



British Association of Social Workers
Northern Ireland

**Committee for Health
MLA Briefing Paper**

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BASW
Northern Ireland

The professional association for
social work and social workers

Overview of social work roles

Often, when people consider social work, they think primarily of the profession's statutory functions to safeguard children and young people from harm. While this is a vital aspect of social work, it's just one of a diverse range of roles social workers undertake to improve the life opportunities of vulnerable individuals across all sections of society.

Social workers support individuals and families to overcome disadvantage rooted in social, economic, environmental and physical factors, including disability, physical and mental ill-health, poverty, abuse and neglect, immigration status, and addiction.

For example, social workers:

- Help older people to access the support services they need to live safely and independently at home.
- Help people with a mental health problem to understand the challenges presented by their illness and support them as they work towards recovery.
- Protect children and young people who are at risk of abuse and neglect, ensuring they grow up in a safe and stable environment.
- Assist people with a physical disability to access and manage personal care services to live independently.
- Help hospital patients by identifying care needs and arranging the support services they will need to live safely when they are discharged.
- Work with young people who offend, helping them pursue alternative options by supporting positive choices in education and employment.

In Northern Ireland there are approximately 6,600 registered social workers. This comprises staff working in Health and Social Care (HSC), in education and training, the criminal and youth justice sectors and the voluntary sector, as well as a growing number of independent practitioners.

What is BASW?

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) is the largest professional body for social workers in the UK. The Association has 22,000 members employed in frontline, management, academic and research positions in all care settings.

What issues are social workers facing?

There are several pressing matters which require the attention of the Minister for Health to ensure the interests of social workers, and the people who use social work services, are met. They concern:

- Safe staffing legislation
- The Independent Review of Children's Social Care
- The crisis facing Approved Social Workers
- The Social Work Student Incentive Scheme

The case for safe staffing legislation

Central to addressing the challenges facing social work is the need to ensure safe staffing within the profession.

Recruiting and retaining enough social workers is critical if practitioners are to carry manageable caseloads which enable them to provide high quality services to the children, families and individuals they support.

Increased demand on services

Caseloads are growing across programmes of care. A clear example is the month on month increases in the number of children looked after by social services, leading in the highest number on record since the introduction of the Children Order (Northern Ireland) 1995. The enlarged workload is further compounded by the increased complexity of cases, which results in additional time being required to support service users in many instances.

As a consequence, **demand for services is being managed by a workforce bearing the signs of stress and burnout. Department of Health figures indicate that in 2020/21, 50% of sickness absence among all HSC social workers was due to mental health.**

This scenario has been worsened by the pressures of working during Covid. Social workers adapted to meet the needs of service users, while bearing the stress of increased demand and concerns regarding the risk of infection.

Impacts on social workers

[Recent research](#) demonstrates “significantly lower levels in well-being and higher levels in personal, work-related and client-related burnout” among social workers who consider that their service does not operate a safe staff-to-service-user ratio. This is very significant given the same research indicates two-thirds of social workers in Northern Ireland hold the view that their service does not operate a safe staff-to-service user ratio

The current social work vacancy rate of 9% (December 2023) points to challenges across all sections of the profession, including adult services, older peoples social work and mental health social work. However, pressures are most acute in children’s services. The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care (June 2023) highlighted that in February 2023 the five Health and Social Care 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%.

The cost-of-living crisis

The pressure on services has been further compounded by the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. Poverty is a key factor in driving demand for social work services. Many of the problems social workers support people to overcome are rooted in or exacerbated by poverty.

For example, incidents of mental health problems are more prevalent in disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland. Also, children living in our most deprived areas are [six times more likely to be placed on the Child Protection Register and are four times more likely to become looked after by social services](#) than those in the most affluent areas.

As financial pressures on households increase the problems which require support from social workers also grow. This comes in the context of funding cuts to support services delivered by voluntary and community sector organisations. Many of these services are designed to provide early intervention and support to prevent problem situations worsening to the point at which the intervention of statutory safeguarding services are required.

