

British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland response to the Northern Ireland Executive consultation on the Draft Programme for Government 2024 – 2027

Introduction

The British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Northern Ireland Executive consultation on the Draft Programme for Government (DPFG) 2024 – 2027.

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.

In Northern Ireland there are approximately 6,600 registered social workers. This comprises staff working in Health and Social Care (HSC), in education and training, the criminal and youth justice sectors and the voluntary sector, as well as a growing number of independent practitioners.

Often, when people consider social work, they think primarily of the profession's statutory functions to safeguard children and young people from harm. While this is a vital aspect of social work, it's just one of a diverse range of roles social workers undertake to improve the life opportunities of vulnerable individuals across all sections of society.

Social workers 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.

BASW NI's response to the DPFG covers a broad range of issues affecting the social work profession, the individuals, child and families social workers support, and society more widely.

Our response is compiled under the following headings:

- Reform of Children's Social Care
- Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs
- The role of social work and social care in cutting health waiting times, and reform and transformation of public services
- Recruitment and retention of social workers
- Poverty
- Mental health services

- Funding of public services
- Ending Violence Against Women and Girls
- Housing

Reform of Children’s Social Care

The DPFG notes “a significant programme of reform of children’s social care services is underway.” This, the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, led by Professor Ray Jones, is a welcome and long overdue review, the recommendations of which are vital to strengthening and restructuring services to meet the ever-growing demand for children’s social care.

To highlight the context for the need for reform, the number of children in the care of social services is the highest on record since the introduction of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. The Department of Health’s provisional statistics for September 2024 indicate the number of children in care is now 4,137—an increase of 65% over the past two decades¹.

Core to the once in a generation reforms proposed by the Independent Review is the need to refocus services to improve early intervention and support for families. Doing so will help address challenges early on, preventing problems becoming crises—an approach strongly supported by BASW NI.

However, to deliver this and the wider programme of reform, ringfenced funding is required and timebound targets for implementation are necessary. Unfortunately, the DPFG commits to neither, calling into question the NI Executive’s commitment to deliver improvements for children, young people and families in Northern Ireland.

Core to the recommendations outlined in the Independent Review is the proposal for the creation of “a region-wide children’s and families Arms-Length Body which includes current HSCTs’ statutory children’s social care services along with other allied services and professions closely related to children’s social care.” Among the allied services Professor Jones recommended the Arms-Length Body contain are the Youth Service and Education Welfare Service, both currently the responsibility of the Department of Education, and the Youth Justice service which is presently the responsibility of the Department of justice.

BASW NI supports the creation of the Arms-Length Body, recognising there are benefits to be accrued via increased integration of service planning and delivery, with improved strategic leadership enabling region-wide consistency in services.

¹ Health and Social Care Board Delegated Statutory Functions Statistic Reports indicate 2,510 children were looked after by children’s services in 2003/04

It is unfortunate the DPFG fails to recognise the proposals for the Arms-Length Body, less support its creation. This is despite the assertion that “as an Executive, we will work across departments, in addition to our responsibilities under the Ministerial Code” .

Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs

BASW NI welcomes the commitment in the DPFG to better support children and young people with special educational needs. Since 2019, BASW NI has been campaigning to end the use of restrictive practices involving children with additional needs in educational settings.

The use of restraint and seclusion can have extremely harmful effects, and it is critical that the human rights of children and young people with additional needs are upheld. Restraint can result in physical injury, and both restraint and seclusion can have damaging impacts on emotional wellbeing and can lead to the children affected experiencing psychological trauma.

BASW NI has called on the Department of Education to introduce mandatory training for all staff working directly with children and young people with additional needs to ensure child-focused and therapeutic positive behavioural support interventions are implemented to support pupils while removing the use of restrictive practices. We therefore welcome the DPFG aim to “set out plans to enhance in-school support and resources to empower teachers and support staff to implement child-centred, effective, evidence-based interventions that can assist at the earliest presentation of need, reducing the need for external support”. BASW NI also welcomes the pledge to “invest in our educational workforce to ensure they are highly skilled, equipped, and empowered to build supportive learning environments for pupils with SEN where needs can be met at the earliest opportunity”.

However, children with additional needs and the families are awaiting the publication of statutory guidance by the Department of Education concerning restrictive practices. BASW NI contends this guidance must mandate training for staff, focused on delivering cultural change which promotes a restorative and child-focused relational approach. It must also provide for the introduction of therapeutic alternatives to the use of restrictive practices and the prohibition of the use of seclusion.

