ABOVE AND BEYOND:
AT WHAT COST?

NIASW Social Work
Workload Survey Report

NIASW
N.IRELAND ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS
(PART OF BASW)

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

"Caseloads" – it's an issue frequently talked about by social workers, with discussion usually focused on the growing volume of cases, their increasing complexity, or both.

In early 2016, NIASW members highlighted a series of concerns to the Association regarding workload challenges. To establish a clear understanding of the challenges NIASW surveyed social workers in Northern Ireland employed across a range of settings.

The survey findings highlight the extent to which many social workers go above and beyond, working additional unpaid hours to meet the needs of their service users. In numerous cases staff work in teams with vacant posts, shouldering additional responsibility as a result.

This dedication comes at a cost to social workers. Additional hours spent in work is time away from family and friends. However, it also represents a benefit to social work employers and the health and social care system. NIASW estimates the unpaid hours worked by social workers amount to a saving of

£11.4 million annually – £9.9 million for statutory health and social care bodies and £1.5 million for voluntary sector social work employers.

Four years on from NIASW's 2012 *Social Work not Paperwork* report social workers continue to identify the burden of bureaucracy as an obstacle to spending time with the service users they work to help. In addition, social workers report undertaking highly complex work on a daily basis.
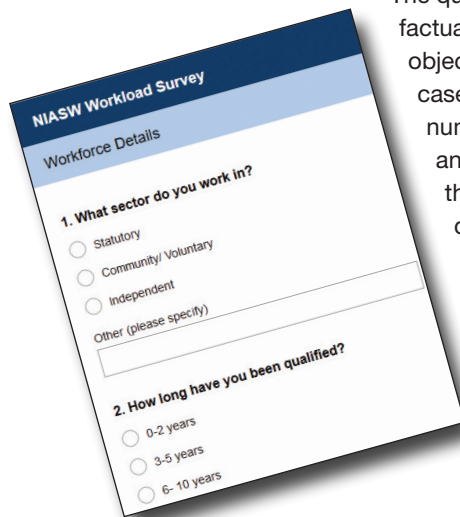
Change is required to free and facilitate staff to perform their roles to the best of their ability.

This research was not conducted to highlight problems – it was undertaken to identify solutions. Throughout the document a series of recommendations are presented and NIASW looks forward to working in partnership with the Department of Health, the Health and Social Care Board, and social work employers to see these solutions implemented.

Marcella Leonard
NIASW Chair

METHODOLOGY

On 8 March 2016 NIASW launched its Workload Survey on the online platform Survey Monkey. The survey ran until 18 April 2016 and 398 responses were received.

The questionnaire contained a series of closed factual questions intended to construct an objective evidence base of social workers' caseloads. Respondents were also asked a number of open questions. This provided an opportunity for respondents to explain the challenges they face in their role, and detail what changes would help to alleviate these pressures.

NIASW recognises social workers in practice are best placed to identify the pressures they face and to suggest solutions to address the problems they encounter.

PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

84% of responses came from social workers working in the statutory sector, 15% from social workers working in the voluntary sector, and 1% from independent social workers.

8% of the respondents have been qualified for less than 2 years, 13% for between 3 and 5 years, and 19% for between 6 and 10 years. 59% of the respondents have been qualified for more than 10 years[1].

55% of the respondents work in adult services and 45% work in children's services.

[1] Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

KEY FINDINGS

- **88% of social workers work additional unpaid hours**

- **Half of all social workers report staff vacancies in their team**

- **44% of social workers report the burden of paperwork and lack of administrative support as the single or joint greatest challenge they face in their role**

- **Across all programmes of care social workers highlight the growing complexity of cases and the need for greater support from their employers**

- **Where caseload management is in use the vast majority of staff are working above the recommended level**
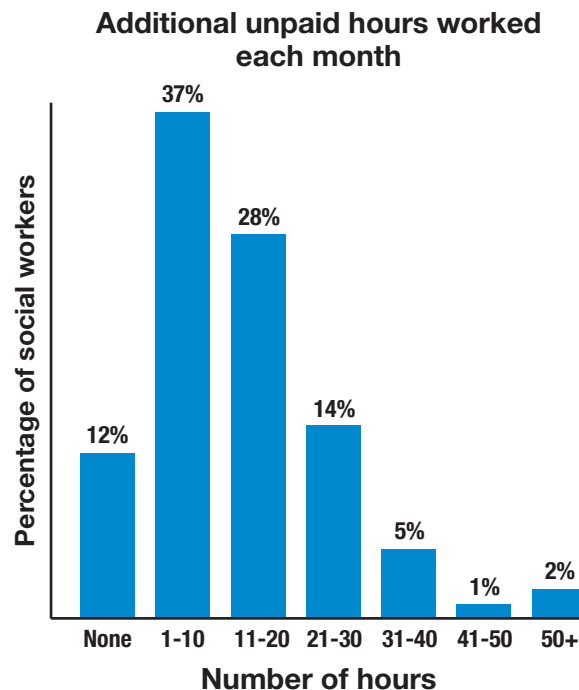
WORKING ADDITIONAL UNPAID HOURS

The survey data indicates nine out of ten (88%) social workers work additional unpaid hours as a regular occurrence.

