NIASW

N.IRELAND ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

(PART OF BASW)

Social Work Not Paperwork

Cutting Bureaucracy in Childcare Social Work

November 2012

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NIASW, is the professional association for social workers in Northern Ireland. One of our key functions is to support members by representing them and addressing any issues of concern they raise.

During discussions with members, in recent months, NIASW found the issue of increasing bureaucracy in childcare was raised as the major on-going challenge social workers face across all programmes of care. As a key step in supporting our members with this important issue we undertook a survey of childcare social workers to ascertain their views in a more structured way. As well as reporting challenges they face with regards to bureaucracy in childcare we also asked them to identify areas of good practice and offer suggestions for improvement in current systems and processes.

The survey was constructed for electronic completion and sent directly to NIASW members via email. The survey link was also sent to Directors of Social Work, Social Work Leads and First Line Managers in Health and Social Care Trusts with a request that they would circulate amongst staff employed in childcare teams. The survey was also sent to voluntary organisations working primarily with children and families.

The total number of responses to this survey was 149. The majority of respondents were from Trust childcare settings (132) while 17 were from Voluntary Sector settings. Family Intervention Team service accounted for the largest individual group to response (37%). The sample represents a wide range of children's services settings.

88% (131) of the respondents reported working full-time and 12% (18) reported working part-time.

To supplement the sample size the findings from this survey will be compared to the doctoral work of Paula McFadden who also gathered information regarding levels of bureaucracy in childcare as part of her research "Resilience and Burnout in Child Protection Social Work in Northern Ireland" McFadden, P, 2012 (pre-publication). In that study 162 Gateway and Family Support Workers completed questionnaires and an additional 30 social workers were interviewed.

SOCIAL WORKERS GO THE EXTRA MILE ▶▶▶▶▶▷

Over two thirds of respondents reported they spent less than **30%** of their working week in direct client contact.

76% of social workers reported regularly working longer than their contracted hours.

50% of social workers reported working between 20-60 additional hours each month.

This finding was also evident in the work of McFadden (2012), referenced earlier. McFadden reports, "Workload was found to be a common factor raised in relation to feelings of being over-extended due to having to work excessive hours to cope with the demands of the child protection role. Many social workers in this study expressed the difficulties associated with the high volume of the workload and how this impacts on them even when on holiday or on sick leave".

Individual social workers are having to work additional hours to cope with excessive workloads. This means that there are social workers who work one extra week per month without pay. It was not possible in this study to examine which areas of children's services required social workers to regularly work additional hours. We are aware that a regional caseload weighting system, developed by RIT, is in place, however, respondents report that this is not being utilised in every team. Caseload weighting is a system which measures the time required to complete both statutory child protection and child in need activities and give a sense of what an "average" caseload should be.

"I can't do work every night and I have noticed a big difference ... you can't fit it in and it's just an unspoken rule in family and childcare that you will work after five ... it's expected. If it's court work and it means the difference of a child being at home and being at risk or being in foster care and being safe, I would drop everything but when it's child in need meetings and child protection case conferences and I can't get it done nine to five then."

"I do go out in the evening, I don't go in and do a spot check ... I do speak to every child in that home whether there's one of them or five of them ... but I think during office hours a huge percentage, up on eighty percent of our time is probably paperwork."

"I mean nobody is doing their thirty-seven and a half hours. Everybody every week is doing so much more than that ... it could be ten hours ... it could be twenty or thirty ... everybody's the same."

◆ **Recommendation 1**
   Further research is required by NIASW to examine which areas of childcare practice require social workers to work regular additional hours each week.

What is clear is that the majority of social workers are going the extra mile to provide a service to children and families.

◆ **Recommendation 2**
   Employers should ensure they utilise the caseload weighting system which is used throughout children's services and ensure that it is audited regularly.

The importance of increased and high quality administration support was highlighted as either a factor which currently works well or one which would improve the administration requirements of a social worker's role. The Review of Public Administration in recent years has contributed to a significant reduction in clerical and administrative support throughout the Health Service to assist with efficiency savings. It would seem important in light of these findings to examine ways in which administrative support could be increased to frontline social workers to support the delivery of increased face to face work with clients.

96% highlighted report writing as a specific difficulty that impacts on their ability to spend time in face to face work with clients.

90% highlighted recording in client files as a specific difficulty that impacts on their ability to spend time with clients.

