



Independent Review of
Children's Social Care
Services — Core Social
Work Roles Survey

Research Findings

February 2023

BASW
Northern Ireland

The professional association for
social work and social workers

Northern Ireland

**Social
Care**

Council

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Introduction

The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care Services in Northern Ireland was commissioned by the former Minister for Health Robin Swann and commenced in February 2022.

The review is being led by Professor Ray Jones who has highlighted his intention to recommend a diversification of skills mix within social work teams. Throughout the review period, Professor Jones has sought the views of social workers concerning which roles and areas of expertise they consider key to social work and which tasks currently performed by social workers could be undertaken by additional support staff if they were introduced to social work teams.

To facilitate the inclusion of social workers’ views in the review, the British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI) and the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) administered the *Independent Review of Children’s Social Care Services—Core Social Work Roles Survey*.

Methodology

The survey ran from Monday 30 January until Monday 13 February 2023. It was hosted on the online *Survey Monkey* platform and was open to all social workers in Northern Ireland, including retired social workers who have previously worked in children’s services.

The survey was issued to all registered social workers in Northern Ireland via a NISCC e-bulletin and to all BASW NI members via member e-bulletins. The survey was also promoted via BASW NI’s and NISCC’s social media accounts.

The survey comprised 28 questions primarily aimed at collecting quantitative data. There was provision throughout the survey for respondents to provide additional qualitative responses to specific questions. Verbatim responses provided to these open questions are featured in the findings outlined in this report.

The survey attracted 461 responses. Of these, 16 respondents had never worked in children’s services in Northern Ireland, and they were prevented from answering any further questions. The responses from the 445 social workers who either currently work in children’s services, or who have previously worked in children’s services make up the findings.

Survey findings

Background

80 percent of respondents currently work in children’s services, 20 percent have previously worked in children’s services. Of the respondents who have previously worked in children’s services, 22 percent have worked in children’s services in the last year, 49 percent between one and five years ago, 16 percent between five and ten years ago and 13 percent, more than ten years ago.

88 percent of respondents either currently work or had their most recent children’s services role in the statutory Health and Social Care sector, eight percent in the third or voluntary sectors, four percent in the education sector and one percent in the youth or criminal justice sectors.

Area of practice

The most common area of practice for respondents currently working in children’s services or the most recent posts of respondents who previously worked in children’s services is family intervention (23%), followed by fostering and adoption (14%) and looked after children’s teams (12%).

Table 1: Area of practice

Area of practice	Percentage of respondents
Family intervention team	23%
Fostering and adoption	14%
Looked after children’s team	12%
Residential childcare	9%
Gateway team	6%
Children’s disability	5%
CAMHS	4%
Education welfare	2%
Other	25%

A wide range of additional areas of practice across the statutory and voluntary sectors were highlighted by respondents who selected ‘other’, the most common of which was guardian ad litem followed by intensive support.

Focus of role

Respondents were asked to select from a list all factors that reflect their current or most recent role in children’s services. Five factors were selected by more than half of all respondents: child protection (59%), intervention (59%), assessing need (58%), family support (56%) and care planning (53%).

A wide range of additional roles were cited as responses to the category ‘other’, the most common of which were fostering, and training, learning and development.

Table 2: Focus of role

Focus of role	Percentage of respondents
Child protection	59%
Intervention	59%
Assessing need	58%
Family support	56%
Care planning	53%
Accessing services	41%
Advocacy	40%
Preventative work	39%
Mental health support	36%
Other	24%

Employment status

86 percent of respondents either currently have a permanent contract of employment in their children’s service role or had a permanent contract in their most recent role. Eight percent have or had a temporary contract, and six percent are agency social workers or were agency workers in their most recent children’s services post.

Making a difference

80 percent of respondents feel that on the whole they make / made a positive difference to the individuals they support / supported. Social workers currently working in children’s services are more likely to feel they are making a positive difference (81%) compared to social workers who previously worked in children’s services (75%).

Core competencies

Central to the research was the aim of identifying which competencies social workers believe are core to effective children’s services social work. Respondents were asked via separate questions to highlight which skills and areas of knowledge they consider fundamental to practising in children’s services.

First, respondents were presented with a list of skills and asked to select all factors which they consider core for social workers in children’s services. The three most frequently cited skills are the ability to communicate with children and adults, the capacity to build effective relationships, and the ability to make decisions in the context of risk and uncertainty.

The complete set of results are presented in Table 3 on the following page:

Table 3: skills considered core to social work in children’s services

Skill	Percentage of respondents who consider it core to children’s services social work
Communication with children and adults	93%
Building effective relationships	92%
Decision making in context of risk and uncertainty	91%
Team working skills to work effectively with other social care and health professionals	86%
Analysing complex information	83%
Child and family assessment	83%
Presenting information in formal settings, for example, court work, case conferences, or LAC reviews	81%
Planning and review	79%
Problem solving skills	78%
Ability to help parents develop the skills they need	77%
Support strategies to promote choice and empowerment	70%
Application of specific methods of intervention/models of practice	67%
Advising people on the best support for them	58%
Development, evaluation and application of evidence to inform practice methodology	58%

Next, respondents were asked what the core areas of knowledge for social workers in children’s services are. The three most frequently cited factors—each selected by over 90 percent of respondents—focus specifically on child development, wellbeing, and safeguarding. Knowledge of domestic abuse was also noted as a core area of knowledge by more than nine out of ten (92%) respondents.

