



Independent Review of
Children's Social Care Services:
initial consultation on the
recommendations

BASW NI Response

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BASW
Northern Ireland

The professional association for
social work and social workers

BASW NI response to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services: initial consultation on the recommendations

Introduction

The British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation. BASW NI is part of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), the largest professional body for social workers in the UK. BASW has 22,000 members employed in frontline, management, academic and research positions in all care settings.

The provision of high-quality children's social care services is fundamentally important to the functioning of a healthy society.

Social workers working in children's services support individuals and families to overcome disadvantage rooted in social, economic, environmental and physical factors. As highlighted by the Review of Children's Social Care Services (the Review) report, in Northern Ireland, many of these factors are caused or exacerbated by the region's troubled past.

It must also be recognised that the children and young people who use social work services are some of the most vulnerable in society. Many of whom, because of their age, stage in life, or lack of influence do not enjoy the agency, taken for granted by other members of our community, to speak out and highlight the shortcomings in the services they receive.

BASW NI acknowledges the vast contribution that children and their families make to our children's social care system. Their lived experience, expertise, and the role they have played in this Review to improve policies and services must be recognised. BASW NI has had the opportunity to engage with many children's social care stakeholders during the review process and hopes to continue to do so as the recommendations of the Review are implemented.

The Association is supportive of **Recommendation 2: Action should be taken to tackle through welfare benefit changes, the increasing prevalence and intensity of child poverty**. Poverty is part of the everyday context of social work and BASW NI is gravely concerned at the impacts inequality and economic hardship have for many of the children and families social workers support.

The situation continues to deteriorate, with increasing numbers of children and families finding themselves in poverty and destitution in Northern Ireland. Addressing the causes of child poverty has become an even greater and more urgent priority because of the stark austerity measures implemented by the Northern Ireland Office in recent months. This includes the real terms cut in the Department of Health's finances and the 2.7% cut to the funding allocated to the Department of Education in the current Northern Ireland Budget.

The Association supports **Recommendation 49: There is without doubt the need for increased funding and investment to respond to the increasing poverty creating difficulties for children and families and to allow them to receive the help and assistance they need.** High incidences of social work intervention with the most disadvantaged families has little to do with social work reform and much more to do with the outworkings of a neoliberal political economy amplified by a decade of austerity policies.

The primary challenge for frontline family support services, particularly in the community and voluntary sector over the last decade has not been their structure, but the lack of funding they receive. BASW NI's members are clear that funding for family support needs to be ringfenced to ensure investment in early intervention is prioritised and protected. Long-term commitments to funding need to be made to allow supports in the community to have long-term impacts.

The welfare safety net of society that protects people from poverty, homelessness, illness, and the impact of disability has been weakened by more than a decade of austerity. The current cost of living crisis has highlighted how significant the deficiencies in the social security system have become. Children and families require a culture of support where parents are not required to use foodbanks, struggle with homelessness, or face poverty because of unemployment, low wages, or disability. BASW NI continues to work in conjunction with like-minded agencies and individuals to defend the human rights of the children and families affected.

BASW's Anti-Poverty campaigning has highlighted the impacts of poverty and aims to deliver change both at Westminster and at the Northern Ireland Assembly. As a lead member of the Cliff Edge Coalition in Northern Ireland, the Association has secured the permanent extension of the mitigation against the Bedroom Tax and an extension of the Benefit Cap mitigation to 2025. The Coalition continues to campaign, calling for the removal of the Universal Credit two-child limit, an intervention to address the five-week wait for Universal Credit, and improved support for private renters affected by rising rents.

The central issue of poverty and its devastating impact on children and their families must be comprehensively addressed by devolved government. Social policy across NI Executive departments needs to work collectively to address the chronic problem of poverty and therefore BASW NI, in partnership with colleagues in the Equality Coalition, is calling for the implementation of the Anti-Poverty Strategy. The Coalition, of which BASW NI is a member, is a broad civil society alliance of more than 100 NGOs and trade unions dedicated to promoting equality and compliance with Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act.

Northern Ireland has been waiting for an anti-poverty strategy for nearly twenty years. The 2006 St Andrews Agreement contained a legal obligation for the NI Executive to develop a strategy to tackle poverty, social exclusion, and patterns of deprivation based on objective need. In 2015, following a judicial review, the High Court found the NI Executive was acting unlawfully for not having adopted such a strategy. Progress was made during the last NI Assembly mandate, with an expert advisory panel and co-design group established to take

forward the development of an anti-poverty strategy. However, the Executive collapsed before the strategy was implemented. When a NI Executive is established a comprehensive and effective anti-poverty strategy must be advanced as a priority.

In consideration of **Recommendation 22: There needs to be a reset and refocus for children's services to give a greater focus and attention to family support**, BASW NI acknowledges that social work history and literature indicate child safeguarding and support rarely function from rigid positions between the individual versus societal, 'child rescue' versus 'prevention', 'care' versus 'control'. Social work literature and history also suggest that separating practice in this way is not practical. Social work practice therefore must find a balance, and this involves operating on the continuum encompassing the 'both/and', rather than 'either/or'.