73% identified entering information into computer systems as impacting on the time they can spend directly with clients.

The reduction of bureaucracy faced by social workers would allow increased capacity to undertake more face to face work with clients.

NIASW would support the on-going review of LAC documentation (Looked After Children) by the RIT work stream (Review & Implementation Team) however, would highlight that any changes to current documentation should be to reduce the quantity of paperwork required. An over reliance on forms which can be "repopulated" by computer should be avoided unless all childcare social workers have the appropriate IT tools.

◆ **Recommendation 3**
The DHSSPSNI, as part of the 10 Year Strategy for Social Work, should lead on a review of the recording requirements and practices in childcare with a view to significantly reducing unnecessary bureaucracy for social workers.

◆ **Recommendation 4**
Employers should examine the availability and role of administrative support for social workers.

■ ■ ■ ■ CASE STUDY

South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust
Linda McConnell, Children's Services Improvement Co-ordinator and
Ards Gateway Team

THE PROBLEM:
High number of unallocated cases
Social work staff were spending too much time inputting data on to the system and undertaking admin tasks, unable therefore to address the backlog of unallocated cases.

AIM:
1. Reduce the number of unallocated cases by 50% over 6 months.
2. Reduce social work time spent on admin tasks.

WHAT THEY DID:
Redefined referrals and assessment process
■ Admin staff took responsibility for inputting data to system.
■ New template for recording at point of referral.
■ Streamlined social workers recording of Assessment.
■ Implemented an electronic file.

WHAT THEY ACHIEVED:
■ 100% reduction of unallocated referrals.
■ Significant time reductions for social work staff on recording saving 3 hours 27 minutes on average per recording of Initial assessment (used to take 4 hours 31 minutes for social workers to complete the assessment). Inputting data on to the system previously took 1 hour 15 minutes, it now takes social workers 11 minutes and admin 18.3 minutes). A total of 6 hours 36 minutes have been saved on the total social worker time from point of referral to discharge of the case.
■ Increased job satisfaction and perception of safety for social workers.

This is an excellent example of how a team worked together to identify a problem which affected service users and the staff. By ensuring that the members of the team were each doing the job they were trained for they achieved improved outcomes for all. This team did not need additional resources but have achieved a more efficient, streamlined and safer model of practice.

87% identified dealing with unplanned crisis as a major factor which directly impacts on their spending face to face time with clients.

79% highlighted telephone contact with other agencies.

78% indicated time/travel as a key factor.

23% of respondents chose to provide additional free text answers and a number of themes emerged from these responses:

a. Collecting statistical data

"Compiling Statistics, preparing for Internal Audits, completing Supervision files."
"Collating information for research and administration tasks."
"Repeated accountability documentation statistic collection."
"Constant statistical information, re number of clients seen during the week, their age, time spent with them and their category of care."

b. Organising and attending meetings

"Attending numerous meetings – some of which could be dealt with by telephone conferencing"
"Length of time coordinating and taking part in meetings – full LAC meetings for children that use respite services. Attending meetings."
"Organising and planning core group meetings and sending invites for these monthly meetings."
"Lengthy meetings."

c. Managing contact arrangements for children

"Supervised contact could be carried out by contact workers in many situations, freeing up social workers to do other things, but there is a considerable waiting list for contact workers."
"Supervising and arranging contact with children and their birth parents."
"Supervising contact and transport and then writing up."
"Supervising contact and facilitating transport for young people to attend therapeutic appointments."

d. Additional comments

"Too many cases and when agreement reached to close or transfer these cases, no time to do this."
"Too many layers of bureaucracy within own agency. Responding to complaints, NISCC requirements Educating/Mentoring new inexperienced staff – just too much of it with staff leaving."
"Dealing with computers not working. Not having a team mobile means I have to travel to office to make calls."
"Minute taking and amendments; photocopying; letters."
"Undertaking office duty."
"Changes in recording happen often and I find it difficult to catch up with this as well as see young people and record their daily notes. Also expectations of commissioners change every quarter and when you think that you have the information they want the information required changes again."

The number of replies which included comment on time spent on contact issues is worthy of consideration. Professionally qualified staff are spending significant amounts of time organising, transporting and supervising child contact, which is largely court directed. Whilst NIASW recognise that some cases require particular skill to manage the supervision of child contact, due to risk and other factors, organisation and transport could in most cases be carried out by a competent person without a social work qualification. The introduction of skill mix may be useful in freeing up social work time to conduct professional duties.