The complete set of results are presented in the table below:

Table 4: knowledge considered core to social work in children’s services

Area of knowledge	Proportion of respondents that consider it core to children’s services social work
Child development and child mental health	96%
Child abuse	94%
Child neglect	93%
Domestic abuse	92%
Behaviours which challenge	87%
The law pertaining to children and families	86%
Substance abuse	82%
Poverty	79%
Adult mental health	78%
The family and youth justice systems	63%
Disability	60%
Homelessness and inadequate housing	59%
Eating disorders	41%

When asked to identify the obstacles which hinder the completion of key social work activities, three quarters (75%) of respondents highlighted *administrative tasks* as a factor. This was followed by *insufficient time* (71%) *caseload size* (68%) *vacancies* (62%) and *lack of community resources* (55%).

Respondents were able to suggest other obstacles not included in the closed list. Almost three in ten (29%) of respondents specified an additional obstacle. The most commonly cited issues, which were not captured in responses to the factors presented in Table 4, related to a shortage of foster carers and a lack of adequate support for them, concerns about the quality of leadership at both strategic and staff management levels and issues regarding the complexity of cases.

Allocation of staff time

Respondents were presented with a list of tasks undertaken by children's services social workers. They were asked to identify the task, or tasks, they spend the most time working on, the task, or tasks, they would like to be able to spend more time working on, and the tasks they believe could be undertaken by non-social workers.

The most frequently cited task which respondents spend the most time working on is participating in statutory processes and meetings—it was cited by 83 percent of respondents. However, respondents consider it a core social work activity and although fewer than one in ten (nine percent) of respondents would like to have more time to spend on the activity, only three percent consider this a task which could be undertaken by non-social workers.

“We don't have time to address much of the work that is needed. Our focus is on firefighting and crisis management.”

Similarly, *child protection concerns* was cited by 70 percent of respondents as a task or one of several tasks they spend most of their time on. Nearly a quarter (23%) would like to be able to spend more time on this task, and only one percent believe it is an area of work that could be undertaken by non-social workers.

By comparison, while 64 percent of respondents highlighted *administration / bureaucracy* as a task or one of a number of tasks they spend most of their time on, nearly half (49%) consider it as something that could be undertaken by non-social workers.

“There should be a full audit of the amount of bureaucracy within SW roles to demonstrate time spent away from assessment and intervention there should be a consideration given to a standard assessment of risk and need—cradle to grave”

Spending time directly with service users, supporting them and addressing trauma are the most frequently cited activities that social workers would like to have more time to work on. Nearly two-thirds (64%) highlight *trauma experiences*, six out of ten, *supporting children / young people* and just over half (53%) *supporting children or young people with mental health problems* as the tasks they would like to have more time to undertake.

“Education welfare in my opinion is a wasted social work resource. Social workers should be placed in schools. This would join up working and relationship building with families and school staff”

Although cited by only seven percent of respondents as the task or one of several tasks they spend most of their time on, *housing problems* was an activity which more than three quarters (76%) of respondents consider could be undertaken by non-social work staff. *Facilitating family contact* is another task which the majority (70%) of respondents believe could be undertaken by non-social work staff. It, however, is noted by only a quarter (24%) of respondents as being the task or one of several tasks they spend most of their time on. Similarly, *accessing services in the community* is noted by 60 percent of respondents as a task that non-social workers could complete, although only 18 percent of respondents cite it as the single task or one of several tasks they spend most of their time on.

Table 5: tasks respondents spend most time working on, tasks they would like to spend more time working on and tasks they believe could be undertaken by non-social workers

Task	Task I spend most time working on	Task I would like to be able to spend more time working on	Task I believe could be undertaken by non-social workers
Statutory processes / meetings	83%	9%	3%
Child protection concerns	70%	23%	1%
Administration / bureaucracy	64%	2%	49%
Court work	54%	23%	8%
Behaviour or relationship difficulties	44%	43%	21%
Parenting problems	43%	41%	27%
Supporting children / young people	33%	60%	20%
Trauma experiences	32%	64%	12%
Family violence	31%	49%	14%
Drug, alcohol or substance misuse	30%	33%	38%
Supporting children or young people with mental health problems	28%	53%	25%
Supporting parents with mental health problems	25%	42%	37%
Facilitating family contact	24%	8%	70%
Issues at school	22%	31%	48%
Offending or anti-social behaviour	21%	28%	46%
Accessing services in the community	18%	31%	60%
Grief and loss	15%	47%	36%
Disability issues	9%	41%	42%
Housing problems	7%	13%	76%

“Part of my current role is to identify emergency foster placements and deal with disrupting foster placements. The lack of foster carers regionally (in Trust and with the independent agencies) makes this job impossible. All Trusts are the same - we have very limited foster carers... Efforts need to be directed at adequately recruiting, resourcing and retaining skilled foster carers to prevent young children being exploited in residential care.”