There is little variance in terms of additional unpaid hours worked by social workers in the statutory and voluntary sectors. 89% of statutory sector social workers work unpaid hours compared to 84% of their voluntary sector counterparts.

"I have more work than I can fit into my working hours"

"Due to putting clients first my unpaid additional hours are a result of completing paperwork"

Additional unpaid hours worked each month

Percentage of social workers

Number of hours	Percentage
None	12%
1-10	37%
11-20	28%
21-30	14%
31-40	5%
41-50	1%
50+	2%

While working additional unpaid hours comes at a cost to social work staff, it represents a real saving for social work employers.

We estimate social workers working in the statutory health and social care sector work an additional 644,000 unpaid hours per year[2]. This is equivalent to 330 full time social work posts, which is equal to 9% of the social work workforce employed by the Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts and the HSC Board[3].

We also estimate social workers working in the voluntary sector work an additional 98,000 additional unpaid hours a year. This is equivalent to 50 full time social work posts, or 7% of the voluntary sector social work workforce[4].

In financial terms, we estimate the saving to the HSC Trusts and the HSC Board as a result of the additional unpaid hours worked by social workers is c. £9.9 million annually and the saving to voluntary sector social work employers is c. £1.5 million annually[5].

Although it is praiseworthy that social work staff are prepared to work additional hours to meet the needs of their service users, it is not acceptable that staff are having to work beyond their contracted hours. Furthermore, NIASW is concerned some social workers may be working at unsafe levels, with negative impacts on their quality of life.

Recommendation

All employers should undertake an audit to establish the number of additional unpaid hours worked by their social work staff. The findings should inform future workforce planning to ensure social work staff are not working at unsafe levels.

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[2] Estimate calculated by multiplying the mid-point figure for each category of additional hours worked by the number of HSC Trust and HSC Board employed social workers that fall within each category.

[3] Department of Health Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Workforce Census March 2016 – the total number of social workers employed by the HSC Trusts and HSC Board is 3820 which is equivalent to 3574 staff on a whole time equivalent basis.

[4] There are 750 social workers employed in the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland – NISCC employment data correct as of 12/04/2016.

[5] These figures are calculated by multiplying the mid-point of the Agenda for Change Band 6 salary scale hourly rate (£15.37) by the estimated number of additional hours worked (644,153 hours for statutory sector social workers and 97,796 hours for voluntary sector social workers).

STAFF VACANCIES

Half of all social workers surveyed reported at least one staff vacancy in their team.

Vacancies are more common in the statutory sector than in the voluntary sector. 51% of respondents working in the statutory sector reported at least one staff vacancy in their team compared to 40% of respondents from the voluntary sector.

When asked about the pressures they faced in their job role, half of all respondents highlighted staff shortages and workload pressures as the single or joint greatest pressure they encounter.

"We need additional staffing to ensure staff have time to spend with young people as opposed to writing about them"

"Staff morale is currently low in my department due to staff pressures to cover additional wards and annual leave has been declined at times due to staff shortages"

There are a number of factors, especially in the statutory sector, which impact on the level of vacancies across social work servcies.

We are aware insufficient funding is provided to fill HSC Trust posts vacant due to maternity leave and long term sick leave on a like for like basis. We also recognise the HSC Trusts have moved to a regionally centralised system of recruitment administered by the Business Service Organsiation (BSO) and this has resulted in delays in recruiting staff. In light of these delays we believe the Department of Health should work in partnership with the Business Service Organisation to streamline recruitment processes.

NIASW recognises problems caused by staff vacanices are not unique to Northern Ireland…

Leaving social work vacancies unfilled creates undue pressure on social workers by increasing the number of cases they have to manage. The complexity of social work, the risk elements involved and the severity of the consequences which can result from system failure requires teams to be staffed to full capacity.

Recommendation

All employers should conduct an audit of social work vacancies and ensure all vacancies are filled as a matter of urgency.

