

A close-up photograph of a child's hands holding several autumn leaves. The child is wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt. The leaves are in various stages of autumn color, including red, green, and yellow. The background is blurred, showing more leaves and a warm, golden light.

Proposals for a children's social care  
Arms-Length Body & Minister  
for Children & Families made as  
part of the Independent Review of  
Children's Social Care Services

## **BASW NI Position Statement**

November 2023

**BASW**  
**Northern Ireland**

The professional association for  
social work and social workers



## Introduction

The provision of high-quality children’s social care services is fundamentally important to the functioning of a healthy society. However, as is identified by Professor Ray Jones in the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care Services (the Review) report, the intense pressures facing our health system have all too often led to children’s social care services receiving less prominence than issues impacting our healthcare infrastructure, patients and workforce.

## Pressures on children’s social care services

The number of children looked after by social services continues to grow. Month on month increases have kept the number the highest on record since the introduction of the Children Order (Northern Ireland) 1995. Provisional statistics for September 2023<sup>1</sup> indicate 3,892 children are looked after by social services, a 16% increase on the pre covid figure of 3,362 and 36% increase over the last decade<sup>2</sup>.

The demand for services is being managed by a workforce bearing the signs of stress and burnout. Department of Health figures<sup>3</sup> for 2020/21 indicate 50% of sickness absence among all HSC social workers was due to mental health.

As illustrated by the Review, in February 2023 the five Trusts had vacancy and absence levels in Family Intervention teams of between 26%, and 41% and vacancy rates in Gateway teams of up to 86%.

This problem is starkly illustrated by the wide remits of the Directors of Children’s Services which greatly exceed responsibility for children’s social care. Regardless of the professionalism and ability of these individuals, the scope of their responsibilities drastically restricts their focus on, and the time they can give to, children’s social care.

While it is not a surprise, it is deeply concerning that the Review found that Directors of Children’s Services only spend approximately 30% of their time focussed on their children’s social care services. BASW NI supports Professor Jones’s assertion that the “Directors of Children’s services are distracted and disempowered in leading children’s social care” and that they need real authority to tackle the long-standing issue within their services.

## Support for the creation of an children’s services ALB+ and a Minister for children and families

The combination of factors, including: the pressures on the health service, the ever-increasing demand for children’s social care, the ongoing social care workforce crisis and the factors undermining focused and effective strategic leadership for social care services

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-childrens-social-services-data-during-covid-19>

<sup>2</sup> There were 2,858 Looked After Children in 2013/14—Delegated Statutory Functions, Statistical Report, 1

April 2019 – 31st March 2020, Health and Social Care Board

<sup>3</sup> Department of Health presentation at Social Work Workforce Symposium, 4 November 2021

has led BASW NI to fully endorse Professor Jones’s view that “*Statutory children’s and families’ social care services need to be located within an organisation where this is the primary focus of the organisation.*”

The Association agrees with Recommendation 38 calling for the introduction of a region-wide children’s and families Arms-Length Body (ALB) which includes current Health and Social Care Trust statutory children’s social care services along with other allied services and professions closely related to children’s social care. This is the model referred to in the Review as option 5, the ALB+. Alongside children’s social care services, the ALB+ model includes the Education Welfare Service, the Youth Justice Agency and the Youth Service.

Social workers involved in supporting children, young people and their families currently work in a range of services spread across three NI Executive departments—Health, Education and Justice. There are benefits to be accrued via increased integration of service planning and delivery, with improved strategic leadership enabling region-wide consistency in services.

However, the problems stemming from competition for resources and lack of strategic focus for children’s social care are unlikely to be resolved by transferring them to an ALB under the remit of the Department of Health. To comprehensively address the challenges outlined in the Review, it is necessary to appoint a NI Executive Minister exclusively responsible for children’s social care and for the Minister’s portfolio to be outside the Department of Health.

To ensure the all-encompassing scope required to transform children’s services, BASW NI believes the Minister for Children and Families should be a newly created junior ministerial role within the Executive Office (TEO), reporting directly to the First and Deputy First Ministers. A Minister for Children and Families in TEO would provide integrated leadership, strategic focus and enhanced accountability for all decisions taken across government which affect children and young people.

Politically, it would be more expedient, to ‘elevate’ all services (including the Youth Justice service, Education Welfare service and Youth Service) regarded by Professor Jones as central to the ALB, to TEO rather than transfer them to an ALB overseen by the Department of Health. In this scenario, no department held by a single party would be alone in transferring an area of responsibility. Furthermore, the functions of the new ALB would coalesce within a department shared by two parties—those being the largest Nationalist and Unionist designated parties. The shared nature of TEO may also help address concerns at the political level regarding the transfer of the Youth Justice Agency from the Department of Justice, the only Ministry appointed by a cross community vote in the NI Assembly.

**If you would like any further information, or to discuss this response, please contact Andy McClenaghan, BASW NI Public Affairs, Policy and Communications Lead—  
07702 517560 / [andy.mcclenaghan@basw.co.uk](mailto:andy.mcclenaghan@basw.co.uk).**