

BASW NI briefing to the NI Assembly Committee for Health ahead of evidence session on Thursday 30 January 2025 concerning the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services

1. Introduction

- 1.1. 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.
- 1.2. The provision of high-quality children's social care services is fundamentally important to the functioning of a healthy society. Social workers working in children's services support individuals and families to overcome disadvantage rooted in social, economic, environmental and physical factors. As highlighted by the Review of Children's Social Care Services (the Review) report, in Northern Ireland, many of these factors are caused or exacerbated by the region's troubled past and increasing rates of poverty.
- 1.3. It should be recognised that the children and young people who use social work services are some of the most vulnerable in society. Many of whom, because of their age, stage in life, or lack of influence do not enjoy the agency, taken for granted by other members of our community, to speak out and highlight the shortcomings in the services they receive.

2. Shift in focus of service delivery

- 2.1. BASW NI fully endorses the aim of the Review to shift children's services away from an approach primarily characterised by child protection towards one focused on early intervention to improve support for children and families. Early intervention and preventative work, if adequately resourced and prioritised is key, in many instances, to preventing problems becoming crises. Supporting parents to care well for their children often leads to better outcomes for children and is less costly, particularly where it prevents children becoming looked after by social work services.
- 2.2. Independent Review Recommendation 22 outlines the need for *a reset and refocus for children's services to give a greater focus and attention to family support*. This must not be misunderstood as an intention move away from intervention when safeguarding requires children being taken into care. However, there should not be an either/or approach to working with children and families marked by the binary options of 'child rescue' versus 'prevention'. There must be a balance.
- 2.3. To move from the current child protection focused model, services must be resourced, structured and staffed in a manner which enables social workers to spend more time in direct engagement with children and families, understanding their needs and providing support which addresses the challenges families face.

- 2.4. *Central to the reset recommended by Professor Jones is the creation of family support services that prevent escalation to the level of statutory intervention.* However, the availability of such services varies between geographical areas, even within Health and Social Care Trust areas. Often, such services are provided by the voluntary sector which have been ravaged by more than decade of cuts, and more specialist services provided by the national children's charities have been reduced as contracts with Trusts have ended and not been renewed.
- 2.5. BASW NI's members are clear that funding for family support needs to be ringfenced to ensure investment in early intervention is prioritised and protected. Long-term commitments to funding need to be made to allow supports in the community to have long-term impacts.
- 2.6. In implementing the Review, consideration must be given to how to ensure regional consistency in services. BASW NI members frequently raise concerns about the disparity of services available to children and families depending on geographic locality. This is particularly acute in provision of respite services, short breaks and accessing direct payment workers for children and children with disabilities.
- 2.7. In addressing how to how to reset and refocus children's services, it is essential that a human rights informed approach is followed. A clear focus on human rights allows rhetoric to be translated into specific practical action for the most marginal and at risk in society. One of the most basic human instincts is to raise one's own children. This instinct is enshrined in Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998, *The right to respect for private and family life*. Children have rights too, including a right not be physically abused and not to be neglected. However, a family's legal right, such as Article 8, has limited meaning if that right cannot be used. For Article 8 rights to be exercised families need access to appropriate support, for example adequate income, housing, and access to appropriate services—all of which are being increasingly eroded.
- 2.8. Recommendation 30 calls for respite care for children with a disability to be expanded which the Association fully supports. This needs to happen at pace to keep up with increasing demand. BASW NI also agrees that children receiving respite care should not be seen as looked after children. This is causing carers and families distress as it is viewed as stigmatising. It also is causing staff additional paperwork who then must implement the requirements and procedures of the child becoming looked after.

3. Skills Mix

- 3.1. BASW NI fully supports Review Recommendation 17, agreeing that there should be the further development of a skills mix within children and families frontline teams and services. The Association has encouraged the Department of Health to draw on the findings of the research BASW NI conducted in partnership with the Northern

Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) during the period of the Review to inform skills mix diversification¹.

- 3.2. Almost nine out of ten (89%) of the 445 social workers who responded to the survey believed 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 support. When 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) were: family support workers, social work assistants, behavioural support workers, administrative support staff, and contact workers.
- 3.3. Recruiting these additional support staff is essential to enable more time for relationship-based practice. Social workers explain they spend too much time on administrative tasks rather than spending time working with families face to face. Addressing this problem requires the hiring of additional administrative staff.
- 3.4. It should be recognised, however, that while the diversification of skills can be beneficial in supporting social service delivery, it should not be regarded as a cost-saving way to replace social workers. An enhanced skills mix must be understood in the context of improved professional support for social workers to deliver better outcomes for people who use services, with the social work role protected and valued.

4. Addressing the workforce crisis

- 4.1. The social work workforce was already struggling considerably before Covid-19 with difficulties around recruitment, retention and high stress levels being regularly reported by social workers and managers. Overwhelmingly social workers relate these difficulties not to direct work or the pressures of practice but instead to working conditions and organisational stressors. Child and family social workers have been particularly critical of these aspects of their work. The system in its current form is only able to function due to the long hours that social workers and their managers work. This is unsustainable and BASW NI fully supports recommendation 3, which states *action needs to be taken to address the children's social care workforce crisis*.
- 4.2. There is a need for investment in social work recruitment, education, professional development and retention initiatives. the social work workforce, which is predominately female, also requires a more family friendly approach, with provisions for greater flexibility for childcare, other caring considerations, and more part-time opportunities. The work of Reform Board Workstreams must have a broader view of the workforce beyond HSC organisations. Reform and investment must include the voluntary and community sector.