Children and families' social workers take a particular reflexive and ethical perspective regarding power, advocacy, and rights in their practice. The need for this broad understanding of social work is reiterated by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work's (IASSW) global definition of social work.

"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being." (IFSW, 2014)

Social workers need a comprehensive understanding of a range of needs and different approaches to practice. This enables them to work systematically but also flexibly in responding to individual and community needs. A systems understanding however underpins the range of approaches and specific methods. This is important as children's services and adult services are often seen as separate entities, however social work, as BASW NI knows as the professional body for social work, remains one profession.

Issues and difficulties for adults, identified in the review as Northern Ireland's unique 'Toxic Trio', directly impact on children's well-being. The Review references the legacy of the personal traumas of *The Troubles* which are associated with high levels of mental health difficulties, misuse of alcohol and drugs, incidence of domestic violence and the impact of intergenerational trauma. It also noted the contemporary threat, fear and trauma created in Northern Ireland's communities today and the need for social work to be responsive to people affected by current threats and violence. The issue of a political vacuum created by the absence of a NI Executive or functioning Assembly is having a particular impact around key decisions concerning funding for statutory and voluntary services, grants to community groups, pay for social workers and others working in children's social care.

The Association is acutely aware of this toxic mix of factors and the impact it has on children and families. The level of work needed to keep children safe and support families by the

profession continues to grow as the issues identified in the Review continue to fester due to the lack of a functioning devolved government. This is felt most acutely in the lack of long-term decision making and funding commitments as referenced in **Recommendation 48**.

The global definition of social work is explicit that social workers must contribute to change on the individual and societal levels. The *BASW Code of Ethics (2021)* states “social workers, individually, collectively and with others, have a duty to challenge social conditions that contribute to oppression, social exclusion, stigma or subjugation, and work towards an inclusive society”. Throughout the profession’s history, there have been ongoing debates about whether to mainly focus on empowering individuals to change behaviours that may cause harm or take more radical and critical approaches. BASW is unequivocal that social work must address both individual reform and social revolution in social policy.

In the BASW UK publication, *A Vision for Social Work: Children and Families (2020)*, the Association acknowledges that working with at risk and marginalised children and families is a multi-disciplinary, multi-professional task which requires community support. However social workers play a central role—one which is recognised in the profession’s specific legal duties and responsibilities.

The major challenges the social work profession faces are well documented. A series of child abuse scandals have shaken practice and cast a long shadow over how social work frontline staff, managers and senior managers view risk. The increasing use of procedures to shape social work practice and growing bureaucracy limit the time social workers can spend directly working with service users. Increasing gaps in the provision of family support services whether family support, or community-based specialist intervention services. Growing holes in the safety net provided by the state—Universal Credit, the Benefit Cap, reductions in disability benefit, the shrinking stock of social housing, No Recourse to Public Funds, the ‘rape clause’ and many others have all weakened the support provided by the safety net of welfare benefits. All are products of the UK Government in Westminster. The impact of poverty on parenting has been clearly evidenced and we know that children who are in poverty are significantly more likely to be in the care of the state.

Before answering the question of how to reset and refocus children’s services, it is necessary to consider human rights. One of the most basic human instincts is to raise your own children. This instinct is enshrined in Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998, *The right to respect for private and family life*. But children have rights too, they have a right not be physically abused and not to be neglected.

As social workers know, getting the balance right between prevention, support and intervention for families is crucial. A family’s legal right, such as Article 8, has limited meaning if that right cannot be used. For a right such as Article 8 to be exercised families need access to appropriate support, for example adequate income, housing, and access to appropriate services—all of which are being increasingly eroded.

A clear focus on human rights allows rhetoric to be translated into specific practical action for the most marginal and at risk in society. In its document, *A Vision for Social Work: Children*

*and Families*¹ BASW has identified 12 Actions for Change for social work with children and families. These are outlined below with reference to recommendations of the Review as part of the actions the Association asserts are needed for children and families social work in Northern Ireland.

Action for Change 1: Family support services that support and prevent escalation to the level of statutory intervention. The availability of such services varies between geographical areas, even within Health and Social Care Trust areas. Often, such services are provided by the voluntary sector which have been ravaged by more than decade of cuts, and more specialist services provided by the national children's charities have been reduced as contracts with Trusts have ended and not been renewed. As per **Recommendation 1: Northern Ireland is not that large and should be considered in how children's services are organised and delivered**, BASW NI agrees this needs to happen to ensure regional consistency. BASW NI members frequently raise concerns about the disparity of services available to children and families depending on geographic locality. This is particularly acute in provision of respite services, short breaks and accessing direct payment workers for children and children with disabilities. **Recommendation 30 calls for respite care for children with a disability to be expanded** which the Association fully supports. This needs to happen at pace to keep up with increasing demand.

BASW NI also agrees that **children receiving respite care should not be seen as looked after children** as per this recommendation. This is causing carers and families distress as it is viewed as stigmatising. It also is causing staff additional paperwork who then must implement the requirements and procedures of the child becoming looked after.

