



# **A MANIFESTO FOR SOCIAL WORK**

## *NI Assembly Elections 2022*

The British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI) campaigns to deliver positive change for the social work profession, and those who use social work services. We call on political parties to make commitments in their election manifestos to address the following issues in the next Assembly mandate.

1. Reduce bureaucracy in social work
2. Address social work recruitment and retention pressures in Health and Social Care
3. Increase funding for social work services
4. Deliver and implement an anti-poverty strategy
5. Introduce a statutory Duty of Candour at organisational level with criminal sanctions for breach and oppose the introduction of a statutory Duty of Candour at individual level

Social work is a unique and vital profession. Social workers are employed across a diverse range of services to improve the life opportunities of vulnerable people from all sections of society. They support individuals and families to overcome disadvantage rooted in social, economic, environmental and physical factors, including disability, physical and mental ill-health, poverty, abuse and neglect, immigration status, and addiction.

Approximately two thirds<sup>1</sup> of Northern Ireland's 6,692 social workers<sup>2</sup> work in Health and Social Care (HSC). Social workers are also employed in the education, criminal justice and third sectors, or work as Independent practitioners.

## 1. Reduce bureaucracy in social work

For the past ten years, BASW NI has highlighted the negative outcomes for social workers arising from heavily bureaucratic processes<sup>3</sup>. While detailed and precise record keeping of engagement with service users is a vitally important aspect of social work, it is essential that paperwork supports, rather than constrains, practice.

Social work is a relationship-based profession and ensuring social workers can prioritise engaging with the people they support—learning about each service user’s unique needs and building trust—is key to providing high quality services. Impeding the development of these relationships is a key factor in explaining why 76% of social workers cite bureaucracy as having a negative impact on their professional identity<sup>4</sup>.

### Action needed

The Department of Health must establish a task force to take forward a whole systems approach to tackling unnecessary bureaucracy within social work service provision.

## 2. Address social work recruitment and retention pressures in Health and Social Care

The HSC social work workforce currently has an average vacancy rate across all service areas of 8%<sup>5</sup>, with rates highest in Children’s Services Family Intervention Teams and Looked After Children Teams. As a result, HSC Trusts are increasingly relying on agency staff. In 2020/21 spending on agency social workers totalled £8.5 million<sup>6</sup>.

Where there is high staff turnover and reliance on agency social workers on temporary contracts, the relationships which are central to provision of high-quality social work services cannot be formed. As a result, service users are impacted negatively.

The HSC social work workforce is facing a potential retirement cliff edge—32% of the workforce are aged 50 or older and in 2020/21 the average age of social workers retiring from HSC Trusts was 60.5 years<sup>7</sup>. This indicates the impact of retirements over the next five to 10 years is likely to be significant. The Department of Health is undertaking a review of the Social Work Workforce in recognition of the pressures currently facing the profession.

### Action needed

There is an urgent need to revise how social workers are recruited and retained, with lessons learned from the regional recruitment process commenced in 2021. The Department of Health’s Workforce Review Action Plan must be implemented in full to expedite employment of permanent staff and reduce reliance on agency social workers.

It is essential the Department of Health resources and implements an increase in the number of training places on undergraduate social work courses—according to assessed need. It is also vital the Department incentivises the retention of highly experienced social workers to avoid a retirement cliff edge and implements measures to encourage greater diversity within the social work workforce to ensure the profession better represents and supports the communities it serves.

### 3. Increase funding for social work services

It is essential social work services are adequately funded to ensure the people who need them receive high quality support in the face of ever-increasing demand.

- There has been a 6% increase in the number of children in the care system compared to the pre-pandemic scenario<sup>8</sup> and a 34% increase compared to a decade earlier<sup>9</sup>.
- New responsibilities placed on social workers regarding Deprivation of Liberty assessments, in accordance with the Mental Capacity Act (NI) 2016, are placing immense strain on staff in Older People's Services and Mental Health Services.
- Mental Health Services and Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services social workers are braced for increases in Covid-19 related cases as society returns to normal, post pandemic.
- The introduction of new social work services, including support services for adoptive parents—as prescribed by the Bill which will become the Adoption and Children Act—will require additional funding. Similarly, significant additional resources will be required to deliver the vision set out in the 2021–2031 Mental Health Strategy to address existing gaps in mental health services.