Despite consulting in September 2023, the Department of Education is yet to introduce the guidance. Inclusion, in the DPFG, of a timeline for its introduction and a budget for its implementation would represent a tangible commitment from the NI Executive to deliver “The Right Support from the Right People, at the Right Time, in the Right Place”.

The role of social work and social care in cutting health waiting times and reform and transformation of public services

BASW NI welcomes the DPFPG commitment to cut health waiting times. Life opportunities for hundreds of thousands of people² are limited as they wait for consultations and treatment. The DPFPG recognises “tackling waiting times requires solutions across our entire Health and Social Care system” and the need to invest in primary, community, and social care.

Provision of high quality, readily available, and well-resourced social care services is central to supporting people to be discharged safely and in a timely manner from hospital. This in turn frees up much needed resources in acute care settings. However, domiciliary care services are also essential in keeping people well in their homes, preventing avoidable readmission to acute services which is not only financially expensive, but is also costly in human terms given the destabilising impact for the people involved.

Although a separate profession, social work depends heavily on the availability of high-quality social care services to meet the needs of the older people and people with disabilities social workers support. Social work is the gateway through which many people in Northern Ireland access social care support. However, frontline social workers feel increasingly like gatekeepers for finite budgets in the Health and Social Care Trusts. This causes social workers a professional dilemma as practitioners feel their role is restricted to developing care and support plans to suit budgets or available services rather than developing care and support plans in partnership with the people who use services to meet their individual needs within their communities. This is felt most acutely when social workers endeavour to meet the needs of people with complex needs.

BASW NI is supportive of the improvements in adult safeguarding which will be delivered via the forthcoming Adult Protection Bill. However, it must be recognised that the new functions which will be conferred on social work services as a result of the legislation will undoubtedly require additional social workers.

An explicit recognition in the DPFPG of the interrelated roles of social work and social care, along with a commitment to increase funding for both is required if improvements are to be delivered for users of Health and Social Care services.

It is also vital that implementation of the recommendations of the Bengoa Review are taken forward with urgency. Services must be reconfigured to deliver the maximum benefits and excellence in care for the population as a whole, with the Executive parties demonstrating leadership rather than being influenced by localised political pressures.

The partial roll out of multidisciplinary primary care teams (MDTs) was a central element of ‘Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together’ which was produced in response to the Bengoa Review. BASW NI supported the inclusion of social workers in the new MDTs,

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cpv8z781yxo>

on the basis of assurance provided by the Office of Social Services that the move would not result in a decrease in staff or resources for existing social work teams in the Health and Social Care Trusts.

In June 2024 there were 312 GP practices in Northern Ireland³. While the size of GP practices varies depending on location and the population served, if on average one social worker is employed per practice, the region-wide roll out of the MDT model would result in 5% of the 6,600 social workers registered in Northern Ireland working in the new model. In addition, it must be recognised that this fails to account for the fact many social workers with a mental health background would also be qualified to apply for the Mental Health Practitioner roles included in the MDT model.

While the region-wide roll out of the MDT model undoubtedly offers the potential for much needed stabilisation of GP services, this must not come at the expense of the destabilisation of social work services. BASW NI therefore calls on the NI Executive to recognise this critical area of public service transformation in the DPFG along with a commitment to fund the training of additional social workers to meet the need created by the MDT roll out.

Effective reform and transformation of public services is not solely about systems change and service reconfiguration. Huge improvements can be made for social work services via a reduction in unnecessary and duplicative paperwork.

Social work is a relationship-based profession and practitioners must be able to spend time with the people who use their services, building trust as they support them to overcome their challenges they face.

BASW NI firmly believe that a commitment by the Department of Health, with an accompanying timebound and targeted action plan is essential to reduce social work bureaucracy. It is vital that social workers are able to practice efficiently and effectively do deliver the best outcome for the individuals, children and families they support.

Recruitment and retention of social workers

The DPFG notes that to address long-term challenges requires investment in the Health and Social Care workforce. The document notes “injecting more money grows short-term capacity but will not solve the long-term challenges”. However, growing and developing the workforce will undoubtedly need additional financial support which will require the Executive to commit to more than the £76 million funding outlined in the DPFG.

Demand is growing across many areas of social work, and it is of paramount importance that safe staffing standards are implemented for the profession. The social work profession is not alone in calling for the introduction of safe staffing and it is undoubtedly

³ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/publication-fps-general-medical-services-northern-ireland-annual-statistics-202324>

an opportunity missed for the NI Executive not to include a commitment in the DPF to introduce these models as part of its aim to address workforce challenges.

Safe staffing is needed to ensure services are provided in a manner that upholds the best interests of the individuals and families who use services, and those of the social workers who deliver them.