Action for Change 2: Understanding what interventions are best for whom, when and in what circumstances has direct relevance for **Recommendation 4: There is the need for more help for families to assist them to care well for their children.**

While the knowledge base of social work continues to expand, further important work has yet to be undertaken. Models of intervention for family support services vary significantly—the best-known ones include Family Group Conferencing and Signs of Safety, but there are also others that are less well known. Sometimes models of intervention are closely controlled with prescribed methods of delivery, trainers, and accredited practitioners. At other times what is promoted as a specific model is understood (and applied) by different practitioners differently. In terms of preventative family support services there is little literature (and even less training) on which interventions and support are best for whom, when and in what circumstances. This needs to change. BASW NI endorses **Recommendation 43** which proposes a review of service delivery in Beechcroft Child and Adolescent Mental Health Unit and **Recommendation 44** which proposes a review of service provision at the Iveagh Inpatient facility alongside implementation of the Strategic Framework for Children with a Disability.

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https://new.basw.co.uk/sites/default/files/resources/181163_a_vision_for_social_work_children_families_0.pdf

Concerns raised in the report about both these facilities highlight the lack of community support available for children and young people to keep them supported and safe at home. The development of emotional health and well-being services separate from a clinical CAMHS service as per **Recommendation 42** is integral to that as outlined in the Mental Health Strategy. Services for young people moving to adult services is regularly raised as a concern by BASW NI members who explain that for those young people it is akin to falling off a cliff when they turn 18. Therefore the Association supports **Recommendation 31: Extend the transition period where appropriate and necessary for young people moving to adult services and Recommendation 32 that a regional approach to transitions and advocacy should be introduced.**

Action for Change 3: Domestic Abuse remains both a major societal wrong, and in the specific professional domain of children and families. Resources for abused partners need to be supported and developed not cut, as has been the case in recent months. Training in relation to working with victims of domestic violence was identified as a need by practitioners in BASW NI's joint survey² with NISCC during the review process. The discourse in some areas of practice whereby mothers are labelled with a badge of 'failure to protect' needs to end and be replaced by training and development to front-line staff delivered by appropriate agencies and the resulting interventions systematically supported by employing organisations. Knowledge of domestic abuse was noted as a core area of knowledge for children's services social workers by 92% of respondents to the joint research survey. Understanding and applying how domestic abuse intersects with, for example, race, sex, and poverty is also key.

*Action for Change 4: Alcohol and other Drugs are often at the centre of the problems that many families face: use may be the source of the problem or exacerbate or maintain other problems (e.g., domestic abuse, mental health issues). Service users need access to specialist support and social workers need access to education, training, and specialist resources in this field. Training needs in relation to substance misuse were identified clearly in our survey by practitioners, with 82% of respondents considering knowledge of substance abuse as core to children's services social work. As noted in paragraph 10.41, a characteristic of many of the best rated children's services is they have brought together into their frontline teams the input of skilled workers including drug and alcohol and domestic violence. BASW NI asserts that for the implementation of **Recommendation 17** regarding development of a skills mix, these two areas of expertise—alcohol and drugs and domestic violence—need to be included.*

Action for Change 5: The perspectives of people with lived experience and their involvement in co-production. Families have a right to participate in decision making about their lives. People with lived experience of social work services—which includes families at all points of

² *Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services—Core Social Work Roles Survey: Research Findings*, February 2023

https://new.basw.co.uk/sites/default/files/resources/independent_review_of_childrens_social_care_services-core_social_work_roles_survey_research_findings_02.03.23.pdf

the spectrum of intervention and support—need to be routinely included in the delivery, review, and development of services. As per **Recommendation 6 the wisdom of all who have experience and engagement with and within children’s social care** should be consulted and via a **wide consultation** as per **Recommendation 51**. The involvement of children and young people who are placed in foster or residential care, and those who have left care, need their voices better heard and their active involvement in services further promoted. The inclusion of lived experience which was so evident during the duration of the Review needs to continue in the implementation of its recommendations. **As per Recommendation 25, previous reviews of foster care policies and services should be updated and acted upon and not allowed to drift.**

Action for Change 6: Anti-poverty practice. Poverty remains both a major societal wrong, and in the specific professional domain of children and families. As set out in Recommendation 2 Poverty and inadequate housing both initiates, and exacerbates, many of the problems that families face and undermines Article 8 of the Human Rights Act – the right to family life. Social workers need to practice with an awareness of poverty, be supported by their employers in this work, and both engage with, and be involved in, the wider fight against poverty and its evidenced impact on child and family rights and children’s and families goals and aspirations.

Action for Change 7: Anti-oppressive practice. Certain groups in society face both direct and indirect discrimination and, because of this, poor or non-existent services. As the movement Black Lives Matter has reminded us, members of Black and other Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities people carry a disproportionate weight of poverty and other societal wrongs. Social workers need to practice with an awareness of the systemic discrimination many individuals, families, and communities face, work actively to redress this, and be actively supported by their employers in this work. As noted in paragraph 5:25 of the report, one possible contribution to the increasing numbers of children in care is the increase in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people. There has been a 42% increase in the reporting years 2021- 2022 to 2022-2023 in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people. This presents social workers with a need to practice in a way that recognises the need to challenge the structural inequalities and disempowerment that these children and young people face.

