March 2020

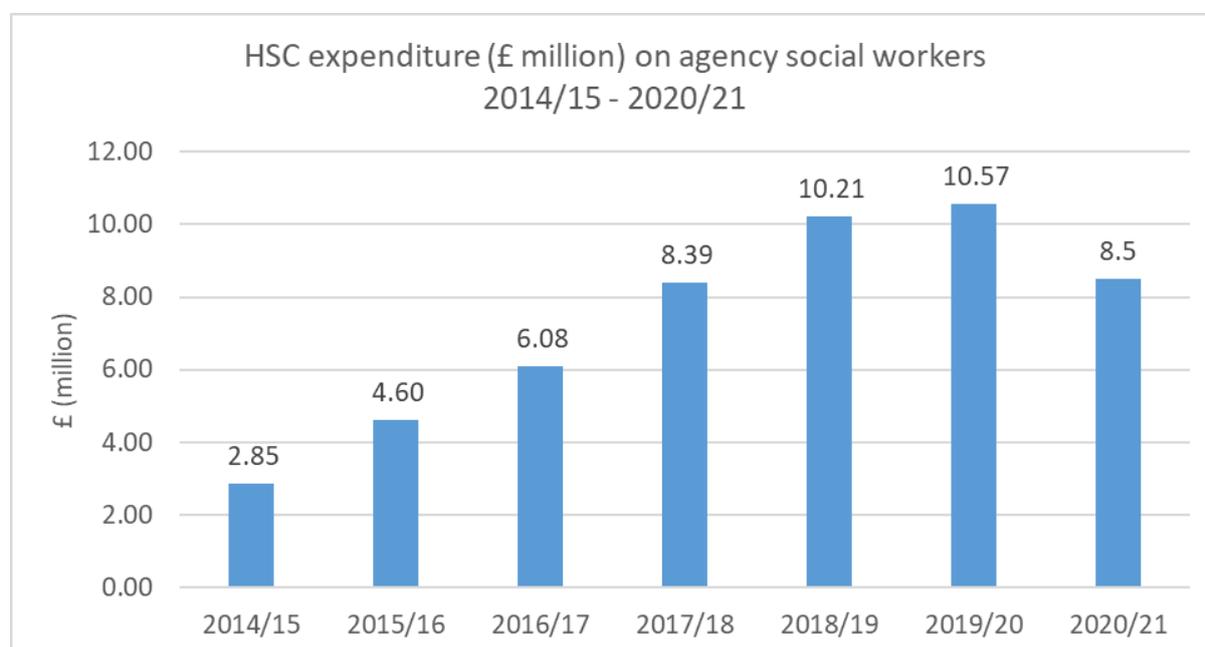
HSC vacancies in recruitment figures spiked dramatically in December 2018 (535) at more than three times those reported in March 2017 although this has since generally decreased and was 417 at December 2021.



HSC sickness absence trends in the percentage of hours lost have ranged from 6.36% to 7.10% in recent years, however the pandemic has resulted in an elevated level of absence to 7.49% of hours lost in 2020/21 including covid related sickness and self isolation..



HSC workforce data showed an increasing use of recruitment agency social workers over the past 3 – 5 years and an exponential growth in costs, however 2020/21 saw a marked effort to reduce this spend, as set out below:



Short term funding and budget uncertainties across the sector have led to a greater use of temporary staff employed by a recruitment agency. This in turn has contributed to unnecessary turnover of staff in some areas, with implications for the continuity and quality of care experienced by service users and carers.

Feedback from Trade Unions and staff surveys indicate that the vast majority of agency staff (and students) would prefer permanent appointments, if these were available in a timely manner, and for students, at a corresponding time to graduations.

Uncertainties regarding levels and sources of income in the voluntary sector require the use of short term or temporary contracts, which can lead to disruptions in service delivery and problems with retention and recruitment.

Within the HSC ratios of experienced to inexperienced staff have shifted with many experienced staff moving to newly created (Transformation) posts, at times leaving core teams with high numbers of inexperienced staff. Recurring

difficulties in some areas particularly in children's services have created 'hard to fill' posts or 'hotspots', with temporary posts particularly difficult to fill.

Children's Services in Leeds County Council, facing similar challenges, focussed on retention of staff and introduced a number of measure to stabilise teams and reduce dependency on agencies which included the introduction of an **advanced practitioner post**, part senior practitioner, part mentor, to co-work with inexperienced staff to support and develop their practice¹⁷. They established a career pathway to offer tailored support and development opportunities at every level, with progression processes rooted in social work practice. The measures taken in Leeds took them from an 'inadequate' Ofsted rating to 'outstanding' with outcomes that included a reduction in agency social workers, higher levels of retention and improvements in recruitment.¹⁸

A review of the roles and deployment of senior practitioners (SPs) and principal practitioners (PPs) in the HSC Trusts carried out in 2014¹⁹ found a lack of consistency in job descriptions and in the numbers and deployment of both senior practitioners and principal practitioners with variation in the amount of support and supervision provided to band 6 social workers.

The report also stated 'Of key importance is the need to examine the role of front-line managers' (band 7 as the review illustrated that these posts while having similar responsibilities to that of SPs, also had additional management duties. There is a need for appropriate weighting of posts at the same pay band' This is a critical post for assuring safe and effective care and remains difficult to recruit to given a senior practitioner is paid at the same band.

Standardisation of job descriptions of SPs and PPs is critical to ensure provision of support/mentoring for band 5 and 6 social workers .Addressing the roles and responsibilities of senior practitioners will assist in the retention and stabilisation of teams.

The use of Risk Retention Tools²⁰ (evidence based diagnostic tool) in some local authorities in England has enabled managers to get a baseline

¹⁷ <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2019/02/25/retention-of-our-social-workers-has-been-key-to-unlocking-outcomes/>

¹⁸ Project entry form for Children and Young People Now Awards 2018

¹⁹ DHSSPS :A review of the Roles and Deployment of Senior Practitioners and Principal Social Work Practitioners in NI.2104

²⁰ <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2019/11/27/social-worker-retention-risk-tool/>

understanding of the retention challenges within teams, and to collaboratively identify risks and potential solutions .

Sustaining people in the profession and in their roles, including the promotion of self –care, is key to reducing dependency and spending on agency staff.

Social work managers in the HSC have expressed frustrations with delays in recruitment processes with vacant posts unfilled for a number of months. HR staff report a lack of consistency across organisations with a call for greater collaboration across the HSC to improve outcomes for all and to secure timely and permanent social work appointments.²¹ Work was undertaken to address this, and with learning from initiatives introduced during the Covid pandemic, proposals developed for Student Streamlining and Collaborative Recruitment to speed up recruitment of newly qualified practitioners.

This led to a HSC Regional Recruitment exercise for band 5/6 social workers, which commenced in 2021.

Reports and analysis of the exercise highlighted more collaborative work was needed to improve recruitment outcomes. A report prepared by the Head of HSC²² recruitment noted that ‘without further external supply we are simply moving existing staff around the system’.

A report on the Professional Learning from the exercise prepared by Trust ADs echoed the recommendations within the Workforce Review on improving recruitment processes, including a focus on ‘hard to fill posts’, maximising outcomes for student recruitment, skills mix, and a review of pathways into social work.²³

Lessons learnt from the 2021 Regional Recruitment are being taken forward by the Task and Finish (HR) group to improve and develop future recruitment exercises.

Historically, PBNI and the EA saw high levels of interest and applicants for social work posts, (including applicants from Trusts) .More recently this situation has changed and employers have concerns about being able to meet future demand due to challenges in recruiting qualified social workers. The

²¹ The Strategic Resourcing Innovation Forum (SRIF) are working on this; TOR are ‘to produce plans and recommendations about. Recruitment processes and HR Processes required to maximise the capacity of the workforce to deliver services regionally and ensure sustainability, consistency and retention.’

²² Regional Social Work Recruitment Update Report : Karyn Patterson Head of HSC Recruitment

²³ Regional Recruitment :Professional Learning from January 2021

reliance on agency social workers, to staff projects funded on a short term basis has also revealed a shortage of agency social workers.

The voluntary sector has seen a drop in applicants and challenges in recruitment and retention due to difficulties competing with HSC pay scales, pensions and job security, and competition in border areas, particularly in the Western area with Tusla. The short term funding nature of many voluntary sector contracts can also have a negative impact on retention.

There needs to be a greater focus on retaining experienced social workers to help address the current supply challenges, and to retain knowledge, skills and expertise within the profession. It may also help to address specific retention challenges that are reported within front line children's services.

