

British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland submission to the independent review of children's social care services

May 2023

1. Introduction

The British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI) welcomes the opportunity to submit to the review and has appreciated the opportunity to engage in the workshops on disabled children and their families; looked after children; family support; the social care workforce; and the organisation and delivery of children's social care.

2. The case for reform

BASW NI recognises the need for significant reform within children's services social work /care, as part of a wider programme of reform of statutory sector social work services. Working with children and families does not happen in isolation and the critical aspect of protecting children is often through multi-disciplinary and interagency working. Appropriately resourced specialist services are required to complement the statutory functions. At present these are difficult to access, particularly in the community and voluntary sectors whose budgets have been decimated. There is a general and increasing frustration being voiced by our members that resources across all sectors including health, education and justice are not able to meet growing demand and consequently putting social workers in an impossible situation. Family support services that support and prevent escalation to the level of statutory intervention availability varies between geographical areas, even within local Trust areas. Local support services have been ravaged by cuts, and more specialist services provided by children's charities have been reduced as contracts with Trusts have ended and not been renewed.

A genuine partnership approach with the statutory and community and voluntary sector providing a community-based service that suits children and families is required. The challenge of providing this within children's social care reform is inarguably formidable due to the complex nature of the systems we are considering and steps taken to improve the system cannot be taken in isolation.

Members are clear that the status quo cannot remain and that the system in its current form isn't working. As social workers we feel that there is an ethical imperative for our system to reform and we want a child and family centred approach to guide this change effort.

In order to move forward we want to effectively support families so fewer children need to be parented by the state, where social work professionals and managers can adhere to the spirit of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and use effective interventions where social work practice genuinely puts human rights first but can also be innovative and creative in practice.

All children and young people have an equal right to protection from harm and a right to the same standards of service across Northern Ireland. Children and families want practical help that is needs led in an integrated and responsive system in their local communities.

Members take differing views on whether structural changes will address the well documented problems we face and have concerns about the challenges that structural reform will inevitably bring. Members are in agreement however that structural reform is unlikely to be a panacea for all ills.

It is important at the outset of this review to define clearly what the primary purpose of our children social care system is, and what the purpose of the reform effort will be. As a starting point, any change must focus on a clear end goal. In the case of reform of children's social care, this goal must be to improve the quality of life and enhance opportunities for children and families across Northern Ireland. Central to this aim is ensuring children are safeguarded from neglect and abuse, and families in need of assistance are provided with the support they require to enable children to live healthy and happy lives, while preventing problems escalating to levels which require statutory social work intervention. Addressing the pressures and challenges faced by the social work profession, which impede the achievement of this goal, must be central to the review process.

3. Workload pressures

Social workers are clear that they have major capacity issues as a result of high caseloads, complexity of cases increasing, and an understaffed and under resourced system which has led to a crisis in children's social care. The report [Setting the Bar for Social Work in Scotland](#) produced by Social Work Scotland last year sets out the case for a maximum caseload size of 15 children for children and families social workers. The reality for our social workers in Northern Ireland is that they routinely work with 25 families. This means that social workers are dealing with unacceptable levels of risk and complexity and are unable to provide the quality of social work practice they wish, and service users expect.

Key to effective social work practice is enabling social workers to spend time with the children and families they support—building relationships and nurturing trust. However, children's services social workers are constrained by an overly bureaucratized system, which in many cases, leads to them spending more time completing paperwork than in direct contact with the children and families they support.

The need for reform of bureaucracy has been evidenced in multiple research reports produced by BASW NI spanning more than a decade. These include [Social Work not Paperwork: Cutting Bureaucracy in Childcare Social Work](#) (2012), [Above and Beyond: At What Cost](#) (2016) and [Shaping Social Workers' Identity: An All-Ireland Study](#) (2020).

BASW NI's most recent research, and the [Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services—Core Social Work Roles Survey: Research Findings](#) (2023) found that 83 percent of respondents reported their participation in statutory processes and meetings, and 64 percent reported

administration / bureaucracy, as either the sole task, or one of several tasks they spend most of their time on.