*Action for Change 8: Community Resources e.g., under-fives groups, drop-ins, clubs, youth facilities, and food banks provide a vital layer of support between the family and state intervention. All have been under acute pressure and have suffered from on-going cuts to funding. Often run exclusively by volunteers the financial costs of such services are low, but the impact is high. We encourage national and local governments to support such activities through investment and other tangible resources. Recommendation 23 of the review recognises the success and contribution of Sure Start along with other family support services and seeks to expand including for 4 to 10 years. As Naomi Eisenstadt, the first Director of Sure Start noted in the Sure Start Review published in *The Therapeutic Care Journal*³ in 2022 noted, “whatever comes next, and whatever it is called, the basic premise of community-based centres for families with young children that are open to all and offer a range of services must be a good thing. But it must be supplementary to the services that*

³ <https://thetcj.org/in-residence-articles/sure-start-review-by-naomi-eisenstadt>

reduce pressure on parents; adequate income supports, parental leave policies, and high-quality public service”. BASW NI notes that the consultation seems to suggest that Sure Start should be expanded generally to deliver family support services to the 4-10 age group. This seems to be out of step with the text of the review, and BASW NI shares the concerns of Sure Start services that this could undermine the ethos and delivery of Sure Start. A priority before any development is to provide the funding that enables Sure Start to deliver its existing remit. Sure Starts need greater freedom to expand into new areas and deliver services to out of area children. The wider expansion of family support services to families with primary school children needs to bring together the many agencies involved in this work. Many aspects of the Sure Start model will be relevant and there will be opportunities to work in an integrated, and in some instances, co-located way, but it would be wrong to propose a general expansion of Sure Start as the solution to the proper development of family support services for families with primary school children.

*Action for Change 9: The use of digital. While many people with lived experience do not have access to digital services, the impact of Covid has accelerated the use of digital in social work. There are real problems here—both for social workers and people with lived experience of social work. As per **Recommendation 4** there is a need for more help for families to assist them to care for their children; digital literacy/exclusion needs to be factored into this.*

*Action for Change 10: Supervision. The social work supervision process has become overly focussed on performance management. There is an important role for performance management, but the supervision task is much wider and involves reflective dialogue, learning and development, feedback from people with lived experience, emotional intelligence, and social worker well-being. These features are not simply ‘nice-to-haves’ but create the conditions for the best professional decisions while minimising risk and are more supportive to staff which can aid staff retention as per **Recommendation 11**.*

*Action for Change 11: Effective management and leadership. Management and leadership involve a distinct set of skills. These skills can be learnt by experience and experimentation. Many self-taught managers are excellent, and many social workers fund their own management education and development. However, to have what is a major service (staff, budgets, working with the most at-risk people in the most complex of circumstances) depending, overall, on people ‘learning by doing’ is not good. The most important management and leadership skills are people skills. Social workers are ‘people people’, but translating this into issues such as motivation, deployment, staff development, organisational systems and budgets is rather different. Without training, feedback and opportunities for reflection and development poor management and leadership translates into high sickness and stress levels and staff churn as reflected in chapter 2 about the actions needed to address the children’s social care workforce crisis identified in **Recommendation 3**. Procedures rather than professionalism becomes dominant, and while there is a role for procedures, they are not sufficient for an effective organisation.*

*Action for Change 12: Work force planning and staff support—is directly relevant to **Recommendation 3: Action needs to be taken to address the children’s social care workforce crisis**. The social work workforce was already struggling considerably before*

Covid-19 with difficulties around recruitment, retention and high stress levels being regularly reported by social workers and managers. Overwhelmingly social workers relate these difficulties not to direct work or the stress of practice but instead to working conditions and organisational stressors. Child and family social workers have been particularly critical of these aspects of their work. The system in its current form is only able to function due to the long hours that social workers and their managers work. Social workers across family and childcare services continue to be tested under the most challenging of working conditions. This is unsustainable. An early concern in the Reform Board workstreams is the continuation of approaches that only think about social work and social care work within HSC organisations. A key insight of the Review was that there is a lot of social work and social care work in the voluntary and community sector that is due equal respect and status, and that needs to be properly included and engaged in the implementation of this Review.

Workforce

Social work has poor status in society. Families often view social workers with suspicion. This is unsurprising when as a profession, due to austerity policies, and our current political and economic model, we have little to offer in terms of timely access to resources. This is in a context in which the children and families social workers support is being tested like never before by the long-term impacts of the pandemic and a broken health and social care system which impacts children's social and emotional wellbeing, development, education, and access to opportunities.

The cost-of-living crisis, working conditions, negative and hostile media coverage and poor public understanding of social work are critical issues for the workforce. The UK Government has a central role in raising awareness and must consider how to improve public understanding of social work. This includes consideration of how the media covers serious cases and how it discusses children's social care more widely.