> ◆ **Recommendation 5**
> **The Health and Social Care Board should commission a review of child contact arrangements and specifically the use of professionally qualified social workers time to organise, transport and supervise lower risk cases.**

78% spend less than a third of their working week in direct contact with clients.

Only **8%** of respondents reported that they spent over 50% of their working hours in direct work with clients.

43% spend between 20% and 30% of their contracted hours recording on client notes.

17% spend between 30 and 60% of their contracted hours recording on client notes.

Over half of those surveyed spend up to 10% of their week dealing with unplanned crises. This undoubtedly has a negative impact on children and families and increases social workers levels of stress.

Unplanned crises in social work tend to be due to significant events in a child's life, a placement breakdown, an allegation of physical or sexual abuse, an emergency reception into care, an intoxicated parent unable to care for their children. These are situations which simply cannot wait, they must receive an urgent response by someone with the appropriate skills and knowledge. However, that social workers will undoubtedly have a full diary, possibly a case conference, facilitating a family contact session, preventative work with a child in need, a child protection visit to at risk children or a looked after child review. All of these activities are equally as important to that child and their family.

These are examples of the 'choices' social workers have to make every day. By dealing with an emergency in one child's life they affect another, by squeezing in a later visit, or sending someone else to see that child, they affect the quality of the service that child receives.

It is clear from these findings that the majority of social workers who responded to the survey have limited face to face contact with clients. This clearly impedes the level and quality of social work service available to clients accessing childcare services. In addition it also impacts on job satisfaction for social workers. Recording on client notes and report writing account for the biggest use of time aside from face to face work with clients.

These findings are echoed by the wider study undertaken by Paula McFadden. "When asked about the volume of face to face work with clients versus paperwork and bureaucracy associated with child protection work, 100% of those interviewed stated that more than 70% of their working week is doing paperwork".

Reducing bureaucracy would enable social workers to spend more time in face to face contact with clients, thus increasing the quality of social work available.

The first ever Social Work Strategy produced by the DHSSPSNI states "One of the ways to demonstrate that professional social workers are valued is to make sure their skills are recognised and the amount of time they spend practising social work is maximised and the amount of time they have to spend on administrative and bureaucratic tasks is minimised."

Whilst decreasing administration tasks and bureaucracy has been identified here as essential, it is important to note that this should not happen at the expense of accurate, high quality assessments and casework by social workers.

◆ **Recommendation 6**
   DHSSPSNI, as part of their 10 Year Social Work Strategy, should explore practical ways to reduce bureaucracy and administration in childcare without sacrificing quality of assessments and case work undertaken by social workers.

SOCIAL WORKERS VALUE TEAM WORK ▶▶▶▶◗◗

34% highlight the importance of good administrative support to aid best practice.

Social workers need increased admin support, less report writing and improved IT.

It was felt important to allow respondents to highlight areas of good practice in relation to bureaucracy and administrative requirements of their role. It was hoped that this would indicate areas where improvements could be made and examples of good practice could be shared regionally (please see case study).

Four main themes emerged from the responses:
- The importance of good administrative support (34%)
- The importance of access to computer and recording at home (19%)
- Time management and planning (12%)
- Effective systems including IT and computer systems (10%)

Protected caseloads, writing directly into patients notes to minimise duplication, diverting calls in busy periods were also highlighted. A number of respondents also referred to the streamlining of UNOCNNI as being helpful.

■ Administrative Support
"Having admin support to do tasks such as filing."
"Good and supportive admin staff."
"Admin support is vital for social workers in relation to sending letters and typing reports."
"We have great secretaries who are proactive in helping us keep databases up to date and send letters of invitation on time as well as minutes and visit letters."

The volume of comments throughout the survey in relation to lack of administration highlights the importance of good quality administration to support professional social work practice.

■ The importance of access to computer and recording at home
"Having access to a computer regularly in the form of my laptop, this is so useful."
"Having my own laptop."
"Having my own computer".
"Having access to a PC of my own."

NIASW recognise that working additional unpaid hours in the evening or at weekends to complete paperwork is commonplace for most childcare social workers. NIASW does not endorse this practice as it can add additional stress to social workers and interfere with their work/home life balance. There are also obvious issues around confidentiality and security which could be addressed by the use of secure IT tools.