The research also highlighted that spending time directly with service users to support them and address trauma, and support children or young people with mental health problems, are the most frequently cited activities that social workers would like to have more time to work on.

Affording social workers sufficient time and space to spend with children and families, so they feel confident to use their professional judgement, provide family support, and intervene in partnership with families is essential, though the research confirms children's services social workers are working in environments that cannot facilitate this. Resources within social services departments in children's services across the region appear to be critically lacking. The current level of resourcing means that only the most urgent cases are being prioritised for intervention. This has implications for the morale of social workers and propagates recruitment and retention problems and contributes to a demoralised workforce.

A whole-scale review of social work bureaucracy is well overdue. Steps need to be taken to ensure social workers can spend the majority of their time in direct contact with their service users. Central to a review of bureaucracy must be the removal of all unnecessary and duplicative paperwork, improvements in information technology solutions, and diversification of skills mix in social work teams to include additional administrative staff to support social workers.

Only when a strategy is in place for reducing bureaucracy should any structural reform of children's social work services be undertaken.

The balance between preventative and reactive services needs to be urgently redressed. The principles and philosophy of the Children Order (NI) Order 1995 relating to early intervention and family support services cannot be realised within existing resources.

4. Workforce planning

Any structural reform of services cannot happen without careful consideration of workforce planning and staff support around recruitment, retention and high stress levels which are being regularly reported by our members who are 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 in statutory services have been particularly critical of these aspects of their work.

BASW NI continue to assert that social workers require wellbeing support and adequate professional development, time for reflective supervision to work through complex child protection and family support cases, manageable caseloads and a consistent approach to caseload allocation through the introduction of safe staffing legislation.

Children's social care working conditions are not sustainable, staff are working over and beyond contracted hours and as a result have a poor work life balance often leading to burn out. Social workers often feel like they are working in silos in a system that is not really integrated and feels hard to navigate. Feelings of disempowerment in practice are common.

5. Impacts of poverty

Poverty is part of the everyday context of children's social work and is growing. The impact of poverty on parenting has been clearly evidenced. Children who are in poverty are significantly more likely to be in the care of the state. The [Northern Ireland section of the Child Welfare Inequalities Project](#) found that children living in the 10% most deprived areas of Northern Ireland were six times more likely to be placed on the child protection register and four times more likely to become looked after than children living in the 10% most affluent areas. [The number of children looked after by social services](#) (3,770 March 2023) is currently the highest on record since the introduction of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

It should also be recognised that there is a significant disparity in rates of mental health problems between the most and least deprived areas of Northern Ireland. For example, the Department of Health [Health Inequalities: Annual Report 2023](#) highlights that prescription rates for mood and anxiety disorders are 66% higher in the region's most deprived areas compared to the least deprived areas. From 2019-2021, the suicide mortality rate in the most deprived areas was more than double that observed in the least deprived areas. These factors, among many other social problems associated with poverty, undoubtedly contribute to the higher likelihood of children in deprived areas coming into the care system.

6. Arms-Length Body—points for consideration

In October 2022, Professor Ray Jones, outlined his intention to recommend the establishment of a new social work led, regional Arms-Length Body (ALB) of the Department of Health with sole responsibility for children's services. The proposed body would replace the current model of delivery through the five Health and Social Care Trusts. It would have its own Chief Executive, local delivery bodies and a singular focus on Children's Social Care Services.

BASW NI recognises the fundamental importance of placing a singular focus on children's social care services. The Association works closely with the Executive Directors of Social Work and recognises the incredibly challenging role they perform. It is one which includes oversight of children's social work services alongside managerial responsibility for a diverse range of healthcare functions.

If front line workers are not there in numbers and capacity, the system will simply not achieve its purpose no matter what the higher-level management structure looks like. System needs to be built from the front line with investment in the education, training, and professional development of front-line staff to do these complex roles. Focus should be on the maintenance of the best possible front-line workforce with a strong leadership backing them and making sure the voice of the profession is heard.