A Research in Practice paper on 'Recruitment and Retention of Social Workers'²⁴ discusses the 'push and pull' factors that social workers consider when deciding whether to stay or leave organisations or the profession. Minimising the 'push' factors and maximising the 'pull' factors, such as commitment to making a difference, high quality supervision (which includes a focus on health and wellbeing), opportunities for staff development, peer support, opportunities for career progression and organisational support for emotional well-being have been shown to strongly influence the decision to remain within an organisation. Loss of job satisfaction was cited as one of the biggest reasons social workers leave their profession.

All Ireland research recently completed on social work identity²⁵ provides further evidence of the 'push' factors and cited four factors which negatively impacted on social work identity as bureaucracy, workload pressure, insufficient time to spend in direct engagement with service users and media portrayal of social work.

Research has shown linkages between positive organisational culture and lower staff turnover, improved quality of service and outcomes for service users and increased job satisfaction.

2:5 Covid-19 Response

²⁴ Research in Practice: Social Work Recruitment and Retention

²⁵ Shaping Social Workers Identity, An All Ireland Study, Oct 2020, BASW, IASW, NISCC, CORU

The impact of Covid -19 has presented unprecedented challenges to workforce planning. In response to an anticipated increase in demand steps were taken to increase the capacity of the workforce by expediting the registration and recruitment of newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) in 2020. HSC colleagues with the Social Care Council and others, worked collaboratively to accelerate and streamline processes, successfully resulting in the direct and timely recruitment of newly qualified social workers into the Trusts and the return of a number of lapsed social workers to the workforce.

Learning from this accelerated approach has been developed into proposals for streamlining student recruitment and collaborative recruitment processes which will reduce duplication and improve service delivery.

The impact for both newly qualified and experienced staff is yet to be fully understood, however, a survey of the health and social care workforce in the UK on the work experiences and coping of health and social care staff in relation to the COVID -19 pandemic confirmed the need for flexible working conditions, appropriate training and policies for working from home.²⁶

A paper 'Testing Partnership and Preparedness in Northern Ireland During Covid-19'²⁷ reflected on the processes and the impact on social work students and AYE social workers of 'entering the workforce in a time of flux'. Both point to a need for increased flexibility and adaptation with training and support to ensure a competent, confident and skilled workforce.

The crisis has highlighted the need for a workforce that is agile, responsive and equipped with transferable skills. Collaboration and innovation have been key to some of the responses to the pandemic that have included, role rotation and redeployment, flexible working arrangements, greater use of technology, increased cross-boundary working and more partnering with service users and carers.

To embed the learning from this innovative and collaborative approach to recruitment, the Department proposes to establish a reference group of representatives from HSC professions, HR Directors and BSO to develop collaborative, responsive and timely recruitment processes in future years.

²⁶ Health and Social Care Workers quality of working life and coping while working during the Covid -19 pandemic. May –July 2020: Dr. Paula mc Fadden, Dr. John Moriarity et al

²⁷²⁷ Testing Partnership and Preparedness in NI During Covid-19 M O'Rourke, C. Maguire, J Molineaux & L Tanner. Social Work Education: The international Journal. Vol 39, 2020

2:6 Commissioned Professional Training

A Degree in Social Work is the threshold qualification for entry to the social work profession in NI and is a generic qualification which entitles social workers to practise across a range of sectors and settings including the statutory health and social care, justice, education and the third sectors.

Social Work education places in Northern Ireland are commissioned by the Department of Health (DoH) and providers approved by the Social Care Council. There are now **275** training places available in NI which include a recently approved Degree course provided by the Open University.

The number of student university/FE places was reduced from 300 to 260 in 2011 due to scrutiny of value for money across public spending, austerity measures and a reduction in available posts for new graduates at that time.

The Degree is provided as a three year undergraduate course (UGR) and a two year relevant graduate route. (RGR), the latter through QUB and the UU only. A part time route, which was an undergraduate five year programme, was available from 2010 but was discontinued in 2016/17 due to a low take up of places.

In March 2020 the Open University was ‘approved with conditions’²⁸ by the Social Care Council to deliver 15 places on a flexible degree course, primarily to those currently working within the social care sector, (statutory and the third sector) as a career pathway for social care workers. The course has been oversubscribed with some Trusts exploring the possibility of funding additional places to help address supply challenges. (HSC Trusts are also exploring the option of supporting staff to complete the two year RGR programme) The voluntary sector would also welcome additional places and view this route as an opportunity for many experienced staff working in social care to gain a professional qualification while continuing to work and support themselves.

The OU route would also be suitable for staff in justice and education to obtain a professional qualification, if sufficient and recurrent funding could be secured.

Feedback from the engagement events and consultations have frequently referenced the need for an employment based route that would enable staff

²⁸ The approval is for a 5 year period subject to satisfactory quality assurance and annual monitoring

who are not social work qualified but experienced working in these sectors to obtain a qualification in social work. A work based route, or trainee programme, was previously available but discontinued a number of years ago.

There are now three approved providers, providing full time courses, as set out below:

Course Provider	Programme	Number of places
Queens University Belfast	Batchelor of Social Work Degree (UGR) Programme	72
	Batchelor of Social Work Degree (RGR) Programme	40
Ulster of University	Batchelor of Science Honours Degree (UGR) Magee	63
	Batchelor of Science Honours Degree in Social Work (RGR) – Magee	40
	Belfast Metropolitan College, Undergraduate (UGR) Programme (Yrs. 1 & 2 only)	30
	South West College (Dungannon) Undergraduate (UGR) Programme (Yrs. 1 & 2 only)	15
Open University (Approved March 2020)	NI Degree in Social Work	15
	TOTAL	275

The universities report that applications to both social work programmes are oversubscribed. Whilst there had been a decline in applications, for two years, for the UGR programme at the UU, this has been addressed, and applications to both universities increased in 2019/20 and 20/21.

Admissions data from the universities²⁹ shows that fewer males are applying to complete social work courses.

Admissions data is collated on age, sex and disability, but not race, religion, or sexual diversity. There is a perception that while the social work population is becoming more diverse, more could be done to improve diversity with both students and the social work workforce. Improving data collection on diversity would help inform future workforce planning and ensure the workforce reflects the population it serves.

In response to the decreasing number of applicants the Social Care Council, the NI Degree in Social Work Partnership, and representatives from the universities' and colleges academic staff and Admissions and Domestic Recruitment teams, worked to proactively promote social work as a career and review processes in order to maximise applications in 2020, increasing the number of successful applications by over 19% on 2019.

Analysis over the last five years shows that on average 239 (out of 260) students complete the Degree and are eligible to join the workforce per year. (A number defer for personal or health reasons with the majority joining the workforce at a later date. Attrition rates would be between 2-3 %) Annual monitoring processes undertaken by the Universities (Continuous Assurance of Quality Enhancement (CAQE) at the UU and Continuous Action for Programme Enhancement (CAPE) at QUB) and ongoing work with the collaborative partnerships continuously review the quality and standards and seek to optimise successful completions.

Student social workers are required to complete two Practice Learning Opportunities (PLO's) or placements while training, and are required to be supervised by a qualified practice teacher, onsite, or an onsite supervisor and an offsite practice teacher. Positive learning opportunities are essential for the supply and development of the workforce, and must be adequately resourced

²⁹ <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2019>

to ensure we have a workforce 'fit for purpose' (Action 3: HSC Workforce Strategy).

Research findings from NI studies have identified the importance of PLOs being adequately resourced, sustained and developed.³⁰

There should be cross departmental discussions (DOH, DOJ & DE) to ensure practice learning opportunities are adequately resourced, sustained and developed across the profession.

In England the Open University has launched its Social Worker Degree Apprenticeship supporting more people into higher education and providing a new flexible route into social work. The Apprenticeships offer staff working within the care sector opportunities for qualification and career progression.

Scotland and the Republic of Ireland are addressing supply problems by considering options such as widening access to social work courses, particularly career pathways from social care into social work.

A Pathway Programme for widening participation is currently offered by Queen's University, in terms of supporting school leavers from disadvantaged communities, who meet the academic entry requirements. It is hoped that this will extend to the Bachelor of Social Work Degree (UGR) in 2023

A Domiciliary Care Workforce Review³¹ completed in 2016 included a recommendation to create career pathways for social care workers to remain within the care sector and as a route into social work. This could both strengthen the social care workforce and potentially improve the supply of social workers.

Similarly, within the justice sector, there are experienced, motivated (unqualified) staff who may be interested in pursuing a career in social work if an appropriate route was available, which could assist in meeting future workforce needs across the justice sector.

There are currently 9 IQSWs registered with the Social Care Council (Feb 2022) Qualifications held by Internationally Qualified Social Workers (IQSWs) are assessed by the Social Care Council when they apply for registration. IQSWs are often required to complete a compensation measure before being accepted as suitable for practise in NI.