For a number of years the high rate of vacancies has led to huge pressures on social workers. BASW NI's engagement with senior leaders in the Health and Social Care Trusts indicates that the recently reported reduction in the social work vacancy rate to 5.4%⁴ is not reflective of the situation in many social work teams.

In contrast to the figures published by the Department of Health, BASW NI has been informed of current vacancy rates in Family Intervention teams of 30 – 35% and vacancy rates exceeding 40% in Looked After Children's Services. This scenario is untenable and results in social workers bearing extreme pressure while they deliver vital services across Northern Ireland.

Considering changing demography and increasing levels of inequality and poverty, workforce planning is of critical importance to the profession. It must be recognised, however, that in addition to the requirement for safe staffing models to address the current pressures facing the profession, BASW NI anticipates the need for hundreds of additional social workers to provide services associated with the implementation of the Adoption and Children Act, the roll-out of the forthcoming Adult Protection Bill, and the continued expansion of primary care multidisciplinary teams.

On 8 October 2024, the Minister for Health addressed the NI Assembly, explaining the number of social workers being trained each year in Northern Ireland has increased to 325, up from 260 in 2020⁵. However, what wasn't mentioned was that in 2011 training places were reduced from 300 to 260. Therefore, social work training places have increased by only 8% since 2011. The DPF notes that latest figures indicate almost 4,000 children are in care, however, provisional statistics for September 2024 published by the Department of Health indicate the figure is now 4,137⁶. This 8% uplift in the number of social workers trained annually since 2011 stands in contrast to a 65% increase in the number of children in care over the same period⁷.

BASW NI's members want to see commissioning of further social work training places and social workers to have safe workloads and caseloads. BASW NI will continue to engage with the Office of Social Services and the Department of Health to ensure the implementation of safe and effective staffing legislation, which we hope will provide much needed transparency, scrutiny and enforcement for the social work profession.

⁴ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/staff-vacancies>

⁵ <https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?eveDate=2024/10/08&docID=412367>

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

⁷ Health and Social Care Board Delegated Statutory Functions Statistic Reports indicate 2,511 children were looked after by children's services in 2010/11

While additional training places are urgently required, so too is improved financial support for student social workers. BASW NI acknowledges the demands on the Department of Health budget, however the Association highlights the importance of improving support for student social workers as part of the Department's wider efforts concerning retention and recruitment of staff. Research conducted in 2024 by BASW NI and the Social Workers Union⁸ indicates the financial situation is so severe that almost a quarter of social work students (23%) are considering leaving their studies because of the pressures they are facing.

For students who do complete their studies, they report such significant negative impacts on their mental health associated with the financial pressures they have faced, that they begin their careers at greater risk of burnout.

For every student unable to complete their studies there is not only the loss of that individual's ability to meet the needs of service users, but also the loss of the funding provided by the Department of Health in the form of Student Incentive Scheme payments and resources provided to fund the student's training place.

The Social Work Student Incentive Scheme which currently provides social work students with financial support of £4,000 per year has not been uplifted since at least 2008, despite increases for nursing and allied health profession student colleagues. To reflect the increased cost of living, BASW NI has called for the student incentive scheme to be increased to £7,000 per year.

While BASW NI recognises the DPFG may be unable to address these issues at this particular degree of granularity, nevertheless, an opportunity has been missed in the document to more broadly commit to support the development of the social work profession via improved financial assistance for student social workers.

Poverty

The DPFG neglects to recognise the impacts poverty has on the lives of people in Northern Ireland as well as the costs of poverty to public services. The omission of the need for an anti-poverty strategy is a clear failure of the DPFG.

Following the 2006 St Andrews Agreement, a statutory duty was introduced on the Northern Ireland Executive under the revised Northern Ireland Act 1998 requiring it to adopt a strategy setting out how it proposes to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need. The Department for Communities has not yet produced an anti-poverty strategy and it is highly regrettable the DPFG fails to recognise this. While the document outlines plans to launch a Fuel Poverty Strategy in 2025, this will fall far short of adequately addressing growing levels of poverty in Northern Ireland.

⁸ <https://basw.co.uk/sites/default/files/2024-05/Campaign%20to%20increase%20the%20Social%20Work%20Student%20Incentive%20Scheme-The%20case%20for%20change.pdf>

The Department for Communities (DfC) Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality Report (2022-23)⁹ published in March 2024, indicates rates of poverty have increased across Northern Ireland. In 2021/22, 16% of the NI population were in relative poverty and 13% were in absolute poverty. In 2023/23 the figure for relative poverty had increased to 18% and 14% of the population were in absolute poverty.