BASW NI has previously conducted research⁴ to examine the extent to which social workers have been subjected to intimidation, threats, and violence. The findings indicate a troubling scenario, both in terms of the scope, and the nature of incidents experienced:

- Close to 9 out of 10 social workers have experienced intimidation
- 3/4 have received threats
- 1/2 have been subjected to physical violence

This level of hostility and toxicity undermines the work needed to keep children safe and support families. The safety and wellbeing of social work staff is a priority for BASW NI as we face unprecedented unsafe staffing levels **action needs to be taken to address the children's social care workforce crisis as outlined in Recommendation 3.**

⁴ Insult and Injury: Exploring the impacts of intimidation, threats and violence against social workers (2018)
<https://new.basw.co.uk/sites/default/files/resources/insult-injury-social-workers.pdf>

BASW NI wants to see investment in social work recruitment, education, professional development (**Recommendation 21**) and retention initiatives (**Recommendation 11**). A thriving social work sector which is predominately female also requires a more family friendly approach to the workforce, allowing more flexibility for childcare, other caring considerations, and more part-time opportunities. The work of Reform Board Workstreams must have a broader view of the workforce beyond HSC organisations. Reform and investment must include the voluntary and community sector.

Organisations delivering children’s social care services should be able to undertake their own staff recruitment (Recommendation 8)—BASW members have expressed the view that the recruitment approach centrally through BSO is not working efficiently and is causing significant delays in the recruitment and appointment of social workers. They want it brought back ‘in house’ so they have responsibility for staff recruitment.

There is a clear need to tackle poor working conditions and the unfeasibly high workloads of social workers. High case and administrative loads are a major source of stress and the quality of support to children depends on providing social workers with the right conditions, which means more support, reflective practice, and resources to do the job. The introduction of Safe Staffing legislation for Northern Ireland is needed and BASW NI is contributing to the Department of Health’s ongoing work in this much needed area.

During the Review, BASW NI, in partnership with the NI Social Care Council (NISCC) conducted research⁵ to assess the extent to which social workers in Northern Ireland supported Professor Jones’s interim recommendation for a diversification of skills mix within social work teams. Responses to an online survey questionnaire were received from 445 social workers, 80 percent of whom worked in children’s services at the time of the research, and 20 percent of whom have previously worked in children’s services.

Almost nine out of ten respondents (89%) believed that a diversification of skills mix in children’s services, through the recruitment of additional non-social work staff, would be beneficial to the children and families social workers support. When asked to identify the additional staff that would most benefit the children and families social workers work with, the most commonly cited responses, (in descending order) were: family support worker, social work assistant, behavioural support worker, administrative support staff, and contact worker.

Recruiting these additional support staff is central to enabling more time for relationship-based practice. Doing this requires a reduction in bureaucracy. Social workers explain they spend too much time on administrative tasks rather than spending time working with families face to face. Addressing this problem requires the hiring of additional administrative staff and a streamlining of bureaucratic processes. Social work in the voluntary and community sector in NI has considerable experience of delivering high

⁵ [*Independent Review of Children’s Social Care Services—Core Social Work Roles Survey: Research Findings* \(February 2013\).](#)

quality, flexible, responsive and innovative services that readily use mixed skill sets. The Reform process should engage that experience in the development of new models of working, and the sector should also benefit from investment in staff development and retention.

BASW NI therefore fully supports **Recommendation 17**, agreeing that **there should be the further development of a skills mix within children and families frontline teams and services**. The Association encourages the Department of Health to draw on the findings of the research it conducted in partnership with NISCC to inform the skills mix diversification. It should be recognised, however, that while the diversification of skills can be beneficial in supporting social service delivery, it should not be regarded as a cost-saving way to replace social workers. An enhanced skills mix must be understood in the context of improved professional support for social workers to deliver better outcomes for people who use services, with the social work role protected and valued.

The cost-of-living crisis is a crisis for social workers. BASW NI recognises the impact it has on the people social workers work with every day and practitioners are increasingly personally affected. Social workers who use their cars for work are absorbing the impact from the rising cost of fuel leaving them facing real term pay cuts.

BASW NI supports **Recommendation 9 that a grading and banding structure review** is required for social work considering ongoing financial difficulties of our members. Grading scales within the HSCT's are short and bands closely back onto one another leaving a small salary recognition for Band 7 roles which are becoming increasingly hard to fill. The issue of Senior Social Workers being graded at Band 7 is one that members have consistently raised, this role should be reviewed and retitled as Team Managers—which they are—and re-graded to a Band 8.

BASW NI is supportive of **Recommendation 21** which seeks further development of Post Qualifying development programmes and qualifications for social workers linking them to specialist areas of practice. As a professional body we understand the importance of continuous professional development and our members across the community and voluntary sector would particularly welcome modular post qualifying programmes being more accessible to them. Commitment to post qualifying and specialist training should be linked to grading and career advancement and supported by employers.