³⁰ <https://pure.qub.ac.uk/en/publications/the-inside-story-a-survey-of-social-work-students-supervision-and-promoting-readiness-to-practice-which-learning-activities-promote>

³¹ Domiciliary Care Workforce Review NI 2016-21

Concerns have been expressed about the impact of Brexit on the recognition of qualifications and whether this will limit the opportunity to recruit EU social workers, which may also have to be factored into future workforce planning. Currently social workers working across the border are required to be registered in both jurisdictions.

Newly qualified social workers have restricted caseloads and are required to undertake an assessed year in employment (AYE) to ensure competency to practice in the workplace and for future career progression and professional development. Following their AYE all social workers are required to complete two requirements from the Social Care Council, Professional in Practice (PiP) Framework to maintain their registration. Professional in Practice Framework is the CPD Framework for social work in Northern Ireland

The Standards for Conduct and Practice for Social Workers require that, *'As a social worker, you must be accountable for the quality of your work and take responsibility for maintaining and improving your knowledge and skills'*. As a requirement of registration social workers must complete a minimum of 90 hours post registration training and learning in each three year period.

Although a requirement of their first year in employment, feedback from AYE staff, particularly in some Family and Childcare teams highlights that caseload protection is minimal and induction haphazard. Retention of staff into their second and third year, in the same post, should be a key organisational objective to break the problem of unnecessary turnover, in some teams. Including a recognition of and facilitation of AYE learning requirements.

Continuous Professional Development (CPD), professional supervision and supporting professional activities are essential for the maintenance and development of the workforce and frequently identified as essential factors in recruitment and retention of staff. CPD is key to ensuring social workers are competent to practice and able to manage increasingly complex and challenging caseloads and must be promoted and protected.

The Learning and Improvement Strategy for Social Workers and Social Care Workers³² sets out the strategic direction for learning and improvement to improve outcomes for people who use services, carers and communities.

A commitment to continuous improvement and the creation of a learning environment in which social work can thrive, are reported as factors that have

³² A Learning and Improvement Strategy for Social Workers and Social Care Workers 2019-27: DOH

contributed to 'Outstanding' organisations, in Ofsted³³ inspections. (See North Tyneside Inspection of Children's Social Care Services)³⁴

The introduction of job plans which include time for CPD would ensure learning and development and other activities are recognised, prioritised and valued as an essential contribution to the delivery of high quality care. Recognition for CPD through the PiP Framework provides further opportunity for ensuring quality, consistency and transferability.

The Association of Executive Directors of Social Work in the Health Trusts has identified the need to adopt a regional approach to the leadership development and support for the social work profession in the context of ever increasing demands. The Association has endorsed a paper entitled ' A time for Change ' ³⁵which lays out a vision for a more centralised leadership model and the development of a regional learning hub for the profession .This proposal advocates the sharing of Trusts resources with a view to ;

- Promoting a strong confident and readily identifiable voice for the social work profession in Northern Ireland
- Fully implementing the strategic priorities contained in the Learning and Improvement strategy for Social Workers and Social Care Workers , the SW Research Strategy³⁶ and the Social Work Strategy
- Developing a drive within the social work/social care workforce which is focused on facilitating innovation and change at the front line, enabled by peer support and coaching, to address staff recruitment and retention issues.
- Removing the current barriers to securing a coordinated and coherent approach to all learning and improvement activity for social workers and social care workers, which maximises its efficiency and effectiveness.

³³ Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills :England

³⁴ Ofsted Inspection of Children's Social Care Services :North Tyneside Council March 2020

³⁵ A Time for Change :Creating a learning system for social work and social care in NI ?AD ?Directors of Social Work 2018

³⁶ Health and Social Care Board (2020) *Social Work and Social Care Research Evidence: Supporting Continuous Improvement in Service Outcomes Strategy 2020-2025* Available as [SWSC-Research-Evidence-Strategy-2020-25.pdf \(hscni.net\)](https://www.hscni.net/sites/default/files/2020-12/SWSC-Research-Evidence-Strategy-2020-25.pdf)

Strategic Theme 1: Supply

Demand is outstripping supply and collaborative, proactive action must be taken to attract, recruit and retain students and social workers, with responsive and timely recruitment processes in place to provide a sustainable workforce (Recs 1, 3, 4 & 5)

2:7 Service Demand

Workforce issues in Health & Social Care have been reported in Delegated Statutory Functions³⁷ (DSF) reports since 2015. The 2019/20 Delegated Statutory Functions report³⁸ highlighted social work staff shortages across all five HSC Trusts and as having a significant impact on the Trusts ability to deliver their statutory functions.

Overall Trusts continue to report increased pressures due to rising demand and complexity of need across all Programmes of Care.

Emerging pressures related to the impact of Covid -19 also continue to present unprecedented challenges..

In children's services workforce difficulties are reported in recruitment and retention, caseload pressures, caseload size and complexity of cases, and rising numbers of unallocated cases which have impacted on service delivery .Rising numbers of children on the child protection register³⁹, rising numbers of looked after children, and placement availability across the spectrum ie fostering , residential care , post care and for children with a disability remain sources of significant pressures for Trusts.

As of the 31st March 2020, there were 3,383 Children Looked After. This is the highest number of children looked after since the introduction of the Children (NI) Order 1995

The number of children known to Social Services and whose names have been placed on the child protection register increased by 20% between 2014 and 2020, with 2,298 on the register in March 2020.

³⁷ Delegated Statutory Function reports are Trust reports to the HSCB on the statutory functions delegated to them by the HSCB .The Social Care Directorate carried out a review of the reporting process in 2021 and have begun work on an Outcome Framework which will assist and compliment the DSF process in future.

³⁸ Delegated Statutory Functions Report 2019/20

³⁹ Northern Ireland has the highest rate of children on the child protection register in the UK, at 52 per 100,000

Concerns have been raised by the judiciary regarding delays linked to staff turnover in children's services and there have been increases in waiting lists for parenting capacity assessments in family centres.

There has been a rising trend in unallocated cases in children's services since 2013 with 804 children reported as awaiting a social work allocation in March 2020, compared with 236 in 2013.

HSC Trusts report increasing caseloads and increased complexity of need linked to addiction issues, poor mental health, domestic violence and poverty across all Trusts. The RQIA Review of Governance Arrangements for Child Protection in the HSC⁴⁰ noted concerns raised by staff about the increasing complexity of work, and unattended cases, and recommended that steps be taken to assess risk and support staff to mitigate the potential impact of work related stress.

HSC Trusts report that social work staff in children's services are working to capacity, with growing waiting lists, high staff turnover and high numbers of inexperienced staff within many children's services teams.

This prompted the successful submission of a business case in 2020 for an additional ten Band 7 peripatetic senior practitioners, ten social work assistants and five recruitment officers, to reduce the number of unallocated cases, provide greater levels of support for inexperienced staff, and enable social workers to spend more direct time with families, across the HSC. The additional capacity will be subject to review and evaluation on the basis of agreed measurable targets and objectives. Filling these additional posts will undoubtedly present further challenges making it imperative that supply is adequate to meet future demand.

Reducing unnecessary or unmanaged turnover and stabilising the workforce are critical to improving outcomes for staff and service users.

In Adult Mental Health all Trusts report pressures to varying degrees in terms of increases in service demands, acuity of need, management of waiting lists and challenges around the recruitment and retention of the skilled workforce, particularly Approved Social Workers (ASWs), needed to underpin and secure high quality, accessible and safe services.

⁴⁰ Review of the Governance Arrangements for Child Protection in the HSC in NI :Phase 1 .The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority :May 2018

The phased roll-out of the Mental Capacity Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 commenced in December 2019, has placed significant demands upon Trusts, changing practice and requiring the development of new teams and protocols. The establishment of multi-professional panels to examine and authorise deprivation of liberty applications has placed an enormous demand on the wider HSC system and mental health particularly with regard to approved social workers

Improved understanding of the range of mental health needs of the population has led to the development of a wider range of new and targeted services and initiatives. Some of these will be described in the Mental Health Action Plan and will form part of the future Mental Health Strategy work. Trusts are reporting difficulties in finding experienced skilled staff to fill these posts.

In an effort to quantify both current and anticipated demand for ASWs a report was commissioned to provide an evidence based assessment of the number of ASWs required for Trusts to fulfil their statutory functions. Revised ASW Quality Standards are to be implemented which include a recommendation for an additional 64 ASWs.⁴¹ While the QUB report included out of hour admissions in its calculation, work on the model of delivery for the out of hours ASW service is still underway and may alter these numbers.

Recruitment and retention of social workers and social work team leaders, was reported as of concern in all service areas, and particularly acute in mental health services across NI.