When these early intervention and preventative projects are insufficiently resourced to meet need, the knock-on impact is greater demand for statutory services and increased pressure on the social workers who deliver them.

Pay and conditions

Achieving safer staffing requires enhancements in the retention and recruitment of staff. Central to this is ensuring improved pay and conditions for social workers.

As the professional association for social work—not a trade union—the role of BASW NI does not extend to balloting members in relation to industrial action. However, the Association shares many common interests with its trade union colleagues and BASW NI has supported social workers who have chosen to participate in industrial action.

BASW NI contends **it is essential Agenda for Change pay bands maintain parity with those in England on a permanent basis** to ensure the contribution made by social workers in providing vital services which improve society for everyone is adequately recognised.

Legislation

In its [Social Work Workforce Review](#) (2022) the Department of Health acknowledged the need for “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”.

BASW NI welcomes the Department’s work to date in beginning the development of safe staffing models. **The Association would support the introduction of legislation to place safe staffing models on a statutory footing and believes this should be advanced as a priority by the Department.**

The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care

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](#) (June 2023), 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.

At the core of the recommendations made by the Review is the need for a greater focus on intervening early, supporting families where need is identified and reducing instances where problems become crises which result in children coming into care.

The number of children looked after by social services continues to grow. The most recent [figures published by the Department of Health](#) indicate there are 3,941 children looked after by social services (October 2023). This represents a 17% increase since before Covid and a 35% increase since 2013/14.

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. 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.

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.

BASW NI fully endorses 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 supports 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.

To comprehensively address the challenges outlined in the Review, BASW NI considers it 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.**

Crisis facing Approved Social Workers

BASW NI is acutely concerned by the crisis facing Approved Social Workers (ASWs) with regards to the formal admission of individuals to psychiatric care under the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. ASWs are encountering significant delays in the conveyancing of people requiring admission to psychiatric care, a situation which causes distress to those in need of care and strain for professionals involved in the assessment and conveyancing processes.

Our ASW members work directly to respect, protect, and fulfil the human rights of the people they support. They have spoken about their ethical distress in working in an environment where upholding the human rights of the people they are supporting is becoming increasingly difficult. Human rights concerns have been raised in relation to service users with learning disabilities who have no access to learning disability inpatient beds.

The Chief Social Worker has recently produced guidance by way of a circular to all Executive Directors of Social Work and it seeks to assist ASW practice. This guidance goes some way to tackling the issues of concern, however it does not deal with what BASW NI regards as the fundamental issues of a shortage of beds and a lack of investment in community level support for people with a mental health need.

The Social Work Student Incentive Scheme

BASW, in partnership with the Social Workers Union, has joined with the Ulster University Stand up for Social Work Society and Queen's University Belfast Social Work Society in calling for an uplift in the financial assistance provided under the Social Work Student Incentive Scheme.

Under the scheme, eligible student social workers in Northern Ireland receive an annual payment of £4,000 and an allowance of £500 towards travel costs associated with practice placements. While it is unclear when the amount paid under the Student Incentive Scheme last increased, BASW NI understands it has been in operation at its current level since at least 2008. Since then, the impact of inflation has significantly reduced the real terms value of the financial support provided.

According to QUB guidance on cost-of-living, students need £6500 – £8500 to cover expenses in one academic year. **As a minimum, BASW NI contends the Student Incentive Scheme should be uplifted in line with inflation from its year of introduction. The Association also urges the Department of Health to annually review and uplift this amount in line with inflation.**

Consideration should also be given to the rate of mileage allowance payments. All students have been impacted by rising fuel costs and the mileage allowance should be reviewed in light of inflation in recognition of the fact unleaded petrol increased in price by 54% between 2008 and 2022.

If you would like any further information, or to arrange a meeting to discuss the issues raised in this paper, please contact BASW NI Public Affairs, Policy and Communications Lead, Andy McClenaghan — a.mcclenaghan@basw.co.uk / 07702 517560.

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