■ Time Management & Planning
"Staying up to date with recording. Record daily."
"Recording days when the phones are off."
"Quiet time."
"All recording and telephone calls done in the morning and visits after lunch."
"Having some time allocated off the floor as part of my rota to complete key work file."

■ **Effective Systems including IT and Computer Systems**
"More user friendly IT."
"Availability of good IT systems"
"That it is all computer based and no paper files need to be kept."
"Good IT systems – our team has not been taught the Trust-wide "Communities" programme for social workers, which allows for much easier writing up of client notes. Unfortunately the team that was teaching it was disbanded before it got round all the teams."
"Computer systems in place to allow for holistic assessment of children in need or at risk."
"Computer system which is easy to negotiate and saves time writing out documents to be typed by admin which in turn means my files are up to date."
"Systems in place to record information."

It is clear that simply increasing the amount of administrative support to social work teams on its own will not achieve the desired results. Social workers need appropriate IT tools to enable them to do their jobs properly and more efficiently. By so doing this enables the debate about the tasks required within social work teams and who is best placed to undertake them.

NIASW are not simply making a call for increased admin support; although some of the respondents did highlight that they currently have no admin support within their team and this needs immediate action. We are however calling for a comprehensive review of the roles undertaken within social work teams and who currently does them.

The case study we illustrated earlier clearly highlights the benefit of efficient and effective use of social work and admin resources and the positive outcomes for all involved.

On asking social workers what they would suggest for improving administration within their role, four main themes emerged from their responses:

■ **Increased administration support**
"At present, a permanent admin support staff in the team."
"Full time sec support and better/more effective procedures in place"
"More admin support to allow for more direct work with children and families."
More dedicated admin support, too many transient temporary staff. The level of form filling in the job is now affecting workers' ability in direct work with clients. Streamlining of the process is needed as it is too focused on files and less on families."

■ **Less reports and recording required**
"Cut down the amount of reports e.g. UNOCINI, LAC reports, court reports. One unified framework that is family friendly."
"The current requirement for contact recording and file management demeans the Family Case File into a bureaucratic blockage to effective working ... The Western Trust has been using the very effective 'Safety in Partnership' model alongside the UNOCINI framework – from experience I know that families and professionals found this more effective. This model should be piloted as a stand-alone model. It is more effective and more efficient"
"Don't respond to each serious incident with another form to fix a problem. Allow for more professional judgement when designating assessment tools. A complete review of all administrative procedures is required to completely re-evaluate the job"
"The forms are cumbersome to complete ... Dept LAC forms are truly a paper and time wasting disaster ... A way of recording information on the spot during visits to families or just after like laptops, tablets, mobile phones for contacting clients would save a lot of time and energy".
"Streamlining of the process is needed as it is too focussed on files and less on families"

The volume of reports and recording expected from social workers working in a childcare setting has been highlighted as excessive and unnecessarily bureaucratic. Duplication of content and the need to record every contact have been highlighted as areas for improvement. This is also coupled with the suggestion that central

sharing of information and the need to streamline information sharing across professionals and agencies is necessary to reduce the current burden placed on social work staff. This would support best practice and sharing amongst agencies as has been a constant finding in learning from all serious case reviews.

■ **Less duplication and central sharing of information**

"Less duplication of information and a better system whereby sharing of information is centralised and updated on a monthly basis."

"Remote access, less forms to fill in, less panels requiring reports that mean duplicating work"

"More streamlined monitoring proformas, fewer referral forms adherence to currency of UNOCINI, less governance or more focussed governance."

"Less duplication of forms."

"Less elongated forms and constant repetition, particularly from management looking for the same statistics and information. A useful computer system such as the Apex system mental health service use would save repetition and enable ease of access to information – also a central system that would store all information to a client."

◆ **Recommendation 7**

DHSSPSNI, as part of the Ten Year Social Work Strategy, should examine the use of Information Technology across the geographical locations and sectors to identify ways in which Information Technology could be used to reduce the administration requirements experienced by social workers.

■ **Improved IT and equipment**

"Electronic notebooks that convert writing to text and are linked to computers for more recording in situ that can be password protected."

"More efficient ways of recording such as use of Dictaphones, computerised pens, laptops etc use of technology to assist with making administration and recording more efficient."

"Good training in the latest systems for all staff, including admin staff. Staff should have secure fobs so they can work from home – we have four laptops between three teams."