Skills mix

Almost nine out of ten respondents (89%) believe 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 work with. Only 11 percent believed this not to be the case.

Respondents were 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) are: family support worker; social work assistant; behavioural support worker; administrative support staff, and contact worker.

However, respondents who previously worked in children’s services were more likely than their colleagues currently working in the area to recommend additional family support workers, administrative support staff and contact workers. They were also significantly more likely to recommend substance misuse workers as part of the skills mix in children’s services. By comparison, respondents currently working in children’s services were more likely to recommend additional social work assistants in children’s services teams.

Recommendations made by respondents under the ‘other’ category include youth workers, family therapists / counsellors, psychologists, and professional foster carers.

Table 6: respondents’ views on which additional staff would most benefit the children and families social workers work with

Staff	Previously worked in children’s services	Currently work in children’s services	All respondents
Family support worker	82%	73 %	75%
Social work assistant	65%	74 %	73%
Behavioural support worker	68%	68%	68%
Administrative support staff	75%	63%	65%
Contact worker	72%	59%	62%
Mental health social worker	65%	56%	58%
Substance misuse worker	75%	49%	54%
Peer support worker	48%	35%	37%
Other	23%	18%	19%

Conclusion

British Association of Social Workers

As the professional body for social work and social workers, these findings reinforce BASW NI's view that social workers value relationship-based practice as they strike the difficult balance between working supportively with families to tackle childcare issues and protecting children. Respondents were clear in identifying that communication with children and adults, the capacity to build effective relationships, and the ability to make decisions in the context of risk and uncertainty are at the heart of effective practice.

However, the results paint a frustrating picture, outlining a service which continues to be heavily bureaucratised, with 83 percent of respondents reporting their participation in statutory processes and meetings is either the sole task, or one of several tasks they spend most of their time on. BASW NI maintains that social workers must be afforded 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. This research confirms social workers are working in environments that cannot facilitate this. Social workers want to focus on child and family centred work, but due to administrative demands, excessive caseloads, and a depleted and overstretched workforce they are unable to.

In addition to those challenges, respondents cited a series of core case considerations concerning the wellbeing and development of children. These were closely followed in importance by domestic abuse, which was identified by a worryingly high proportion of respondents as a key area of knowledge for them in their workplaces. In the challenging practice environment created by austerity, in which social work operates at the sharp end, 79 percent of social workers report that a knowledge of poverty is also core to practice. These figures should be reflected upon in the context of the review and future planning for children's services. Social work is trying to deliver supports to children and families when over half of respondents are hindered by a lack of community resources.

The proposal for a skills diversification in teams was supported overwhelmingly and responses offered a range of roles that could potentially work in step with social workers to improve services for the children and families they support.

In summation, this survey highlights that to effectively meet the needs of children and families, social workers must be properly resourced and facilitated by the establishment of working environments in which their skills and knowledge are valued and promoted. This is fundamental to the delivery of services which meet the needs of the children and young people social workers support.

Commentary

Northern Ireland Social Care Council

The Social Care Council recognises, from the evidence presented in this survey and reports to date from Professor Jones’ review, the need for systemic consideration of skills diversification within and across children’s services in Northern Ireland. As the regulator for the social work and social care workforces we would suggest a range of matters for the review team to consider as part of their proposals for a skill mix approach. Firstly, in assuring the social worker’s commitment to relationship-based practice it will be important to consider the necessary governance, for introducing support staff, to safeguard the needs of children and their families. Secondly, it will be important to understand the availability, capability, capacity and diversity of each of the potential support staff groupings alongside a more in-depth exploration of what might be asked of them. Some may have a professional qualification and a regionally recognised job role, such as a mental health social worker while others may have a less well-defined job role or specification, such as a peer support worker. Some will already be part of a registered and regulated workforce, working to standards and able to access appropriate support and learning while others will require all of that to be put in place aligned to the appropriate quality, governance and accountability requirements. In some instances, this may require a process for delegation whilst other circumstances may be more about supporting diversification. The Social Care Council will be keen to contribute to these conversations and work plan where appropriate.

In our capacity as regulator for social work education and training we note that almost half of the social workers responding to this survey do not recognise evidence informed practice as core to their role. This is of some concern and whilst we appreciate the pressurised context of children’s services currently it is important that we work collectively across the system to ensure that social workers maintain and develop their knowledge and skills to deliver safe, effective and quality practice. We also note the emphasis on child protection and intervention and the need for appropriate learning and development to support this work as well as balancing this with provision that enhances knowledge on prevention and early intervention. The partnership arrangements in Northern Ireland at both qualifying and post qualifying levels for social work provide a robust collaborative approach for change and development to be brought forward in supporting the needs of social workers in children’s services into the future. It will be important in a context of diversification and skill mix that equally robust consideration is given to the development needs of support staff and the Social Care Council will welcome the opportunity to work with others to ensure safety and quality of services.

To cite this document: British Association of Social Workers and Northern Ireland Social Care Council (2023). Independent Review of Children’s Social Care Services—Core Social Work Roles Survey: Research Findings.

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