In some areas across adult services social work team leaders, at Band 7, have responsibility for management of Senior Practitioners, Approved Social Workers and other professional leads, who are on the same Band (7) as well as responsibilities for decision making, caseloads and administration. They may also have to act as Designated Adult Protection Officer (DAPO) or ASW practice assessor unlike team leaders from other professions. Social Work leaders have expressed concerns these additional responsibilities may deter many from taking up the posts.

Adult Learning Disability reported challenges with the recruitment and retention of their workforce, specifically in relation to Approved Social Worker roles as well as Short term Detention Approvers and Social Workers assigned investigating Officer (IO) or Designated Adult Protection Officer (DAPO) roles.

⁴¹ Approved Social Work Planning Estimates: July 2020 Prof Gavin Davidson & DR Claire Mc Carten QUB

The implementation of Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DOLs) under the Mental Capacity Act has also presented challenges for Trusts in meeting the required timescales.

Chief Officers in Trusts have called for regional consistency in bandings to ensure equity of opportunity and greater consistency in service delivery

A review of job descriptions and use and deployment of first line managers and Senior Practitioner posts could help to address perceived inequities and maximise the professional resource at Band 7 level. This should include opportunities for rotation and/or mobility to strengthen professional development and incentivise staff to take up management posts.

Strengthening professional leadership is one of the key priorities of the Social Work Strategy⁴², and work has been ongoing to develop a Leadership Framework for Social Work.⁴³ This aligns with the HSC Collective Leadership Strategy launched in 2017 to create *‘a culture of high quality, continually improving, compassionate care and support’*.

A framework to strengthen and support professional leadership and career progression should be progressed, supported by relevant development and CPD opportunities.

Effective leadership and management is also one of the six strategic priorities of the Learning and Improvement Strategy.⁴⁴

Concerns have been raised in adult services at the variations of the social work footprint across programmes of care and Trusts. A multiplicity of job descriptions, or generic job descriptions, job titles, and job roles across teams, many of which are set up at a local team and service area level, can undermine the social work role, complicate identification and data collection and diminish visibility of the social work profession.

Greater regional consistency in job titles, including the use of the ‘social worker’ title in every day job names, would allow for easier and standardised collation of data and intelligence on the social work workforce to assist in workforce planning and decision making.

Delegated budgetary autonomy in the HSC enables service or senior managers, to determine the number of social workers within their service area and create

⁴² Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing: A Strategy for Social Work

⁴³ Social Work Leadership Framework

⁴⁴ Learning and Improvement Strategy:

new social work posts with new job titles and new job descriptions. This can lead to inequity in service delivery and disparity within and across Trusts particularly in the makeup of Integrated Teams.

Variations in terms and conditions along with perceived workload have exacerbated recruitment challenges across sectors. PBNI report high caseloads, increasing complexity and staff shortages that have impacted on staff morale. Difficulties in recruitment and retention are becoming more prevalent compounded by a growing pay differential with the health sector which may impact on future recruitment efforts and potentially increase leavers to the Trust posts.

Within the EA staff are increasingly focussing efforts on the welfare determinants of poor school attendance with the added stressors on young people and families created by Covid . A growing pay differential with the health service is also impacting on recruitment and retention.

It is difficult to quantify the impact of Covid -19 on service demand however there are reports from the NSPCC⁴⁵ , and others, of increasing levels of domestic violence, child abuse, social isolation , mental health difficulties and rising levels of poverty and deprivation which will require additional social work intervention and impact on current caseloads.

Strategic Theme 2: Safe Staffing

There should be regional consistency (using agreed workforce data) in the numbers, deployment and use of social work practitioners (including use of title), based on the development of a model to identify normative staffing/safe practice levels for social work services (Rec2B)

⁴⁵ <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2020/social-isolation-risk-child-abuse-during-and-after-coronavirus-pandemic>

SECTION 3: Mapping Service Change

3:1 Drivers for change

There are a number of strategic drivers shaping the delivery of future social work services and requiring effective coordinated and timely workforce planning.

Delivering Together and the Draft Programme for Government 2016-20 set out the road map for significant change to improve the health and wellbeing of the population. Making Life Better⁴⁶, the annual Commissioning Plan Direction,⁴⁷ the Children and Young People's Strategy: 2017-27, and the Social Work Strategy are all drivers for change highlighting the need to ensure connectivity with workforce planning.

Work is also underway to develop a Future Planning Model based on an Integrated Care System approach and includes the development of a Strategic Outcomes Framework which will detail the strategic direction for the Department in future.

The Outcomes Delivery Plan⁴⁸ sets out the headline actions that departments have put in place and includes the development of a problem solving approach to crime reduction. The DOJ Corporate and Business Plan 2020-21 sets out objectives to improve community safety in which PBNI has a key role in 'Improving Outcomes for individuals by helping them address the root cause of offending behaviour and reduce the rate of reoffending'⁴⁹

YJA will have a key role in caring for vulnerable children with complex needs in the proposed secure care and justice centre and in further developing early interventions for children encountering the justice system.

There are a number of new policies or initiatives within the education sector that will impact on the social work workforce of the future, including the joint (with the DOH) Looked After Children Strategy, the New Special Educational

⁴⁶ Making Life Better 2013-23 is the strategic framework for public health designed to provide direction for policies and action to improve the health of people in NI and reduce health inequalities.

⁴⁷ The annual Commissioning Plan Direction sets out Ministerial priorities, key outcomes and objectives and related performance indicators, prepared by HSCB in

⁴⁸ Outcomes Delivery Plan :Executive Office :2019

⁴⁹ DOJ Corporate and Business Plan 2020-21

Needs (SEN) Framework, the Newcomer Policy/Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS) and the Emotional Health and Well Being Framework. Developments of services in EWS and Children Looked After (CLA) and more general opportunities within education for social work may see further demand for social work qualified staff in the future. Multi-agency approaches whereby social workers with experience in education are working alongside social workers in health have proven very successful. This will be a big driver for change going forward as more traditional service delivery models are changed to reflect the increasing importance of and broadening role of social workers within education. This is particularly so for children and young people with trauma and attachment difficulties and the staff providing their education. Support from social workers in education with the unique understanding of the impact of trauma and attachment difficulties on the child/young person has yielded significant outcomes.

The 'State of the Sector' document reports on issues facing the VCS with levels and sources of income and withdrawal from the EU, and consequent impact on the workforce and service delivery, as of significant concern in the future.

The voluntary sector report that the current procurement culture destabilises the contribution of the sector generally due to limited, often short term funding and resources, but given sufficient funding and resources they could make a full contribution to the training and development of the social work workforce.

The ongoing Covid-19 crisis has presented further challenges, setting out a need to rebuild or reconfigure services in many areas. A Strategic Framework for Rebuilding Health and Social Care Services was launched in June 2020 which along with complementary plans from the Health Trusts will set out how services will be delivered in the future. The crisis has highlighted the need for a workforce that is responsive and prepared to meet surges in demand which must also be considered in workforce planning for social workers.

New models of service delivery, new or pending legislation, ongoing reviews and investigations, developments in technology and changing demographics are placing new and additional demands on the social work workforce. It is essential that steps are taken now to ensure there will be a workforce of the right size with the right skills deployed in the right way to deliver safe effective and high quality social work services in the future.

Ongoing and emerging issues include increasing demand for services, insufficient capacity to meet demand across many areas of health and social care, workforce challenges across the spectrum of children's services and in particular the retention and availability of social workers, growth in the numbers of children and families in need and requiring early intervention services; increased demand for placements for children in the care of the state, an aging population, particularly those over 85, including frail elderly, and an increase in people with co-morbidities and long term conditions.⁵⁰

Safe staffing legislation for HSC professionals is currently being considered which may also impact on staffing levels in the future.

3:2 Population statistics and health profile

Changes in age composition of the population will affect needs and demand for health and social care, will impact on service provision and place increased pressure across the social work and social care system. Life expectancy is rising and greater numbers of people with significant disabilities or complex needs are living longer.⁵¹ Care needs are not evenly divided among age groups in the population and cost per capita tends to rise sharply with age. These changes inform the commissioning of services at regional and local level. This is likely to place considerable pressure on the social care sector, including care home provision, and access to domiciliary care, and consequently on social workers.

The latest published mid-year estimates for 2020 show ;

- There are approximately 1.90 million people living in Northern Ireland.
- 83% of the population are aged 0-64 years
- There are an estimated 441,108 children aged (0-17 years) living in Northern Ireland.
- Approximately 17% of the population (314319,) are aged 65+ years
- 2% of the population (39,488) are aged 85+ years

⁵⁰ Draft Commissioning Plan 2019-20

⁵¹ Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing :A Strategy for Social Work in NI (2012-2022)

The NISRA 2020-based interim population projections show that the population of Northern Ireland is projected to increase by 2.1% to reach 1.935 million by 2031.