The creation of a children's services ALB would entail a significant overhaul of current delivery structures. This poses significant opportunities for efficiency improvements, particularly in instances where social workers are currently supporting families across HSC Trust boundaries. The proposal also represents an opportunity for improvements in integration between statutory HSC social work services and social work services in the education and youth justice sectors. Furthermore, a regional ALB overseeing service delivery may benefit providers in the voluntary sector by creating a single approach to service planning.

The potential for efficiencies notwithstanding, BASW NI recognises challenges may arise from plans to include services not currently under the remit of the Department of Health within a new ALB, most notably, social workers within the education and youth justice sectors. This would require the support of Ministers of Justice and Education, a move made all the more problematic by the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive.

Government austerity over the past decade have significantly curtailed front line workers' ability to have the time and space to do what they need to do. Austerity has led to an increased need for child welfare and protective services and to the under-resourcing of these services.

It is important to acknowledge that the problems that child protection systems seek to redress have intergenerational and broader societal strands and spill outside the parameters of what can be achieved in our view by any one government agency here in Northern Ireland.

Challenges may also arise if staff who view their professional identity as being part of the mainstream HSC workforce are to be transferred to work within a children's services ALB. Learning should be taken from the creation of Tusla in the Republic of Ireland, which initially sought to include public health nurses and psychologists as part of the service. In the case of the psychology profession, many were reluctant to transfer to Tusla, preferring to remain associated with other healthcare and medical professionals within the Health Service Executive.

Learning from the experiences of social workers associated with the creation of the existing HSC Trust structure which became operational in 2007, highlights the importance of acknowledging and handling ingrained cultural differences in approaches to management and service delivery across the Trusts. Identifying instances of best practice in the current structure and seeking to replicate these on a regional basis in a new ALB will be critical to achieving success. Similarly, understanding common challenges across the HSC Trusts and addressing these will also be of central importance.

The workload pressures facing children's services teams are contributing to high numbers of vacancies and an unsustainable churn in staffing. Not only does this destabilise teams, it also results in a lack of continuity of care for service users, undermining the development of trusting relationships highlighted above as central to good social work practice. The recommendations of the review must be taken forward together with the ongoing Department of Health social work workforce review.

Given the generic nature of social work training, staff, particularly those at the outset of their careers, who are yet to specialise via in-work training, benefit from the opportunity of seeking roles in a wide range of programmes of care. To ensure social workers chose to work in children's services it is vital they are appropriately supported by their managers, allocated reasonable caseloads, and provided high-quality supervision. They must also be provided with opportunities to develop their skills and progress in their careers. The regionalisation of service delivery via an ALB, provides the opportunity for a consistent approach to delivering improvements in these areas across children's services in Northern Ireland.

It should be recognised, however, that the creation of an ALB may generate the perception that children's services have been siloed. There are many challenges around children transitioning to adult services within the current system particularly in the area of children's disability would this system potentially further exacerbate this. This risks a scenario in which social workers may be wary of taking up roles in children's services, for fear they will be locked-in to a programme of care which BASW NI is aware many are currently seeking to leave, or have left, owing to the challenging and pressurised nature of the work.

We would also be concerned about the impact of such a move could have on the integration of our services, when much of the rest of the UK is striving to achieve more integrated services it could seem like a misstep to silo children's services. It could mean that the rest of social work, i.e., adult services, physical disability, mental health and learning disability could be left in a weaker position in a medical model.

7. Staff safety

BASW NI welcomed the recent publication of the Department for Health's consultation on Violence and aggression in the workplace, and noted it was long overdue. It was disappointing that no reference was made to the significant work undertaken by BASW NI in [*Insult and Injury: Exploring the impacts of intimidation, threats and violence against social workers*](#) and the follow up started yet not completed by Department of Health prior to covid-19. However, the unique and challenging role of social work in managing risk and how they are supported by their employers in our opinion requires further attention.

8. Conclusion

BASW NI recognises meaningful reform can only be achieved when all stakeholders work together to cocreate a sustained and focussed approach to addressing the challenges facing children's social care services. Delivering a sea-change in children's services will require enduring commitment, discipline and sustained engagement from individuals, professions, agencies and government departments. BASW NI is committed to ensuring reform is delivered to ensure the needs of children and families across Northern Ireland are met, and the social work profession is appropriately supported and resourced.