"Recent statistics suggest as many as one in five children's social worker posts in England is vacant. This lack of stability is not good for children and it isn't good for the workforce. We have to move forward positively with a clear commitment to improve services and the conditions social workers work in."

Dr Ruth Allen – CEO, British Association of Social Workers

THE BUREAUCRATIC BURDEN

44% of social workers report the burden of paperwork and lack of administrative support as the single or joint greatest challenge they face in their role.

"The challenges of ensuring paperwork is completed has been noted in previous research over the years, yet this is an area that is never properly addressed"

"We need more clerical support to cover tasks like filing, data collection and typing reports"

The combination of large amounts of paperwork that social workers are required to complete and a shortage of administrative support places significant pressure on social workers. Respondents highlighted the amount of time spent completing paperwork allowed them insufficient time to satisfactorily engage with service users.

Respondents frequently expressed frustration at the cumbersome and duplicative nature of paperwork they are required to complete. In one instance, a social worker working in an intensive support children's home, noted that for every

incident involving a child, a staff member is required to complete 14 separate documents.

Social workers also noted the unwieldy nature of IT recording systems and cited the need for the introduction of user-friendly IT solutions to reduce the bureaucratic burden.

"Having to complete reports and records within allocated time periods seems to be more important than the actual face to face work"

"Paper work takes up about 80% of my time with recording"
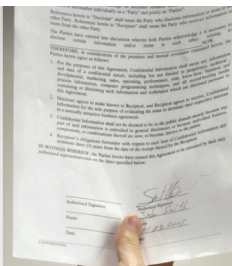
The burden of administration is not contained however to social work practice in Northern Ireland…

"Social workers [in Scotland] tend to have excessive caseloads, and this is getting worse… Recording and reporting, sitting behind a computer in administrative tasks, still dominates time available."

Trisha Hall
– Country Manager, Scottish Association of Social Workers

In 2012 NIASW published its *Social Work not Paperwork* research report. The report highlighted the heavy burden of paperwork endured by social workers.

Since then the Department of Health has appointed a Professional Lead for Reducing Bureaucracy in social work and a regional Reducing Bureaucracy Action Plan has been developed, with work underway across HSC Trusts.

However, a real impact in terms of reduction in paperwork has not yet been felt by staff working on the frontline of social work.

Recommendations

Social Work teams should have adequate dedicated administrative support to ensure social workers spend the majority of their time engaging directly with service users and carers.

The Department of Health should establish a task force to take forward a whole systems approach to tackling unnecessary bureaucracy within social services. A necessary focus of this group should be on developing IT solutions.

WORKLOAD COMPLEXITY

Across all programmes of care social workers highlight the growing complexity of cases and the need for greater support from their employers.

Two thirds (64%) of respondents explained they consider at least 40% of their cases to be complex and high risk. One in five (22%) consider that 80% of their cases fall within this category.

"I have too many complex cases and not enough time or resources for each case. I always feel I am not giving service users what they require and that there is more to be done"

An example highlighting the complexity of cases was provided by a survey respondent who works with adults with a learning disability. The social worker explained that in addition to a service user's learning disability, individuals often also have physical health problems, mobility problems, mental health problems, capacity issues, or dementia and health problems related to becoming elderly. The social worker is responsible for supporting the needs of the service user and carer in relation to all these issues, not simply with regards to their learning disability.

Several respondents noted challenges arising from working in multidisciplinary teams, and from managing diverse caseloads. Respondents also highlighted stress caused as a result of pressure from managers.

"Too many of my cases are too complex. I don't have enough time to spend any quality time on them. The result is I feel overwhelmed with my caseload"

On the whole, the respondents to the survey were not calling for a reduction in the complexity of caseloads, but rather for improved support to enable them to deal with the work.

Various suggestions were made as to how employers could improve support for their social work staff.

The need to emotionally support staff was highlighted by calls for the introduction of reflective supervision and for provision of therapeutic services for staff to discuss the impact complex

cases are having on their emotional wellbeing. Respondents noted the need for staff to be more involved in decision making with management, and for managers to afford greater recognition to the pressure their staff are under.

Finally, respondents called for improved training opportunities and explained better communication between team members, including regular team meetings, could help social workers to more easily cope with complex cases.

Recommendation

In recognition of the growing complexity of social work cases, employers must ensure adequate support and training is provided to their staff to enable them to meet the needs of their service users.