In particular the population projections show that the population aged 65+ years will increase from 319,949 (2020) to a projected 409,620 by 2031, an increase of 89,671, people or 28%.

Further ahead projections are for an increase to 1.93 million by 2045 (an overall 2.3% projected rise from 2020).

Again some of the most significant increases are amongst the older population (65+), which is set to rise by 50.5% by 2045 to 481,473 people.

As the population of N Ireland continues to increase, this will have a direct impact on the number of social workers required to meet the needs of the population.

In addition, it is generally accepted that NI has a population with a significant proportion adversely affected by high levels of trauma, deprivation and division, with detrimental impacts on physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing. Northern Ireland is reported to have a 25% higher overall prevalence of mental health problems than England.

A 2014 study on the impact of the 'Troubles' on the population, found that the prevalence of Post-Traumatic Stress disorder in N.I. was the highest of the 27 countries in a World Mental Health Study⁵².

The number of deaths by suicide in NI was 209 in 2019 a rate of 11 per 100,000 per year. Studies such as 'Mental Health in Northern Ireland: Research and Information Service Research Paper' published in 2017 have reported that mental health problems are the largest cause of ill health and disability in NI.

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At the time of writing the Covid -19 pandemic is having a devastating impact on the health and social wellbeing of populations around the world.

⁵² Traumatic events and their relative PTSD burden in NI: A Consideration of the Impact of the 'Troubles'. Ferry, B Bunting, S Murphy, S. O'neill, D Stein, K Koenan 2014

⁵³ NI Assembly Research and Information Service Research paper: Mental Health in NI. Betts & Thompson 24/1/2017

The full extent of the impact may not be fully understood for some time, however, it is becoming increasingly evident that a social response to the pandemic is needed, as well as a medical response. The World Bank have reported that half a billion people could be pushed into destitution as a result of Covid - 19 and that the outbreak will have long lasting economic and social impacts stemming from the direct and indirect impact of illness.⁵⁴

Reports and research⁵⁵ on the direct and indirect impact of Covid-19 on health and wellbeing highlight the long term impacts on physical and mental health, the increase in reports of domestic violence and family breakdown and of isolation and loss .

Social workers will be required to carry out a wide range of ‘promotive, preventive and responsive’⁵⁶ roles to both mitigate the impact of Covid -19 and assist in the management of the long term consequences on societies.

Social Work has an essential front line role, working with other health professionals in delivering services to Covid-19 patients their families and carers and also in delivering services to vulnerable, isolated at risk adults and children to protect and promote social wellbeing.

SECTION 4: Defining the Required Workforce

4.1 Mapping New Service Activities

This section outlines some of the key developments, including Transformation projects that will impact on the social work workforce of the future. Where known, projected workforce numbers associated with new developments or changes have informed the modelling of future numbers of social workers required. However, some of the developments have yet to quantify the

⁵⁴ The World Bank: Poverty and Distributional Impacts of Covid -19: Potential Channels of Impact Mitigating Policies

⁵⁵ Direct and indirect impacts of COVID-19 on health and wellbeing: Rapid Evidence Review July 2020 Health and Equity in Recovery Plans Working Group

⁵⁶ International Federation of Social Workers: Social Service Workforce Safety and Wellbeing During the Covid 19 Response:

potential impact on staff numbers and there may be a need to review projections going forward when more definite information is known.

Multi-Disciplinary Teams (MDTs)

A new model for primary care has been developed and is being piloted in five GP Federations across Northern Ireland to enhance the services available at primary care level, with a greater focus on prevention and early intervention. Social Workers will work alongside other health care professionals on the management of ill health and the physical, emotional and mental wellbeing of communities. To date (March' 21) 67.7 (wte) Band 7 social workers (against a target of 127.4) have been recruited, representing 67.7 % of what is required. Initial calculations indicate that 18 Band 8A social work managers, 380 Band 7 social workers and 180 social work assistants will be required when the MDTs are fully implemented (8-10 years) across all 17 GP federations in NI.

Around 200 Mental Health Practitioners will also be required and potentially up to 50% of these may also be social workers. Evaluations are currently underway to determine future rollout.

Social Work recruitment into these posts has been impeded by the lack of availability of staff and is significantly lower than the other professions. The maximum impact of this model will only be realised with full staffing and the limited supply of social workers is putting this at risk.

Mental Capacity Act (NI) 2016

The implementation of the Mental Capacity Act⁵⁷ (MCA) has placed additional responsibilities on social workers particularly in respect of Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DOLS) and increased demand for Approved Social Workers (ASWs) as well as the workload for social workers in both hospital and community settings.

A report was commissioned by the DoH in 2020 to provide an evidence based estimate of the number of Approved Social Workers required by Trusts to fulfil their statutory duties under the Mental Health (NI) Order 1986. The report, prepared by Professor Gavin Davidson and Dr Claire Mc Cartan has

⁵⁷ Mental Capacity Act (NI) 2016 /Mental Health (NI) Order 1986

recommended an additional 64 ASWs are required to meet current and anticipated need.⁵⁸

As outlined above all HSC Trusts have reported the roll out of the MCA requirements have added significantly to workforce pressures across adult services.

Reform of Adult Social Care

The Reform of Adult Social Care is considering different approaches to care and support to ensure the long-term sustainability of the adult social care system, including proposals for all aged over 75 to be entitled to a social assessment. The demographic trend towards an increasingly older population including people with a learning disability, greater numbers of people over 85 + and fewer people of working age in society is impacting on demand and requiring a review of how services are delivered and funded in the future.

There are a range of proposals currently out for public consultation, (March 2022) that if progressed will impact significantly on the social work workforce and require additional social work posts such as a focus on locally based, collaborative and community based service provision, supporting people to live well in their own home in connection to their families, social networks and communities and support for preventative and early intervention models.

Social workers alongside multi-disciplinary colleagues, working in integrated teams, are playing a key role in supporting people to live independently at home and ensuring they are safeguarded from abuse or exploitation. Additional numbers of social workers will be required to maintain the current level of service to the anticipated population increases. Any changes in service delivery need to be quantified and factored into future workforce planning.

Review of Urgent and Emergency Care

A Review of Urgent and Emergency Care is underway to establish a new sustainable, high quality regional care model, the most appropriate arrangements for assessment and admission of older people, and the best, appropriate care for people of all ages to reduce Emergency Department (ED)

⁵⁸ Approved Social Worker Workforce Planning Estimates 2020: Prof G Davidson and Dr C. Mc Cartan: QUB

attendances and hospital admissions. Combined with the roll out of 7 day working in hospitals, to improve patient flow, and service delivery to patients and their carers, the role of the hospital and community social worker will become even more pivotal in discharge planning, and in the provision of rehabilitation services in the community. This includes a consideration of how the Regional Emergency Social Work Service (RESWS)⁵⁹ could be utilised to prevent unnecessary admissions. Implications for the social work workforce will become clearer as the review progresses.

Adoption and Children's Bill

The proposed Adoption and Children's Bill will place new duties on Trusts and introduce new processes for social workers, partly as a consequence of the introduction of new legal orders, and the strengthening of existing provision in relation to looked after children, care leavers and adopted children. It is anticipated that there will be additional staffing requirements in relation to some of the new duties under the Bill.

Adult Protection Bill

The Adult Protection Bill is currently being drafted including a business case relating to the costs involved, which will include workforce implications.

The draft Adult Protection Bill will include the establishment of an Independent Adult Protection Board to oversee adult protection in Northern Ireland which will need to be appropriately staffed. It will also legislate for the availability of independent advocates, which will have resource implications for the HSC Trusts, who will be responsible for implementing new powers and duties on the ground.

The full extent of the impact on the workforce has not yet been quantified but future projections should include any emerging workforce data.

Problem Solving Justice

PBNI are involved in delivering a number of the Problem Solving Justice initiatives, aimed at creating safer communities and reducing reoffending, which subject to funding from the DOJ, will be rolled out over the next 5-10

⁵⁹ The Regional Emergency Social Work Service (RESWS) consists of a mixture of permanent and locums senior practitioner social workers and managers to provide an emergency out of hours social work response across the five Trusts.

years. When completed, it is estimated the workforce would need to expand by up to 75 social work qualified staff to deliver the initiatives which include the Substance Misuse Court, the Promoting Positive Relationships project, the Mental Health Court, the Domestic Violence Court arrangements, and the Enhanced Combination Order Project.

Encompass

The development of a digital health and care record for all citizens, Encompass, will introduce new ways of working to improve efficiency and productivity. Implementation and ongoing maintenance will require professional staffing and support. Social Work must be engaged in the design to ensure it supports front line practice, a reduction in bureaucracy and an increase in digital capacity.