Training and Education

To achieve and retain an effective workforce, we need to keep our skilled social work practitioners, and support experienced social care workers who are not yet qualified social workers to undertake training as set out in **Recommendation 20**. BASW NI members have expressed their support for the reintroduction of the trainee social work route as per **Recommendation 10**. Widening access and exploring multiple pathways into the profession including the trainee social worker route is required and that work is ongoing in the Department of Health, BASW NI is contributing to this and will continue to do so in the months ahead. However, this is another area where Reform processes continue to

perpetuate narrow views of social work as an almost exclusively HSC activity. There is a need to engage the voluntary and community sector as full partners in this work with better access to investment and funding in training and education, particularly pathways that enable social care workers from a range of qualification and social backgrounds to enter social work.

BASW NI is of the view that access to social work education must be fair and equitable. Support must be provided to people who have had more challenging life journeys and complicated trajectories to qualify as social workers. These individuals have often developed the personal qualities and life skills that make them excellent social workers.

Social work student bursaries have been frozen for years despite the spiralling cost of living. Many students are facing financial difficulties, resorting to food banks, or are turning to family or friends for support. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with lived experience seem to be most affected, the very people the profession is trying to incentivise into the profession. Professor Jones, in paragraph 11.3, notes that the Student Incentive Scheme needs updated for social work students.

Support for an Arms-Length Body and Minister for Children and Families

As is identified by Professor Jones, 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. BASW NI has consistently raised concerns about the impacts this two-tier approach, both for social workers and the people who use social work services.

Media attention frequently highlights health related challenges and failings—not least the drastic and often life limiting problems associated with Northern Ireland's chronic health care waiting lists. Unquestionably, this is an issue which must be addressed urgently by a Health Minister in a future Northern Ireland Executive.

However, the unmanageable pressures facing children's social care, which in the view of both BASW NI and Professor Jones, amount to a crisis, do not receive the same attention—whether in political debate, media coverage or in terms of public awareness.

The difficulties facing the sector are laid out in detail in the Review report. It is worth noting, however, that the most recent Department of Health statistics for children in care highlight 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 2023⁶ indicate 3,892

⁶ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-childrens-social-services-data-during-covid-19>

children are looked after by social services, a 16% increase on the pre covid figure of 3,362 and 36% increase over the last decade⁷.

The demand for services is being managed by a workforce bearing the signs of stress and burnout. Department of Health figures⁸ 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%. While BASW NI recognises work is currently underway by the Department to address recruitment and retention, the workforce remains far from stable.

As the Review report notes, the Health and Social Care Trusts are large and complex organisations with wide-ranging responsibilities covering numerous hospital and health services along with adult and children's social care. Amid the competing demands for resources, service planning and management oversight, it is an unfortunate reality that children's social care often receives less attention than healthcare services.

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. We support 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.

It is the combination of these factors, namely: the pressures on Northern Ireland's 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 that have 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 Youth Justice Agency, the Education Welfare Service, and the Youth Service.

⁷ 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

⁸ Department of Health presentation at Social Work Workforce Symposium, 4 November 2021

In addition to the Education Welfare Service and the Youth Service, there are other important Department of Education / Education Authority services which should also be transferred to the ALB+. These include the Child Protection Support Service and Intercultural Education Service, pupil wellbeing services including the Critical Incident Response Team, Independent Counselling for Schools Service, and others under the Department of Education and Department of Health Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework.

Although it is not specified among the services to be included in the ALB+, given the success and contribution of Sure Start and the proposal for its expansion (**Recommendation 23**), BASW NI is in support of the inclusion of Sure Start within the ALB+. It is the Association's view that the proposed inclusion of Sure Start in the ALB+ is implicit in the Review.

BASW NI also contends the functions of the Public Health Agency related to its remit concerning *Social Wellbeing Improvement* and the associated finances should be included in the ALB+ model.

BASW NI agrees with Professor Jones's proposal that Clinical CAMHS' should continue to be managed by the Health and Social Care Trusts given the involvement of health professionals including psychiatrists and clinical psychologists in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment provided of children and young people receiving care. The Association agrees with Professor Jones's assessment, that as with health visitors and school nurses, "these health professionals have a strong medical and health identification and value their location within health services. It is where their professional peers are located and it is where their careers are likely to progress. It is where they and their services should continue to be located".

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. While there are many examples of effective working between agencies, the current model erects silos, creating unhelpful barriers between services. For example, a young person involved in the Youth Justice system may also be experiencing problems in their home environment which require the intervention of HSC Trust family support social workers, and issues with school attendance, requiring support from the Education Welfare Service. Housing of these closely linked services across three NI Executive departments impedes conjoined planning and hinders efficient delivery. The Review report recognises this, highlighting 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, which are at the core of the crisis facing the social care sector, are unlikely to abate if children's social care services are transferred to an ALB under the remit of the Department of Health. In such a scenario, the contest for finance and oversight within the Department would remain. While those directly in charge of social care service planning would have a greater ability to focus exclusively on these services, ultimately, they would remain in

competition with their colleagues responsible for healthcare planning and policy in seeking resources from—and the strategic leadership of—a Health Minister.

