

By email: Email - budget24-25response@health-ni.gov.uk

09/08/2024

Dear colleague

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Department of Health consultation on its Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) on the Budget 2024/25.

The British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI) is part of the British Association of Social Workers, 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.

Social work HSC workforce currently has a vacancy rate of 9.3% (March 2024) and 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.

The EQIA notes that there is no budgetary provision for 2024-25 pay settlements to staff and anticipates the likely recurrence of industrial action in response. It is vital that social workers are appropriately remunerated for the essential and challenging work they undertake.

BASW NI welcomed the announcement by the Minister for Health that a further 40 social work training places will be introduced in 2024/24, however, the Association questions whether these additional places will be sufficient to meet demand and address vacancies in the social work workforce. Further resources should be allocated to fund the training of additional social workers.

Failure to adequately fund social work training and the inability to award the 2024-25 pay settlements will have a negative impact on the profession, undermining the Department of Health's efforts to recruit and retain social workers. This in turn will negatively impact all Section 75 groups, with particular impacts for children and young people, older people, people with dependents and disabled people.

The EQIA highlights that given that in the Health and Social Care sector 80% of employees are female, women would be disproportionately affected by a failure to deliver the pay award.

The impacts will be even greater for the social work profession in which 85% of staff are women.

BASW NI is concerned at the lack of funding to further roll out the Multidisciplinary Teams (MDTs) based around GP practices. Social Workers play a key role in these teams, delivering community level services with a focus on early intervention and prevention to address social problems and prevent issues reaching a level at which referral to statutory services becomes necessary. While there will be impacts for all section 75 groups, BASW NI is particularly concerned about potential impacts for children and young people older people, disabled people and people with dependents associated with the inability of the Department to further roll out MDTs.

The EQIA correctly recognises that children will be disproportionately affected by the budget allocation, drawing attention to the findings of the SPPG Youth Wellbeing survey which found that “one in eight children and young people in Northern Ireland experience emotional difficulties, one in ten had conduct problems and one in seven problems with hyperactivity”.

The EQIA also notes the increased demand for children’s services, as highlighted by the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care. While the document recognises the impacts for children, it does not address the need for increases in the social work workforce to support families and shift the focus of services from what is currently predominantly a child protection approach to model characterised by family support. Neither does the document acknowledge the urgent need for increased funding for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in Northern Ireland to meet demand for services.

Northern Ireland urgently needs multi-year funding cycles to enable improved early intervention and prevention services to address endemic factors, including parental addiction, poor mental health, and neglect, which are often rooted in or exacerbated by poverty. Addressing these issues is critical to reducing the number of children coming into the care system.

The EQIA consultation explains the budget allocation will mean the Department of Health would find it almost impossible to restore the core grant scheme in full with likely impacts on organisations that are run for the benefit of older people, children, disabled people, people with dependents, women and LGBTQIA+ people. BASW NI recognises that on 9 July the Minister for Health announced that Department of Health core grant funding for voluntary and community sector organisations will be maintained at the same level as last year. However, significant cuts to core grant funding in recent years have left vital services in the community and voluntary sectors depleted and an improved funding model for these services is urgently needed.

BASW NI strongly opposes any reduction in payments for support services provided by the Community and Voluntary Sector as detailed in the EQIA under the heading *Potential Impact of Savings Measures Not Yet Taken*. The EQIA notes “This would involve the re-negotiation of contracts for the community support services for looked after children, children in need, older people, mental health and learning disability and physical disability clients. These contracts have been set up to prevent hospital admission and to support clients living in the community.”

Any decision to reduce funding for services which prevent hospital admission or reduce the need for referrals to statutory services will likely prove counterproductive from a cost-saving perspective in all but the immediate term given the high costs associated with acute care and delivery of statutory services. A reduction in payments for support services would also have significant negative impacts on quality of life and life opportunities for people supported by these services, including older people, children and young people and disabled people.

Similarly, Northern Ireland needs greater investment, not less, in community support services and domiciliary care. This is required to enable older people and people with disabilities to live safely in the community to reduce demand on more expensive acute care—both through a reduction in avoidable admissions and improved efficiencies in the rate of discharges—as well as a reduction in pressure on residential and nursing care placements. In the current scenario, single year funding cycles impede the ability of HSC Trusts to make the necessary investments to achieve savings in the longer term.

BASW NI opposes any reduction in the number of hospital beds, particularly mental health inpatient beds. Approved Social Workers are facing extreme pressures in relation to the assessment and conveyancing of people in need for care under the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.

The scarcity of mental health inpatient resources—both bed numbers and associated nursing, medical and social work staff to treat and support patients—is a key factor in delaying the admission of people in need of care.

Between 2018/19 and 2022/23, there was a 3.6% decrease in the number of mental health beds and in 2022/23 the occupancy rate for mental health specialties in hospitals was 99.2%.

Increasing the provision of mental health inpatient support, including bed numbers and nursing, medical and social work staff to treat and support patients would represent a key step in improving care outcomes and addressing the pressures our members face. BASW NI would strongly oppose any proposal to reduce the number of mental health hospital beds.

Under the *Potential Impact of Savings Measures Not Yet Taken* heading the EQIA also includes the suggested “reduction in staffing of 1,200 provincewide yielding an estimated 4% reduction in staffing costs” while recognising this would “significantly reduce the ability of Trusts to maintain existing services”. Given the demand facing all programmes of care in social work, any reduction in staff would have a negative impact on the lives of service users and BASW NI would oppose, in the strongest terms possible, any reduction in the number of social work staff, recognising cuts would have a disproportionate impact on children and young people, older people, women, people with dependents, and disabled people.

BASW NI looks forward to continued engagement with the Department on these issues. If you would like any further information or to arrange a meeting to discuss this response, please contact Andy McClenaghan, BASW NI Public Affairs, Policy and Communications Lead, at andy.mcclenaghan@basw.co.uk.

Yours faithfully

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