CASELOAD MANAGEMENT

Caseload management is a range of tools which give weightings to cases according to their complexity. More complex and time consuming cases receive higher weightings and less complex cases are given lower weightings. Used appropriately caseload management will ensure social workers are provided an appropriate number of cases for their contracted hours and service users are given access to timely, safe and high quality services.

However, the survey indicates that where caseload management is in use the vast majority of staff are working above their recommended level.

72% of respondents reported working above their recommended level while only 28% reported working at their recommended level.

No respondents reported working below their recommended level.

Caseload management was reported as being used to varying degrees across children's services with highest levels of use in adoption and fostering teams. 74% of respondents in adoption and fostering teams said their team had a caseload management system in operation.

We are aware a caseload management model has been developed for children's services in Northern Ireland by the regional Reform Implementation Team. Although the model has been implemented in some social work teams it has not yet been consistently introduced. This accounts for those respondents working in children's services that reported they had no caseload management system in place.

Use of caseload management was reported as much less prevalent in adult services, although some respondents noted its use in older people's services, adult mental health, adult learning disability and adult physical disability services. We are aware that under the Social Work Strategy a number of workload management models are being piloted across a range of adult services settings.

"Introduction of caseload weighting is essential as 90% of my time is spent with about 30% of my caseload"

We recognise the benefits caseload management can bring for social workers and encourage its roll-out across all programmes of care. However, to be effective it is essential that social work staff understand how their model is weighted and how their workload has been calculated. Where a social worker is found to be consistently working above their recommended level, their employer should respond to reduce the individual's caseload in recognition that the social worker is overburdened.

Recommendation

All employers should ensure caseload management is consistently adopted across programmes of care and tha staff understand how their model is weighted and how their workload has been determined.
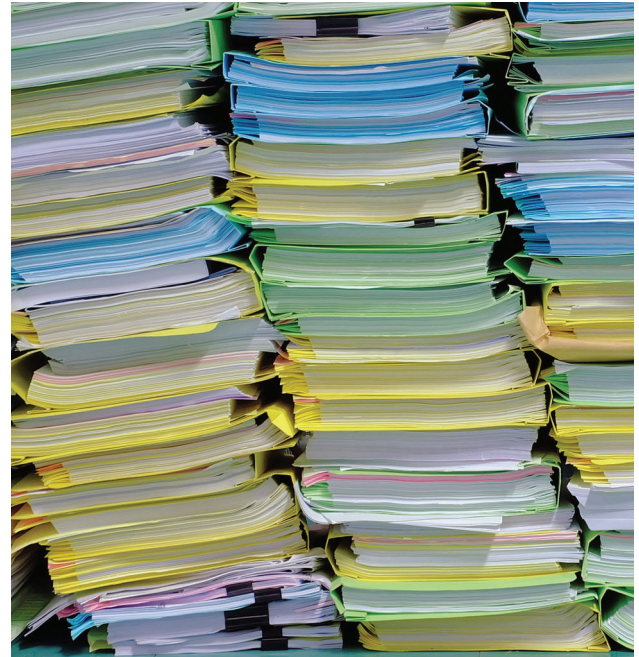
CONCLUSION

The findings presented in this report indicate social workers are committed and dedicated professionals, many of whom go above and beyond to provide help to individuals and families that require support.

However, this commitment can come at a cost – sometimes in the form of stress, often as additional hours spent in work.

This cost to social workers is not acceptable and the research has highlighted what needs to be done to address both the time pressures and workload complexity staff face.

Action is needed at a strategic level to fill vacancies, implement caseload management systems and remove the burden of unnecessary and duplicative paperwork. Support is also needed within teams, via provision of adequate administrative support, to free social workers to spend more time with the service users that need their help.

While as a profession we face challenges, none are insurmountable. NIASW is committed to working with all stakeholders to remove the obstacles that can restrict social workers from working to their full potential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **All employers should undertake an audit to establish the number of additional unpaid hours worked by their social work staff. The findings should inform future workforce planning to ensure social work staff are not working at unsafe levels.**

- **All employers should conduct an audit of social work vacancies and ensure all vacancies are filled as a matter of urgency.**

- **Social Work teams should have adequate dedicated administrative support to ensure social workers spend the majority of their time engaging directly with service users and carers.**

- **The Department of Health should establish a task force to take forward a whole systems approach to tackling unnecessary bureaucracy within social services. A necessary focus of this group should be on developing IT solutions.**

- **In recognition of the growing complexity of social work cases, employers must ensure adequate support and training is provided to their staff to enable them to meet the needs of their service users.**

- **All employers should ensure caseload management is consistently adopted across programmes of care and that staff understand how their model is weighted and how their workload has been determined.**

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