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, the Association is of the view 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. Children’s needs and their rights must be a central priority of devolved government in a manner that until now they have not been. A Minister for Children and Families in TEO would provide integrated leadership and enhanced accountability for all decisions taken across government which affect children and young people.

Professor Jones recognises the potential for “competing interest and arguments about which government department should be the ‘parent’ department for the ALB” and takes the view that the Department of Health remaining the lead department would be least disruptive. BASW NI recognises this scenario would avoid “the transfer and separation to another department of those with a policy brief for children’s and families social care and who work beside colleagues with an adult social care brief.” However, it does not fully take into consideration the potential for resistance from a future Minister for Justice and Minister for Education who would face the transfer of significant aspects of their portfolios to the new ALB, most significantly, the Youth Justice service, the Youth Service and the Education Welfare service.

Politically, it would be more expedient, to ‘elevate’ all services regarded by Professor Jones as central to the ALB, to TEO. 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. Under the current procedures, the Minister for Justice is elected by a cross-community vote in the Assembly rather than via the d’Hondt method used for the allocation of all other NI Executive departments. Housing Youth Justice within a department shared by the largest Nationalist and Unionist parties would meet the criteria for a cross-community approach to political leadership and oversight.

BASW NI believes the wide-ranging nature of services recommended for inclusion in the ALB+ model, strengthens the case for making the ALB the responsibility of TEO given the strategic focus of the Office. The creation of the ALB+ with improved multi-agency integration of services for children and families would also support delivery of the 2021 *Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework* strategic outcome “Our children and young people have the best start in life”.

Given the pressures facing children’s social care, BASW NI endorses the commencement of work to create a shadow ALB at the earliest opportunity. Paragraph 18.11 of the Review indicates Article 22A of the Personal Social Services (NI) Order 1991, “*provides that the Department may, by direction, cease the exercise of specific Social Care and Children functions by HSC trusts and for them to be exercisable by a substituted body or person.*” This would appear to enable services which are currently the responsibility of the HSC Trusts to be brought into a new HSC body to which the other services associated with the ALB+ model could be added, and responsibility for the body transferred to TEO, via new primary legislation at a later stage. The Association also supports the proposal that “*in early in 2024 a shadow chair and board be appointed along with a chief executive designate for the ALB*”, tasked with leading the creation of the ALB and shaping its governance, strategic and operational leadership roles.

Supporting social work professional identity

BASW NI believes the integration of children’s social work services within a single ALB could have the added benefit of creating a greater sense of professional identity among social workers currently working with children and young people by removing silos between service areas.

In 2019, BASW NI partnered with the NI Social Care Council, the Irish Association of Social Workers, and Coru—Ireland’s multi-profession health regulator—to conduct research exploring social workers’ sense of professional identity across the island of Ireland⁹. When respondents were asked if they identify more closely with non-social workers they work alongside, or with social workers outside their area of practice, just over half (53%) stated they identify more closely with non-social workers they work alongside. Furthermore, social workers in NI were slightly more likely to identify with non-social workers in their area of practice than their RoI counterparts.

Fostering a strong sense of professional identity is important to help ensure a clear understanding of purpose and will ground practice in social work values and ethics. This in turn will increase the confidence and ability of the profession to deliver the best outcomes for the children and families social workers support.

While recognising the potential benefits of enhanced professional identity for social workers currently working with children and young people across various services, consideration will need to be given concerning how to ensure a dilution in social work identity does not occur as a result of separating children’s services social workers from their HSC colleagues who work with adults and older people.

⁹ *Shaping Social Workers’ Identity: An All-Ireland Study* (October 2020): BASW NI, NISCC, IASW, Coru.

Regional Children's Services

BASW NI is unable to give a definitive answer in response to consultation question number 42—*Do you agree that a Regional Care and Justice Centre should be developed on the Woodlands site in place of the current arrangements?* The Association highlights the following issues in relation to the proposal and encourages the Department to take these factors into consideration.

The demand for beds in Lakewood secure unit exceeds availability. It could therefore be argued that young people who require secure accommodation are at greater risk of becoming involved in criminal activity. Meanwhile the Youth Justice Agency has been focussed on reducing the number of young people coming into custody. To that end it seems to make sense that Woodlands has greater capacity to care for both justice and secure care children.

However, appropriate care for children should not be based on who has the greater capacity. The accommodation should be right and proper based on children's needs. Therefore, while we know that children in justice have care needs and their behaviour renders them out of control is it correct that they should all be accommodated together?

Previously the St Patricks Training school was on the same site as Glenmona Children's Home. Children were separated but the children in the care setting often considered their fate to be time in the Training Centre. Children in the Justice Centre were deemed to be beyond control by the children in care and carried a kudos that care children had a desire to emulate. To bring vulnerable children with various needs together either in one building or one site has the potential to recreate this scenario. How often have children from Lakewood found themselves in Woodlands and vice versa?