The impact is greatest on children. The DfC statistics indicate that the percentage of children living in relative poverty in NI in 2022/23 was 24%, up from 18% in 2021/22. The percentage of Children living in absolute poverty rose from 15% to 19% over the same period.

Many of the social problems social workers help people to overcome are rooted in or exacerbated by poverty. For example, growing up in poverty increases the chances of a child coming into the care of social services. There is a clear social gradient whereby, for every level of deprivation, the rates of children on child protection registers and looked after children increase. Children living in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland 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 most affluent areas¹⁰.

The March 2024 report from the NI Audit Office, *Child Poverty in Northern Ireland*¹¹, estimates the cost of child poverty in the region to be between £825m and £1bn per year. The Child Poverty Action group estimates that Child Poverty costs the UK economy at least £39 billion per year¹².

The DFIG recognises the need to address health inequalities, but the wider problems and costs associated with poverty go unaddressed. This is despite poverty related costs affecting the majority of NI Executive Departments. While responsibility for the anti-poverty strategy lies with DfC, it is vital each NI Executive Department is fully invested in its delivery given the wide-ranging impacts of poverty. The Comptroller and Auditor General's report into child poverty highlights the child-poverty strategy delivered siloed working which led to siloed interventions and ultimately to poor outcomes.

It is vital the Minister for Communities acts on the recommendation of the Expert Advisory Panel¹³ appointed by his predecessor and delivers an anti-poverty strategy which contains provisions for an audit of the public service costs of poverty. Provision of this information

⁹ https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/PII_report_2223.html

¹⁰ 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 https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/126821013/NI_Country_Report_Final_Feb_2017.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/files/niauditoffice/documents/2024-03/NI%20Audit%20Office%20Report%20-%20Child%20Poverty%20in%20Northern%20Ireland.pdf>

¹² <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/The%20cost%20of%20child%20poverty%20in%202023.pdf>

¹³ Recommendations for an Anti-Poverty Strategy: Report of the Expert Advisory Panel, 2020 <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-social-inclusion-strategy-anti-poverty-expert-advisory-panel-recommendations.pdf>

is urgently needed to guarantee the actions of the anti-poverty strategy are appropriately targeted and adequately resourced, with additional funding provided by the Department of Finance to ensure effective and measurable interventions.

BASW NI is a leading member of the Northern Ireland Cliff Edge Coalition. In addition to the Coalition's call for the DPFG to be amended to contain a commitment to eradicate poverty as an immediate priority, along with a vision for the eradication of poverty, which spans the short to long term, and with corresponding measurables and targets, we support the Coalition's call for the DPFG to adopt its following three key asks as new actions:

- Resolve the five week wait in Universal Credit
- Remove the two-child limit
- Provide support to private renters affected by the Local Housing Allowance

Mental health services

The DPFG notes the importance of the continued implementation of the Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031. However, it is vital this area of work is adequately funded. The 2023 Northern Ireland Audit Office report *Mental Health Services in Northern Ireland*¹⁴ highlights historically funding for mental health services in Northern Ireland has been below the levels in GB and the Republic of Ireland. The report notes that “while the increased investment signalled in the new mental health strategy may go some way to closing the gap in funding levels, on the basis of its planned cost profile, funding would not reach the level necessary until close to the end of the strategy period (in 2030- 31)”.

Funding must be improved to support investment in the community mental health services which are critical to supporting people to live safely and well in community settings, preventing admission, or as is too often the case, readmission to acute mental health services. It is also vital that the unique role played by social work is fully recognised in service planning, with improved funding of services to include mental health social work services, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and Approved Social Work services.

There is also a clear need to increase mental health inpatient resources—both bed numbers and associated nursing, medical and social work staff to treat and support patients.

Shortages in acute resources often lead to significant delays for people assessed and requiring admission to a hospital setting under the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 which can cause acute distress to the people in need of admission. Delays can also lead to strain and moral distress for professionals involved in the assessment and conveyancing processes, including Approved Social Workers. Long waits to access placements are largely avoidable and represent an inefficient use of staff time.

¹⁴ https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/files/niauditoffice/documents/2023-05/00293490%20-%20Mental%20Health%20Report_WEB.pdf

Between 2018/19 and 2022/23, there was a 3.6% decrease in the number of mental health beds and in 2022/23 the occupancy rate for mental health specialties in hospitals was 99.2%¹⁵. Although up to date figures broken down by Health and Social Care Trust do not appear to be publicly available, the Department's figures for 2021/22 highlight care settings in the Belfast, Northern and South Eastern Trusts which operated beyond maximum capacity. Demand was highest at the Acute Mental Health Inpatient Unit in Belfast Health and Social Care Trust which operated at 108.1% occupancy¹⁶.