Third (Voluntary) Sector

As outlined throughout this report staffing levels within the voluntary sector are impacted by a number of factors, however it is unlikely that current numbers will reduce, with expectations, that due to increasing demand for mental health services in particular, and if funding is available, that workforce numbers may need to increase.

Strategic Theme 3: Workforce Planning

Workforce planning and projections must be a compulsory element of all new service developments to ensure future workforce needs are identified and appropriate planning /strategies put in place to address (Rec 2A)

4:2 Social Work Register Projections

Social Work Register projections

The number of NISCC registered social workers at February 2022 was 6,417 not including students. Of this, approximately 5,398 were self-declared with employment in NI.

Additional requirements for the social worker workforce up to 2031 have been estimated as follows:

Increase HSC Older People's Social Workers to maintain the current ration per population aged 65+ years into 2031, plus an additional factor for an increased proportion of 85+ years.	197
Stabilise Children's Services by funding posts on a 52 week service basis i.e. account for planned absence, study leave, annual leave.	534
Primary Care Multi-disciplinary Team (MDT) social workers	380
Primary Care MDT mental health practitioners	93
Approved Social Workers	63
Probation Board for NI	75
TOTAL	1,351

***The above table is mainly based on HSC-derived assumptions. Further data/information from the non-HSC sector and universities may cause this figure to be revised.*

This estimate of a further 1,351 social workers required would represent an increase of 25% on the February 2022 count of 5,398 registrants in employment. Based on assumptions of a 2.3% retirement rate and 90% of the 5 year average of graduates entering the workforce as social workers, the register may be short around 458 social workers on the 1,351 additional estimate required.

A front-loaded approach of an additional 60 places for 5 years could help to bridge that gap, in conjunction with other measures.

This would bring the total places to 320 (260+60), a 23% increase, which is potentially the limit of how many more could be accommodated in placements for students.

2020/21 HSC agency expenditure on social workers was £8.5m (a decrease from £10.57m in 19/20). The NISCC register at February 2022 shows 142 social workers self-identifying with agency employment. Current HSC social worker vacancies in recruitment were 417 at December 2021. The number of current vacancies in recruitment has not been specifically used in the calculation for the recommendation on additional undergraduate places as this requires a more immediate solution. However, long-term it is expected that the main recommendations will help lower future vacancy levels.

Strategic Theme 4: Workforce Business Intelligence

An agreed regional data set (and processes) to inform policy making and decision making at a strategic level and to inform the development of workforce initiatives, should be developed. (Rec 2a)

4:3 Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement is key to effective workforce planning and the delivery of high quality health and social care. Key stakeholders were members of the Project Group, which met regularly and contributed to the development of the review, until restrictions were imposed in response to the Covid-19 outbreak. Engagement events detailed below, and engagement on social media, took place, prior to the restrictions, to ensure the review was informed by the principles of co-production and co-design.

Two key stakeholder events were scheduled, a real time e-participation Stakeholder Engagement Event held at the Ulster University in March 2020, and the 3rd Annual Social Work Strategy Workforce Workshop held in March 2020.

The discussions focussed on the main themes of **supply, recruitment and retention** and future delivery of social work services

A wide range of over 100 participants, from the statutory, independent and voluntary sector, education providers, staff side, and service users, attended the Engagement Event in the Ulster University on 28.2.20. The aim of the event was to seek views on the social work workforce of the future and to consult on the development of the draft report, which was circulated before the event.

The methodology used combined the live aspect of a small scale discussion with information and communication technologies, using information and in-depth investigation, small group discussion, reflection and polls.

Retention

- Manageable caseloads are essential
- Reduction of bureaucracy is required
- Enhance career progression and CPD opportunities
- Focus on health and wellbeing and support for all staff

A second consultation event took place at the **Annual Social Work Workforce Workshop** on 12th March 2020.

The following are some of the key messages from the discussions:

- Need for flexible pathways into the profession to increase diversity in the workforce
- Workplace conditions, keeping people in work and keeping social workers well are a priority.
- The gender imbalance in the workforce remains an issue (predominately female)
- Workforce data trends indicate women are more likely to leave during their 30s and in their 50s; this suggests that there is a need for more family friendly policies and flexible job design including at senior levels to maintain women in the workforce during different stages of their careers i.e. allowing for people to manage personal/professional life commitments while at the same time offering continuity and consistency for service users.
- There is a lack of intelligence about why people leave and their future employment destinations; more extensive use of exit interviews would provide more insights.

Strategic Theme 5: Retention

Effective retention strategies should be developed and implemented to secure and retain a stable, skilled and motivated workforce resourced to deliver safe and high quality social work services (Recs 5&6)

4:4 Social Work Workforce Planning: UK & Ireland

Reports⁶¹ highlight challenges across Europe in respect of the social care and social work workforce that have also been raised in the course of this review, predominantly in respect of supply, recruitment and retention.

Workforce reports from across the UK and the Republic of Ireland identify similar concerns and provide information on initiatives that are being developed along with examples of innovative practice that could be considered within the NI context

Workforce planning in England, Scotland and Wales is based on common data sets⁶² which provide the data, intelligence and information used to analyse social work workforce trends, inform the commissioning of social work training and shape policy and decision making. There is no common data set for the workforce in NI.

The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) undertake two workforce data collections per year using a Core Minimum Data Set (CMDs)⁶³ and publish two reports each year which provide data, information and intelligence to inform workforce planning.⁶⁴ The data and information is available on the SSSC website for use by the sector and stakeholders.

Additionally, they produce a report every two years on 'Demand for Social Workers'⁶⁵ which analyses available information, provides forecasts, highlights areas to address and sets out suggestions for action. The 2019 report identified similar concerns to those identified in this review including a growing gap between demand and supply and concerns regarding retention. Responses to address this include work on widening access to social work courses, a five year longitudinal research study of NQSWs and development of a national model for a supported and assessed first year in practice.

In England, Skills for Care⁶⁶ collate data in respect of the adult social care workforce via an online data collection service using an agreed Adult Social

⁶¹ Social Services Workforce in Europe: state of Play and Challenges. Federation of European Social Employers: June 2019

⁶² Scotland use Core Minimum Data Set (CMDs), England use Adult Social Care Workforce Data Set (ASC-WDS)

⁶³ The Core Minimum data set was created to address the need for standard workforce data covering the whole of the sector using common data standards for key or core data items.

⁶⁴ Scottish Social Services Workforce Data Report & Mental Health Officers Report

⁶⁵ Demand for Social Workers :SSSC May 2019

⁶⁶ Skills for Care are the strategic body for workforce development in adult social care in England

Care -Workforce Data Set (ASC-WDS) and produce an annual report that provides workforce intelligence, analysis and forecasts. The data is used to develop interactive dash boards for local use, to inform policy making and decision making at a strategic level and to inform the development of workforce initiatives. The data collated via the ASC-WDS is also being used to develop 'machine learning'⁶⁷ models to identify key factors that influence turnover rates, Care Quality Commission (CDC)⁶⁸ scores and to understand the impact that workforce variables may have on the quality of care.

Skills for Care also undertake research and impact projects (largely funded by the Department of Health and Social Care) to provide evidence to assist with strategic workforce planning. Research conducted with adult social care employers with low turnover rates, of less than 10%,⁶⁹ concluded that *'investment in learning and development, a positive workplace culture, recognising, supporting and celebrating the strengths of the workforce and the use of values based recruitment all impacted positively on recruitment and retention'*.⁷⁰

The Department for Education (DfE) (England) collate data in respect of the Children and Family Social Work Service in England, based on an annual statutory census collection and produce an annual statistical report.⁷¹

Concerns regarding supply, recruitment and retention are common themes in the workforce reports. The DfE has commissioned a five year longitudinal study to collate robust evidence on recruitment, retention and progression in child and family social work with the aim of building a better understanding of the issues facing local authority social workers and factors affecting job satisfaction and retention. Findings from the first year highlight a need to focus on social workers with 2-3 years' experience as they move from the protection of the AYE, a need for flexible working, reductions in unnecessary bureaucracy and the importance of organisational culture and peer and management support in building a healthy workforce.

