

BASW NI Consultation response on : *“Safe and Effective Staffing Research and Policy Development, Older People, Children and Mental Health Social work in Northern Ireland.”*

BASW NI would like to acknowledge the work of the Office of Social Services (OSS) in taking this critical area of social work practice forward. We commend the approach taken to collaboration and partnership with social workers and the engagement with them and us really informed the resultant work. The academic rigour of stage one is to be commended, and we welcome the statements made in the report which highlighted the evidence base for safe staffing, caseload sizes, and service demands. The report reviewed the available evidence base for safe staffing and surveyed caseloads, staffing supply and service demands (McFadden et al., 2024).

Your report offered a definition of safer and effective staffing and recommended that safe staffing in social work should be based on three key concepts of capacity, communication and connection and ten key principles. BASW NI was a key contributor to both the steering group in phase one and a participant to the workshops in phase two where we attempted to locate an average caseload into the following:

- **Complex input** – cases requiring higher intensity work often including higher levels of risk management and time required on social work tasks.
- **Moderate input** – cases requiring moderate intensity work often including moderate risk management and time required on social work tasks.
- **Minor input** – cases requiring lower intensity work often including lower levels of assessed risk management and less time required on social work tasks.

This was a particularly helpful approach as it highlighted that many of the teams across HSC are working at crisis point and are operating on a level of complexity not previously seen before. BASW NI welcome the narrative contained within the report which details this level of increase in the complexity of social work and the resultant impact on individual practitioners and teams.

Report 1 *Safer and Effective Staffing Research and Policy Development Older People's and Children's Social Work in Northern Ireland* accurately acknowledged the significant challenges facing an overstretched social work system in Northern Ireland, including increased demand for services; due to population factors, the aftermath of COVID-19, funding shortfalls, and the impact on staff wellbeing with recruitment and retention of frontline social workers a significant and long standing challenge with many teams not operating at their funded establishment.

Demographic pressures in particular have not been traditionally considered adequately when workforce planning. Northern Ireland faces an aging population, specifically increasing demand for Older People's Social Work. There is also increasing demand in Children's Services due to factors like poverty with nearly a quarter of NI children live in relative poverty. These demographic shifts directly impact caseloads and require sustained workforce planning and investment.

These issues remain pertinent as Report 2 *Safe Staffing Research and Policy Development in Older People's, Children's, and Mental Health Social Work in Northern Ireland: Report 2- Social Work Caseloads Capacity Analysis* contextually outlines. However, the aspirational nature of the report and the caseload numbers are in stark contradiction to the reality of front-line practice. This is concerning because if social workers, team leaders and service managers strive to meet such aspirational targets that are impossible to achieve within current resources it will lead to further demoralisation, frustration, and feelings of failure within a profession which is feeling much of this already. The acknowledgement that some short term and longer-term work is necessary to embed the recommendations provides some reassurance. However, caution is required around safe staffing that doesn't address

systemic issues that require cross department governmental attention to improve outcomes for service users.

Demographic pressures have not been traditionally considered adequately when workforce planning. Northern Ireland faces an aging population, specifically increasing demand for Older People's Social Work. There is also increasing demand in Children's Services due to factors like poverty with nearly a quarter of NI children live in relative poverty. The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has seen increasing demand for Mental Health services across programmes of care in Children's and Adult services. These shifts in demand directly impact caseloads and require sustained workforce planning and investment.

Emergencies are acknowledged in this document as needing to be prioritised when managing caseloads, they have always been an inherent part of social work practice however the reality for many social work practitioners is that every day at work now involves crisis intervention and emergency responses. The routine nature of emergencies is particularly challenging when practitioners are trying to be reactive and provide continuity of care with ongoing casework. This is placing a significant emotional and logistical strain on social workers across the health and social care system.