#### Action needed

The Department of Health must review demand across all social work services and boost funding to increase staff numbers where service user need has grown or pressures on social workers have intensified as a result of cases becoming more high risk and / or complex.

### 4. Deliver and implement an anti-poverty strategy

Poverty is a major factor in contributing to problems which require intervention from social services. For instance, incidents of mental health problems are more prevalent in deprived areas<sup>10</sup> and children living in our most deprived areas are six times more likely to be placed on the Child Protection Register and are four times more likely to become looked after by social services than those in the least deprived areas<sup>11</sup>.

The costs associated with poverty are enormous, both in human and financial terms. Taking the example of looked after children, the annual average cost of a foster care placement is £24,000 and the average cost of keeping a child in a residential children's home is £265,000 per year<sup>12</sup>.

#### Action needed

Implementation of an anti-poverty strategy, informed by the recommendations of the Expert Advisory Panel to the Minister for Communities<sup>13</sup> is urgently needed. The strategy should include practical steps to remove the Universal Credit two-child limit, which would lift 6,000 children out of poverty<sup>14</sup>. It should also contain a commitment to audit the 'costs of poverty', including the costs to NI Executive Department budgets, associated with addressing the impacts of poverty.

## 5. Introduce a statutory Duty of Candour at organisational level with criminal sanctions for breach and oppose the introduction of a statutory Duty of Candour at individual level

Social workers operate under a de facto duty of candour in accordance with the requirement of the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (Social Care Council) *Code of Conduct and Practice* to be “open and honest with people if things go wrong”. Failure to live up to this duty can ultimately result in a social worker being removed from the Social Care Council register—deeming them unable to practice.

Similarly, the Social Care Council *Standards of Conduct and Practice for Employers* requires organisations to display candour where care has or may have caused physical, emotional, financial or material harm or loss. However, this requirement does not carry any threat of sanction for non-compliance.

While undoubtedly well-intentioned, introduction of a statutory individual Duty of Candour could have the unintended consequence of undermining the effectiveness of a statutory organisational Duty of Candour. Where organisational failings exist, mistakes are more likely to be made. If individuals stand to be punished for these mistakes, it is less likely organisations will reflect and improve. The result will be poorer—rather than better—outcomes for service users.

### Action needed

To close a gap which does not exist at the individual level it is necessary to introduce a statutory organisational Duty of Candour, with criminal sanctions for breach.

If you would like any further information, or to arrange a meeting to discuss the issues raised in this document, please contact Andy McClenaghan, BASW NI Public Affairs, Policy and Communications Lead on 07702517560 / [andy.mcclenaghan@basw.co.uk](mailto:andy.mcclenaghan@basw.co.uk)



## Endnotes

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2. Northern Ireland Social Care Council register, January 2022.
3. Social Work Not Paperwork: Cutting Bureaucracy in Childcare Social Work (November 2012), A Blueprint for Change for Adult Services Social Work in Northern Ireland (May 2014), Above and Beyond: At What Cost? (September 2016), UK Social Workers: Working Conditions and Wellbeing (August 2018) – Dr Jermaine M Ravalier and Dr Charlotte Boichat, Bath Spa University.
4. Shaping Social Workers' Identity: An All-Ireland Study, October 2020, BASW NI, NI Social Care Council, Irish Association of Social Workers & Coru.
5. Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Workforce Vacancies Tables, September 2021.
6. AQW 25299/17-22
7. Includes normal retirement, ill health retirement and voluntary early retirement.
8. Northern Ireland children's social services data during COVID-19, Department of Health, 20 December 2021.
9. Delegated Statutory Functions: Statistics Report, 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020.
10. Department of Health, Health Survey (NI) First Results 2019/20 (December 2020) <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/hsni-first-results-19-20.pdf>
11. Bunting, L., McCartan, C., & Davidson, G. (2017). Identifying and Understanding Inequalities in Child Welfare Intervention Rates: Comparative studies in four UK countries. Single country quantitative study report: Northern Ireland. Nuffield Foundation.
12. AQW 24299/17-22.
13. <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-social-inclusion-strategy-anti-poverty-expert-advisory-panel-recommendations.pdf>
14. Children Can't Wait: Investing in Social Security to Reduce Child Poverty in Northern Ireland, Save the Children and Child Poverty Action Group (August 2021) <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/Children%20cant%20wait.pdf>

# **BASW** **Northern Ireland**

The professional association for  
social work and social workers

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