"One system where all telephone calls, emails, faxes can be stored because attempting to record every conversation on a separate record sheet then maintaining them within a file leaves room for error. A system where the telephone calls can be typed in as they occur would be easier."

"Own secure laptop."

"Better use of modern technology within social services."

The importance of improved computer systems and equipment which supports record keeping and administration has been a recurring theme. Several examples of good practice have been quoted such as the use of the "Communities" computer programme.

◆ **Recommendation 8**

The Health and Social Care Board should examine ways to reduce duplication in recording, including duplicate form filling and ways to streamline information sharing across professionals and agencies by using a central information system.

Lesser themes, some of which recur throughout the surveys responses, include that recording be more of a shared responsibility between professions, protected time to record, changes to the current UNOCINI form and less cases or protected caseload.

SOCIAL WORKERS VALUE PEOPLE ▶▶▶▶▶▶

94% of social workers want to spend more time with the children and families they work with.

The majority of respondents reported that in order for trust and rapport to be built more time was required in direct work with clients.

> *"Personally I have been feeling that I need to improve in this area and I have been starting to work with service users face to face more often. This has proven to be very beneficial as it has helped improve relationships and helps me to have a better understanding of their needs and the situations they face. This is what social workers are taught to do when they are completing their training but practically with the caseloads and the amount of paperwork this is not happening and this is to the detriment of the children and families."*
> *"Enable adequate time to establish proper relationships and gain trust and provide proper support and assistance."*
> *"More likely for work to be more effective and less likely to see cases come back in."*
> *"Better quality of intervention, better assessment and more individual work which would contribute to prevention."*
> *"For most service users the time spent in face to face contact has the greatest impact. Effective communication, using core social work skills are the tools we engage to support service users who choose to make a difference in their lives."*
> *"Increased face to face contact is not the answer unless it is planned and purposeful. I think if it were, it may well promote better outcomes, but I'm not sure that it's helpful to promote the myth that simply by spending more time with clients, social workers will be able to make a better impact on the very deep rooted and complex problems our service users face."*

Time management and planning for administration requirements have been highlighted as ways in which current systems are working well. This is an area of good practice which could be built upon regionally.

◆ **Recommendation 9**
DHSSPSNI and Employers should identify good practice in time management and planning and ensure this is shared regionally.

Overwhelmingly the responses received indicated that more direct time with clients would improve the quality of relationships, provide a better quality service and achieve better outcomes for the children and their families. The relationship between social worker and client was seen to be central to change work.

At the same time as reducing risks and increasing capacity for preventative work, reducing bureaucracy will also have the capacity to increase job satisfaction and improve retention of childcare social workers.

What is clear is that social workers want to spend more time with the children and families they are working with.

WHAT NIASW WILL DO NEXT ▶▶▶▶▶▶

1 **Request a formal hearing at the Assembly Health Committee.**

2 **Bring this report to the attention of each political party.**

3 **Challenge and encourage DHSSPS, HSCB and Employers to face this problem head on.**

4 **Take this report to the media and tell the public what it is like for social workers.**

5 **Share these findings with our members and all childcare social workers.**

6 **Encourage social workers to share the report with colleagues.**

7 **Launch NIASW Adult Services Survey.**

CONCLUSION ▶▶▶▶▶▶

Social work in Northern Ireland is unique; we lead the way across the UK in many ways. We have a Chief Social Services Officer, a robust and well respected qualifying and post-qualifying framework at masters level, the AYE (Assessed Year in Employment) for newly qualified social workers and a statutory requirement that the Director of Children's Services will be the Executive Director of Social Work and the first ever 10 Year Social Work Strategy "Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing".

This survey highlights a profession under extreme pressure. It is evident that social workers go the extra mile; NIASW can demonstrate that they work above and beyond the call of duty.

However, they spend the majority of their time filling in forms, report writing, attending meetings, organising and transporting children for contact, compiling statistics and inputting data into a computer system. This is not what social workers are trained to do and it is not what social workers want to do.

NIASW, as the voice of the profession, are challenging the Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety, the Health & Social Care Board and employers of social workers to acknowledge the problem of bureaucracy in childcare and to commit to make changes for the better.

In standing up for the profession and supporting social workers to be able to deliver the best possible service for children and families, NIASW call for "Social Work Not Paperwork".