⁶⁷ Machine learning is the study of computer algorithms that improve automatically through experience

⁶⁸ Care Quality Commission is the independent regulator of all health and social care services in England

⁶⁹ This included 1426 'standalone' organisations, 157 'parent' organisations & 40 Local Authorities

⁷⁰ Skills for Care :Recruitment and Retention in Adult Social Care: Secrets of Success: learning from employers what works well: May 2017

⁷¹ Department for Education (DfE):Official Statistics: Children and Family Social Work Workforce in England

A number of national initiatives are underway in England to improve recruitment and retention, including the use of 'Risk Retention Tools'⁷² and 'Return to Social Work'⁷³ programmes. Other initiatives have focussed on supporting newly qualified social workers, improving technological support in the workplace, providing personal assistants to support social workers with administrative and non-professional tasks, and an Innovation Programme to support and promote examples of good practice

More broadly, the NHS has identified retention of staff as a key issue and a crucial factor in securing a skilled and sustainable workforce for the future⁷⁴. Key themes such as building line manager capacity, shaping organisational culture, flexible and predictable working, development and career planning, supporting new starters, staff engagement, health and wellbeing and the use of data to understand and evaluate the workforce have all been identified as critical in reducing staff turnover rates. In addition the NHS has developed a Retention Hub⁷⁵ to facilitate the sharing of best practice resources and learning to improve retention.

Social Care Wales⁷⁶ work in partnership with the Local Government Data Unit, the Association of Directors for Social Services and the Welsh Government to collect analyse and report on social worker workforce planning data to inform the commissioning of social worker training and to underpin planning for future workforce needs. They produce an annual report⁷⁷ of the current workforce which also considers the projected demand for social workers. Projections in the report indicate that the local authority social work workforce will increase by 6% by 2021/23.

Republic of Ireland: Significant concerns have been reported by TUSLA (Child and Family Agency) in the retention and recruitment of social workers in Ireland. Major gaps between supply and demand have prompted the

⁷² Evidence-based diagnostic tool that helps senior leaders of children's services understand the risks they face within social worker retention – and what the solutions are.

⁷³ The Local Government Association (LGA) in association with the Government Equalities Office (GEO), in England, have been running a free return to social work scheme, since 2017, for social workers who have been out of practice for between 2-10 years, providing training and support to enable re-registration.

⁷⁴ NHS: Retaining our People: A Practical Guide to improving retention of clinical staff.

⁷⁵ The NHS online Retention Hub is a platform for Trusts to share initiatives and resources and to implement best practice

⁷⁶ Social Care Wales is the regulatory body for social work and social care in Wales

⁷⁷ Social Worker Workforce Planning 2018-19: A national report on the social worker workforce for Wales

development of a range of initiatives to increase supply and improve retention, some of which may impact on supply in NI.

Currently (2020) there are 230 social work training places across nine educational centres in Ireland. Ireland has a population of almost 5 million and it is widely recognised the number of places is insufficient to meet demand. Proposals to address the growing deficit include increasing the number of 3rd level social work places, development of alternative pathways into professional training, development of a career pathway for social care workers, technical administrative roles to support frontline social workers alongside consideration of protected caseloads, the role of senior practitioners and enhanced supervision to improve retention.

Similar to the HSC, Tusla had experienced difficulties with a high number of agency social workers and associated instability within the workforce. In 2019 they converted 400 agency jobs to permanent posts. They have also taken steps to facilitate easier transfer/mobility of the workforce through the development of a National Transfer Policy.

As our closest neighbours there have been concerns about the potential impact on the pool of social workers in NI. A survey completed in January 2019 of new CORU (Ireland's multi professional health and social care regulator) applicants showed that 19 of 100 new applicants were from NI. This represents less than 10% of the average number of new social workers each year, however it is not known if this is an established trend each year.

83 social workers registered with the NI Social Care Council are domiciled in the ROI.

Recent (Feb'21) announcements of public sector pay increases in the ROI may potentially attract more of the NI social work workforce, particularly in border areas.

Strategic Theme 6: Workforce Development

Ongoing investment and support of leadership, improvement and continuous development are essential to maintain and retain a skilled, stable and motivated workforce able to deliver quality services and meet future challenges (Recs 5&6)

SECTION 5: Conclusion

It is evident that demand is outpacing supply for the social work profession and urgent action must be taken to address this and ensure there are the 'optimum number of people in place to deliver treatment and care and promote health and wellbeing to everyone in Northern Ireland with the best possible combination of skills and expertise'⁷⁸

Health and social care services are facing rising demand which is being driven by demographic change, advancing medical science and new technologies. Transformation is essential to ensure a Health Service that is able to meet the challenges of the future.

Different approaches within justice and education and the development of new initiatives are increasing demand for social workers and it is imperative to ensure there is a skilled, competent and confident workforce in place able to deliver safe, high quality care

HSC data, the ASW review, reports from the Trusts and all social work employers indicate a growing gap between demand and supply of social workers that must be addressed to ensure the delivery of safe and effective professional social work practice in the future.

Social Workers have played a key role in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic and will have a crucial role in public health and wellbeing strategies of the future. The long term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is becoming more evident with increasing evidence and reports of mental, physical and emotional ill health and concerns that require a social work response. This will require a workforce that is flexible and mobile, with transferable skills.

Responses from the Stakeholder Engagement events concurred with many of the key themes identified throughout the review and with those identified in other jurisdictions of supply, safe staffing, recruitment and retention.

Safe staffing legislation for professionals within the HSC is currently being considered and it may also impact on demand.

⁷⁸ Obj 1 Action Plan: Health and Social Care Workforce Strategy ;2026

Student numbers were reduced to 260 from 300, in 2011, and it is likely the cumulative impact of this reduction has contributed to a growing gap between supply and demand. The calculations and predictions contained within this report make a clear case for an additional **60** student places in order to ensure there will be a workforce with the capacity to meet future demand.

The route to achieving this number needs further exploration and agreement but may include more work based opportunities, the retention of the Open University Degree course, reductions in student attrition rates, return to social work schemes, and increases in university places.

Widening access to social work courses to improve supply, alongside development of retention schemes and strategies to retain experienced and newly qualified staff were identified as key factors in ensuring we have a fully trained and motivated workforce with the capacity to meet future challenges.

Proactive, collaborative approaches to recruitment difficulties are already underway and need to be developed further, to ensure an adequate supply of social workers and improve and strengthen the workplace supports and practice for every social worker irrespective of where they work.

A focus on health and wellbeing, support for staff, manageable caseloads, opportunities for CPD, career progression and flexibility were all consistently identified as factors that positively impacted on staff retention.

Urgent action is required now to ensure there is a sufficient supply of social workers to meet future need.

SECTION 6 Recommendations

Recommendations and action plan

Based on the findings of the review the key recommendations are set out below, these have been structured under key headings and will inform the Action Plan.

COMMISSIONING	1	<p>Analysis of future anticipated demand, current and future workforce demographics indicate that an additional 60 social work places will be required to maintain a stable social work workforce.</p> <p>Education provision and supporting learning arrangements should be reviewed to produce plans and timetable for increased capacity .</p>
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WORKFORCE PLANNING	2 a	There should be a process to collate, analyse and report on the state of the social work workforce, using agreed regional minimum workforce data , to monitor workforce trends , forecast future needs and inform workforce planning and decision making
	2b	There should be regional consistency (using workforce data) in the numbers deployment and use of social work practitioners, including use of title, based on the development of a model to identify normative staffing/safe practice levels for social work teams
SUPPLY	3	To increase supply, appropriate measures should be taken to promote social work as a career choice, to review the routes into the profession and to develop options for leavers to return

RECRUITMENT	4	Develop recruitment processes and practice to be responsive, timely and cost -effective, to secure workforce stability.
RETENTION	5	Develop a strategy to secure and retain a stable, skilled and motivated workforce, with a specific focus on retaining NQSWs(1-3yrs) in post, to ensure the appropriate mix of staff with the appropriate skills to deliver safe and high quality social work services
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT	6	CPD (through PiP) should support effective practice, career aspirations, workforce mobility, new developments and changing requirements.