Increasing the provision of mental health inpatient support, including bed numbers and nursing, medical and social work staff to treat and support patients would represent a key step in improving care outcomes and addressing the pressures Approved Social Workers face.

Funding of public services

BASW NI recognises the immense pressures on the NI Executive with demand for services outstripping the funding available. In light of this BASW NI has called for the introduction of a needs-based approach to funding public services in Northern Ireland to replace the outdated Barnett Formula which has led to under resourcing in the region. Northern Ireland has disproportionate need for service provision, with higher-than-average levels of mental health need¹⁷ and consistently the highest rate of economic inactivity of any UK region¹⁸. Both of these factors are intrinsically linked to the direct impacts of The Troubles and the associated legacy of intergenerational trauma.

BASW NI urges the NI Executive to collectively engage the UK Government in calling for a new funding model to meet need in the region. There is also the need for a UK-wide conversation about improving funding of public services. Accepting the current allocation to the NI Executive under the Barnett Formula marks a failure to adequately represent the needs of the Northern Ireland population.

Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

BASW NI is fully supportive of the NI Executive's work to end the epidemic of violence, abuse, and harm against women and girls. However, in order to support the delivery of meaningful change, it is essential that adequate funding is allocated to this work. Although the DPGF commits the Executive to "invest through a Change Fund," and a

¹⁵ Department of Health *Northern Ireland Inpatient Activity Statistics, 2022/23*

¹⁶ National Statistics Publication - Inpatient and Day Case Activity in Northern Ireland 2021/22

¹⁷ https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/files/niauditoffice/documents/2023-05/00293490%20-%20Mental%20Health%20Report_WEB.pdf

¹⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-67412851#:~:text=Northern%20Ireland%20has%20consistently%20had,percentage%20points%20over%20the%20year.>

“Challenge Fund”, no commitment is made to the levels of funding that will be made available.

It is also vital funding is not limited to statutory services—adequate resources must also be allocated to charity and voluntary sector organisations that provide refuge and emergency accommodation to women who have experienced domestic abuse. Furthermore, it is essential that adequate funding is provided to support routes out of emergency accommodation into social housing.

Agencies including social services must work together to help survivors and their children put their lives back together following abuse, with a trauma informed approach shaping all professional interventions with victims of abuse.

To support this work, it is essential that funds are allocated to invest in professionals working in Health and Social Care, including training to respond to legislative changes that have occurred in recent years, which to date have had no resources allocated to support their implementation. Legislation in question includes the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act 2021, The Safe Leave Act and the Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. It is vital that staff understand the law and their responsibilities to safeguard victims to ensure they are protected and receive high-quality support. It must also be recognised that training in relation to both domestic and sexual abuse cannot be a one off but needs to be embedded as part of continued professional development.

Finally, cross departmental working arrangements must be established between the Executive Office and Department of Health to ensure coordination between the Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls and the provisions of the forthcoming Adult Protection Act.

Housing

Northern Ireland has a major housing crisis and this has a direct impact on many of the people who use social work services. Housing insecurity has an incredibly destabilising effect, particularly for families and for young people leaving care.

The DPFG pledges to “Boost Housing Funds” to “revitalise the Northern Ireland Housing Executive so that it can invest in its homes.” No commitment is made however, as to the number of new homes required, a budget to fund this work or a timeframe for its completion.

It is also important that adequate and appropriate accommodation is available to people seeking asylum in the UK and living in Northern Ireland. The needs of people resident in Northern Ireland must not be set against those of people seeking asylum. High quality services can and must be provided to all to prevent competing interests and the unrest which all too easily can result from a zero-sum approach to service provision.

To truly address the housing crisis and make housing more affordable there needs to be an intense programme of building more social and specialist housing. More social housing will ease housing costs and should reduce the cost of private rentals due to more supply. There also needs to be more specialist housing to suit those with additional needs, such as people with learning disabilities and older people.

UK-wide, BASW has called for a review of the benefits that fuel the housing crisis. In the Northern Ireland context a first step would be to act on the recommendations of the Mitigations Independent Review Panel Report commissioned by the Department of Communities¹⁹ which proposed the establishment of a Financial Inclusion Service, which would provide advice for low-income families who have been impacted by shortfalls in LHA. This would provide additional access to a grant to meet shortfalls between housing costs paid through benefit and contractual rent.

For more information or to arrange a meeting to discuss this response, contact Andy McClenaghan, BASW NI Public Affairs, Policy and Communications Lead at andy.mcclenaghan@basw.co.uk.

¹⁹ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-welfare-mitigations-review-independent-advisory-panel-report-2022.pdf>