BASW NI has long campaigned for a reduction in unnecessary, duplicative paperwork and this has been a key campaign of ours since 2012, despite numerous efforts the situation has not improved in any tangible way since then. As you say in your report, *"The situation is exacerbated by the necessity for stringent documentation and duplication of the same information needing input to different systems, including case notes, assessments, and legal compliance documents, which diverts time and attention away from direct service user engagement and adds to social worker stress. Mental health and Older People practitioners indicated that Encompass has now created additional time-consuming tasks."* BASW NI welcomed the invitation to join Workstream 8 of the CSRB group, "Reducing Unnecessary Bureaucracy" in May of this year. Carolyn Ewart, BASW NI National Director, is now Co-Chair of *"a recording sub-group"* tasked with streamlining the paperwork requirements within children's social work.

It is hoped that with the work of that group we will see real and dramatic changes to the overly bureaucratic systems that stymie social work practice and take social workers away from relational work with those who use our services. However, this group will only service children's service and there is a real need for a similar group across all of social work to tackle system issues. Some of those solutions are to set standards for recording, advise on what needs to be recorded and stirp out the duplicative elements of our paperwork. It would be helpful to have included a calculation for time spent on paperwork and recording in this report. We also need to explore skills mix within teams to have administration staff who can perform these tasks and to support social workers with sufficient technological equipment that enables them to do their job most efficiently. We also need to consider the appropriate use of Artificial Intelligence to help social workers make the best use of technological advances, the BASW document *Artificial Intelligence in Social Work* (2025) provides guidance on this.

Previous Strategies are referenced as having been drawn upon and setting the context for this guidance namely; Health & Social Care Workforce Strategy 2026 (2018), Social Work Workforce Review (DoH, 2022), Mental Health Strategy (2021-2031), Children's Services Review (DoH, 2023) and the Social Work (NI) Supervision Policy (DoH, 2023). These strategy efforts have been hampered by several longstanding issues including political instability, staff shortages, funding constraints and the aspirational vs reality gap with a lack of investment and systemic change. This guidance at risk of suffering a similar fate without the necessary political will for change.

As the professional body for social work our members continue to highlight in particular the existing systemic pressures and workforce deficits despite all of these strategies and reviews. As outlined in Report 1 there are overwhelming worker-to-caseload ratios in frontline social work teams across NI. It is important that the OSS has recognised the impact of High Intensity Points on teams and individuals in this report, and it will hopefully lead to a more responsive and supportive approach across the piece for social workers. Too often we hear from social workers who have

limited support, who may be in teams of where the majority of colleagues are Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) social workers, who have caseloads sizes that are unsafe and who are under continuous stress and are constantly firefighting. These are some of major factors leading to burnout and high staff turnover. Key to maintaining a healthy and functioning workforce is the availability of support, supervision and leadership.

The research also points to the routine use of waiting lists, indicating that demand is consistently outstripping supply. This means that simply capping caseloads without addressing the fundamental capacity issue could lead to longer waits for vulnerable people. Members are concerned about how this is going to be tackled in the short term as this practice is affecting service quality and outcomes for service users.

A sizeable number of social work teams in NI are not operating at their funded establishment. This creates a vicious cycle where remaining staff take on more, leading to burnout and further vacancies. Legislation needs to tackle this head-on, not just the symptom of high caseloads.

Specific statutory duties and additional legislative burdens also need to be taken into account in commissioning student places given delayed and pending legislative reform. There are specific concerns in NI about the financial pressures facing social work students, with many struggling to meet living costs and considering leaving their studies. This directly impacts the future pipeline of social workers needed to achieve safe staffing levels. Recommendations need to consider the entire workforce journey, from training to retention.

In relation to the **caseload sizes** suggested we have some comments from our members for your consideration:

We welcome the guidance about AYE caseloads and the suggested range of what is safe for this level of social worker but have concerns about its enforceability given a reliance on AYE's in many teams particularly in Children's Services teams.