To bring these children together on one site requires careful planning and management. These settings should only ever be temporary for justice and or care children. Children should only ever stay in these settings for short periods with return to the community providing care and support that there is no return. The culture within these settings must ensure that the children see their accommodation as a temporary stop gap on the road to recovery and rehabilitation. Necessary services to support rehabilitation are a must if this approach will be more successful than what is currently available to children. Therefore, the approach should involve a system which does not support a move from care to justice and vice versa.

BASW NI agrees, however, with the proposal outlined in consultation question 42, that is, *the development of a Regional Care and Justice Centre on the Woodlands site should be conditional on the establishment of a Children and Families ALB.*

The establishment of an ALB will ensure funding for care and justice is provided by one body. Recognising all children have care needs and shaping the response in each instance based on the child's unique situation, not primarily based on whether they are a child in care or a child in the youth justice system, will result in a child-centred approach to meeting need,

and ultimately, more successful outcomes. Access to trauma informed services including social work and psychology must be available to all children regardless of where they are accommodated on the site.

Governance

There has been considerable confusion created by the closure of the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and the creation of the Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG), the case is detailed in Professor Ray Jones report and is also outlined in the Department's *Strategic Outline Case of Options to Reform Children's Social Care*. That document states "the current governance and leadership arrangements for children's social care in Northern Ireland, which includes arrangements, roles and responsibilities within the Department of Health (through SPPG), are at the centre of some of difficulties in tackling the issues facing children's social care."

The *Strategic Outline Case* acknowledges the need for clarity about authority and governance and there is a recognition of the need to recalibrate the strategic orientation of Children's social care in the absence of a robust strategic assessment of need. This needs to be linked to regional planning with operational delivery targets based on integrated working with flex for changing priorities.

The current position of having no clear outline of roles and responsibilities vis a vis delegation, direction and accountability reporting needs urgent review. BASW NI gave evidence to the NI Assembly Health Committee on the Health and Social Care Bill, and expressed concern that there was insufficient detail included to help us draw any conclusions. The Association was assured this detail would be available once the change was made. The SPPG came into operation on 01.04.23 and, as yet no detail is available.

In its evidence BASW NI outlined its concerns about the process of drafting the Bill and about the lack of information available regarding the detail of the proposed new structures. It is worrying, that after months of operation, these concerns have gone unaddressed.

Opposition to the privatisation of care

BASW NI fully supports **Recommendation 29: Do not allow the privatisation of care of children.** As Professor Jones outlines in the Review concerning the privatisation of children's residential care in England, "the location of homes are determined by commercial cost interests, children are placed in children's homes at some considerable distance from their families and social workers, and with profits margins of over 20% taking more than £200m a year as profits from children's social care." This is funding our HSC can ill-afford to lose and the impacts for children are detrimental to their development, sense of place and wellbeing. In England, the proliferation of housing children in unregulated placements is wholly unacceptable and a scenario which should be avoided. A key step in preventing a similar scenario in Northern Ireland is the rejection of any move towards the privatisation of care of children.

Encompass

Following extensive discussion with BASW NI members, the Association is without doubt that social work in Northern Ireland requires a new data system that will efficiently capture the information social workers and service users need it to. Any new system introduced must be an asset to practitioners, not a bureaucratic obstacle to overcome.

The feedback BASW NI has received from members has highlighted clearly that the Encompass system in its design as a healthcare record management system will fail to meet the information management needs of children's social care. For this reason, BASW NI supports **Recommendation 19**—*the existing children's social care information systems should be compared and the best performing adopted as the region-wide system rather than Encompass being developed to incorporate the information systems requirements for children's social care.*

BASW NI is dissatisfied that the Department has proposed rejecting this recommendation. It does not accept the argument that “*the decision to implement Encompass across the HSC was made a number of years ago and a supporting business case has been developed and approved*” as justification for rolling out an information management system which is unsuited for children's social care in the face of a recommendation against such a move by the Independent Reviewer of Children's Social Care.

Imperative for systemic reform

BASW NI acknowledges the commitment of social work practitioners and their managers to deliver for children and families throughout Northern Ireland and concurs with **Recommendation 52** that they are being hindered by long standing systemic issues. Changes now need to happen quickly without drift or delay as referenced in **Recommendation 5**. Mechanisms to monitor progress involving key stakeholders on a quarterly basis and an inclusive annual conference as set out in **Recommendation 53** would help track progress.

BASW NI is concerned, however, that the structural reform required for children's social care cannot happen without genuinely transformational investment *and* a functioning NI Executive. There is a clear distinction between what our system actually does now, and what it may have been designed to achieve. There is now an ethical imperative for our system to reform, adjustments need to be made, and the recommendations set out in this report must guide this change effort.

Reform efforts that have been referenced in our response are vast and include structural change, increased funding and new legislation to name a few. The challenge of reform is unarguably formidable due to the complex nature of the systems we are considering. The problems that child protection and children's social care systems seek to redress have intergenerational and broader societal strands and spill outside the parameters of what can be achieved in BASW NI's view by any one government agency here in Northern Ireland. Responsibility for ensuring child well-being and safety extends beyond the employees of

any single department to include government and non-government agencies, and crucially, services users and experts by experience.