STRATEGIC OVERSIGHT	7	There should be strategic oversight to monitor workforce trends, share good practice and agree regional actions to strengthen the workforce
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SOCIAL WORK WORKFORCE REVIEW – ACTION PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTATION

	Recommendations	Action	Lead, assisted by and timescale
	<p>1 COMMISSIONING</p> <p>Analysis of future anticipated demand, current and future workforce demographics indicate that an additional 60 student social work places will be required to maintain a stable social work workforce.</p> <p>Education provision and supporting learning arrangements to be reviewed to produce plan and timetable for increased capacity.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Agree a cross departmental (DoH/DoJ,DE) strategic plan to resource, develop and sustain additional PLOs with all providers. 2. Secure engagement, investment and support of senior level managers in all provider organisations to resource and enable PLO development/sustainability 3. Review NIPTTP/Refresher training to respond to need for additional PLOs 4. Consider wider context of ‘resourcing the partnership’ for additional students ie admissions selection processes/teaching/marking/assessment/PLO coordination & delivery 5. Consider alternative models of P/L in days required 6. Consider the role of voluntary and community organisations in the provision of additional PLOs. 	<p>OSS</p> <p>OSS</p> <p>OSS</p> <p>OSS</p> <p>NISCC/OSS</p> <p>OSS</p>
	<p>2. WORKFORCE PLANNING</p> <p>There should be a process to collate, analyse and report on the state of the social work workforce, using agreed regional minimum workforce data , to monitor workforce trends, forecast future needs and inform workforce planning and decision making</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. A working group of key stakeholders should be set up to develop a regional workforce data set that for use in workforce planning and decision making, across all sectors 8. A specific HSC workforce planning report should be developed using data collected from the DSF reporting process. 9. Establish a strategic oversight group of senior social work and HR leaders to review annual workforce data and trends and agree on local and regional actions 	

	<p>There should be regional consistency (using agreed workforce data) in the numbers, deployment and use of social work practitioners (including use of title), based on the development of a model to identify normative staffing/safe practice levels for social work services</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Ensure workforce planning and projections are a compulsory element of all new service developments to be shared with strategic oversight group. 11. Develop and agree a model for normative/safe staffing standards, 12. Review numbers, deployment and use of social work practitioners to ensure regional consistency in capacity linked to normative staffing /safe practice levels 13. Review use and deployment of senior practitioners and principal practitioners to ensure support for managers 14. Agree a regional approach to creation of new posts at Band 7 and 8a level to maintain regional consistency and equity in career progression opportunities. 15. Consider regional standardisation of job titles and bandings to promote regional consistency and improve accuracy of workforce data 	
	<p>3: SUPPLY</p> <p>To increase supply appropriate measures should be taken to promote social work as a career choice , to review the routes into the profession and to develop options for leavers to return</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 16. Keybodies to work collaboratively to promote social work as a positive career choice offering opportunities for development and progression. 17. Target post primary schools and develop work-experience/ learning opportunities for young people. 18. Review pathways into social work, including, a career progression pathway for social care workers that includes access to a social work qualification. 19. Develop a strategy to improve diversity within social work workforce 20. Develop a pathway and supports for those who leave social work to return including consideration of a Return to Social Work programme 	<p>NISCC</p>

		<p>21. Key bodies to work collaboratively to minimise attrition rate of social work courses</p>	
	<p>4: RECRUITMENT</p> <p>Improve recruitment processes and practice to be responsive, timely and cost -effective, to secure workforce stability.</p>	<p>22. Develop and implement a regional co-ordinated approach to recruitment of NQSWs to secure timely and permanent appointments in HSC.</p> <p>23. Introduce a transfer policy to enable movement and redeployment of staff within Trusts.</p> <p>24. Consider a regional Job Rotation scheme, within HSC, to support development and career succession planning</p> <p>25. Consider standardisation of social work practitioner job titles , to include the title of ‘social worker’ and agreed core professional tasks for use as basis of job descriptions for comparable posts across Trusts</p> <p>26. Develop strategies and actions to address challenges of hard to fill/unfilled posts that address both recruitment and retention issues.</p> <p>27. Introduce a Childcare recruitment Support Officer for Family and Children’s Services in each Trust</p> <p>28. Consider how to enhance and strengthen total student experience during practice learning as part of proactive</p>	

		recruitment policy for HSC aligned with the HSC Careers Service	
	<p>5: RETENTION</p> <p>Develop a strategy to secure and retain a stable, skilled and motivated workforce to ensure the appropriate mix of staff with the appropriate skills to deliver safe and high quality social work services</p>	<p>29. Review the Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) to strengthen supports for NQSWs including structured rotation that develops capacity and capability to work across different settings and helps inform career choice and pathways.</p> <p>30. The retention of staff into their second and third year in the same post, should become a key HSC objective, to address preventable turnover in some teams. Once recruited, all staff need to be adequately supported to remain in their role. Newly qualified SWs especially, should be mentored by more experienced staff and the achievement of AYE should be formally recognised by an Award from NISCC.</p> <p>31. Agree a regional framework that can be used by all social work employees to strengthen supports for new starts in individual organisations and includes the promotion of self-care.</p> <p>32. Implement a career planning framework setting out pathways for career progression supported by relevant development and CPD opportunities.</p> <p>33. Consider a job rotation scheme for all social workers including opportunities for inter-organisational /sectoral exchange.</p> <p>34. Build capacity and capability of leaders at all levels to support succession and career planning in social work</p> <p>35. Introduce job plans for social workers to include time for CPD and professional supervision.</p> <p>36. Strengthen capacity and capability of first line managers, senior practitioners and principal practitioners to provide professional leadership and supervision.</p> <p>37. Implement revised supervision policy</p>	

		<p>38. Develop coaching and mentoring schemes for social workers including senior leaders.</p> <p>39. Introduce flexible working and family friendly policies, well-being initiatives and policies to help retain experienced staff.</p> <p>40. Consider a Retire and Retain policy in social work</p> <p>41. Review job design and flexible working opportunities for staff in senior posts to retain experience and expertise</p> <p>42. Introduce exit interviews to inform local and regional retention strategies.</p> <p>43. Ensure planning for introduction of ENCOMPASS in community settings meets the need of social workers</p> <p>44. Consider introduction of skills mix into social work teams</p> <p>45. Increase use of technology to improve efficiency, reduce bureaucracy, and increase time for professional practice</p> <p>46. Pilot use of administrative support for first line managers</p>	
	<p>6. WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT</p> <p>CPD, (thorough PiP) should support effective practice, career aspirations, workforce mobility new developments and changing requirements.</p>	<p>47. Review and update CPD to support career planning framework and workforce mobility and to ensure staff are supported and prepared for new business working models including technology and changes in legislation.</p> <p>48. Service user feedback should be used to inform and improve practice</p> <p>49. Review and update supervision training to support implementation of revised supervision policy</p> <p>50. Promote evidence-informed decision making to improve and support practice decisions and outcomes</p>	

	<p>7:STRATEGIC OVERSIGHT</p> <p>There should be strategic oversight to monitor workforce trends, share good practice and agree regional actions to strengthen the workforce</p>	<p>51. Establish a strategic oversight group of senior social work and HR leaders to review and monitor workforce data and trends, share good practice and agree regional actions to strengthen the workforce.</p> <p>52. Create and extend opportunities to showcase good practice initiatives that have strengthened the workforce and agree and support regional adaptation and spread.</p> <p>53. Build capacity and capability of professional leaders at all levels to build healthy work environments and contribute to local and regional workforce planning.</p>	<p>DOH</p>
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Appendix 1: Project Group Membership

Carol Diffin BHSSC T

Karen O'Brien WHSCT

Linda McConnell SEHSCT

Rhoda Mc Bride BHSC T

Anita White NHSCT

Peadar White SHSCT;

Suzanne Mahon WHSCT

Michaela Glover HSCB

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Damien Maguire Staff side

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Danielle Turney QUB

Paul McStravick, YJA

Colin Reid EA

Gillian Robinson, PBNI

Lynne Stevenson Barnardos

Catherine Donnelly, Catherine DoH

Dunwoody, Alison DoH

Christine Mclaughlin WHSCT

Ann Moir SHSCT

Maxine Gibson HSCB

Catherine Maguire NISCC

Judith Mullineux UU

Jill Brown YJA

Elaine Craig EA

Christine Smyth / Jackie McIlroy / Andrew Dawson DOH Co-Chairs

Eithne McIlroy DOH Project Coordinator

Appendix 2: Terms of Reference

Terms of Reference

Social Work Workforce Review

Purpose: To plan for a Social Work workforce of the right size, with the right skills, and deployed in the right way to deliver safe, effective and high quality social work services within available resources, based on data, evidence and analysis of current and future needs.

A Project Group will be established to undertake a workforce review to support strategic workforce planning within the HSC and criminal justice, education and independent sectors.

The workforce review will:

(a) Produce information, data and analysis on:

- Current capacity and availability of social workers in Northern Ireland;
- Strategic developments/changes that will impact on future social work workforce requirements (e.g. demographics, transformation, service changes, emerging need, education pathways to professional qualification);
- The numbers and profile (e.g. skills, roles, practice area etc.) of social workers needed to deliver safe, effective, person-centred services in the future.

(b) Produce plans and recommendations about:

- The workforce profile required to ensure sustainable social work services regionally;
- Recruitment and HR processes required to maximise the capacity of the workforce to deliver services regionally and ensure sustainability, consistency and retention;
- Professional and workplace supports required to improve retention, reduce absenteeism and ensure safe, effective, high quality social work practice and interventions
- The commissioning of pre-registration training places for social workers and education pathways to professional qualification;
- The commissioning of post registration training and education for social workers.

Appendix 3: Social Work Workforce Engagement Event: Instant Report

[DoH HSC Social Work Workforce Strategy Engagement Jordanstown 28_02_20 Instant Report Release.pdf](#)