It would be helpful to have a clear statement that the reports recommendation is that a case is a child or an individual. You state, *“However, it is acknowledged that in some services such as Family Support, a family can be counted as a case depending on assessed need. Operationalising optimal case load ranges therefore requires management and governance oversight to determine a safe workload.”*

In our experience of FIT and LAC teams there is always a need to prioritise Child Protection and Looked After Children and that is at the expense of children needing family support. We are not aware of any FIT team where a social worker carries a 100% family support case load.

The recommended range for Children’s Disability services seems high, some more clarity would be helpful to explain the numbers here. Members report the increasing family complexity of cases coming through this programme of care.

The report makes a suggestion that *“An adjustment should be made for those carrying out ASW or other specialist functions”* again it would be helpful to set out what the adjustment should be to ensure regional consistency rather than leaving it to different Trusts to make their own decisions, which may enhance regional inconsistencies.

We commend the OSS for giving a number to the time that each social worker should be spending on Continuous Professional Development CPD, non-professional forums and supervision. The importance of supportive, reflective supervision and protected time for CPD is repeatedly flagged in NI. Legislation around caseloads needs to ensure these crucial resources as per the Job Demands-Resources (JDR) model cited in NI research are protected, not squeezed out by an intense focus on case numbers.

At BASW NI we feel it would have been useful to have had a breakdown on how many staff in each area were involved in the focus groups and numbers of social workers who were involved with this work. We have had suggestions that this would have improved the level of assurance that this was reflective from scoping wide range of teams and reflective of social work overall across NI.

Many of our members have expressed concern that although we have these recommendations this does not tackle the issue of “*safe staffing*” in the teams. Many teams are not appropriately resourced due to regional recruitment and retention issues, impacted by the available number of social workers for recruitment to be able to safely implement this guidance – there are wider systemic issues that could and should have been researched and action plan in place to improve regional position to move forward with this safe staffing and have any chance of implementing successfully.

While regional consistency is sought, there are variations in local demand and trust specific challenges, workforce stability, and internal processes that affect how caseload recommendations are likely to be applied in practice across the five Trusts. The guidance will also be interpreted differently by the community and voluntary sector.

Going forward members feel that when translating caseload recommendations for social work into strong legislation, it's crucial to flag several key issues to ensure the legislation is effective, fair, and sustainable. Setting strict, unfunded caseload limits without addressing underlying recruitment and retention issues could lead to a permanent state of unmet demand and unallocated cases. The law needs to be realistic about current workforce capacity and include mechanisms for investment. Unmanageable caseloads are a primary driver of stress, burnout, and social workers leaving the profession. Laws aiming for safe staffing must ultimately contribute to a healthier work environment to retain experienced staff.

In relation to implementation and monitoring developing robust, consistent, and user-friendly tools to measure workload beyond just case numbers is complex but essential. The law should mandate the development and use of such tools. While a regional framework is needed, local variations in demographics, service needs, and resources mean that some degree of flexibility in application might be necessary, provided it doesn't compromise core safety principles.

In terms of accountability and enforcement members have queried how will compliance with the caseload recommendations be monitored and what are the consequences if standards aren't met. Any recommendations for safe caseloads must be accompanied by a clear commitment to adequate funding to ensure they can be met in practice. An unfunded mandate will be ineffective.

In summary, for Northern Ireland, the pitfalls of caseload recommendations are deeply intertwined with existing systemic under-resourcing, increasing statutory duties, the impact of austerity, and the urgent need to address social worker well-being and recruitment/retention challenges. Strong legislation will need to move beyond simple numbers and embrace a comprehensive, resourced, and context-specific approach to social work workload.

BASW NI advocates for a comprehensive legislative framework that addresses the multifaceted nature of social work workload, ensuring not just numerical limits but also the necessary support, resources, and systemic changes to genuinely achieve safe and effective staffing.

As highlighted by bodies like Pivotal Policy, "*public service austerity has driven social work services to breaking point.*" Any legislative reform for safe staffing *must* be accompanied by significant financial investment. Without it, the legislation and associated policy guidance risks becoming an unfunded mandate, leading to further frustration and failed implementation.

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