¹ [Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services—Core Social Work Roles Survey: Research Findings \(February 2013\)](#).

- 4.3. There is an urgent need to tackle poor working conditions and the unfeasibly high workloads of social workers. High case and administrative loads are a major source of stress and the quality of support to children depends on providing social workers with the right conditions. This requires improved training for social work managers to ensure staff are supported and the widespread roll out of reflective supervision. Supporting staff through reflective supervision creates the conditions for the best professional decisions while minimising risk and can aid staff retention—the focus of Recommendation 11.
- 4.4. As with many areas of social work, demand is growing across children’s services and it is of paramount importance that safe staffing standards are implemented for the profession. This is needed to ensure services are provided in a manner that upholds the best interests of the individuals and families who use them, and those of the social workers who deliver them.
- 4.5. For a number of years, the high rate of vacancies has led to huge pressures on social workers. While the recently reported reduction in the social work vacancy rate to 3.3% (September 2024)² is welcome, it does not represent the situation in some social work teams, particularly in the area of child protection. The reported vacancy rate is at odds with the figures shared with BASW NI by Directors of Children’s Services who report Gateway, Family Intervention teams and Looked After Children’s teams continue to experience stubbornly high vacancy levels of up to 40%. The figures as published by the Department of Health do not convey the whole picture as they cover only vacant posts actively being recruited to and omit posts unstaffed due to long term sick leave and maternity leave. It is vital that improved support is provided to retain social workers in what are the most hard to fill posts. These frontline child protection roles are among the most challenging in the profession yet are often staffed by newly qualified social workers who may lack the experience needed to handle the pressures of these roles, leading to high rates of burnout and staff turnover.
- 4.6. Considering changing demography and increasing levels of inequality and poverty, workforce planning is of vital 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.

² Northern Ireland health and social care (HSC) active recruitment statistics September 2024
<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-health-and-social-care-hsc-active-recruitment-statistics-september-2024>

- 4.7. On 8 October 2024, the Minister of Health addressed the NI Assembly³, explaining the number of social workers being trained each year in Northern Ireland has increased to 325, up from 260 in 2020. However, what wasn't mentioned was that in 2011 training places were reduced from 300 to 260⁴. In effect, social work training places have increased by only 8% since 2011.
- 4.8. While social work is a diverse profession, with social workers supporting people across a wide range of programmes of care, children and families social workers make up the single largest group within the profession. The 2024 HSC workforce census⁵ indicates 44% of statutory sector social workers practice in this area. The number of children looked after by social services is the highest on record since the introduction of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. Provisional statistics for November 2024 published by the Department of Health indicate there are now 4,171 children in care⁶. In 2011 the number was 2,511. The 8% uplift in the number of social workers trained annually since 2011 must therefore be considered in the context of a 66% increase in the number of children in care over the same period.
- 4.9. BASW NI wants to see commissioning of further social work training places and social workers to have safe workloads and caseloads. The Association 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.
- 4.10. BASW NI also supports Review Recommendation 9 that social work *grading and banding structures need to be reviewed and revised*. Grading scales within the HSC are short and bands closely back onto one another leaving a small salary recognition for Band 7 roles which are becoming increasingly hard to fill. The issue of Senior Social Workers being graded at Band 7 is one that members have consistently raised, this role should be reviewed and retitled as Team Managers and re-graded to a Band 8.
- 4.11. The Association is supportive of Review Recommendation 21 which seeks further enhancement of Post Qualifying development programmes and qualifications for social workers linking them to specialist areas of practice. BASW NI understands the importance of continuous professional development and our members across the community and voluntary sector would particularly welcome modular post qualifying programmes being more accessible to them. Commitment to post qualifying and specialist training should be linked to grading and career advancement and supported by employers.

³ <https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2024/10/08&docID=412367>

⁴ Department of Health Social Work Workforce Review, 2022 <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-social-work-review-ni-2022.pdf>

⁵ Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Workforce Census March 2024 https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/hscwc-march-24_0.pdf

⁶ Northern Ireland children's social services data (provisional) <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-childrens-social-services-data-provisional>

- 4.12. An early concern in the Reform Board workstreams is the continuation of approaches that only consider social work and social care work within HSC organisations. A key insight of the Review was that there is a lot of social work and social care work delivered in the voluntary and community sector that is due equal respect and status. This must be recognised in the implementation of this Review.
- 4.13. To ensure a sustainable and effective workforce, there is a need to retain our skilled social workers and support experienced social care workers who are not yet qualified social workers to undertake training, as advocated by Review Recommendation 20. BASW NI members have expressed their support for the reintroduction of the trainee social work route as per Review Recommendation 10. Widening access and exploring multiple pathways into the profession including the trainee social worker route is required and this is currently being advanced by the Department of Health. However, this is another area where the reform processes continues to perpetuate views of social work as an almost exclusively HSC activity. There is a need to engage the voluntary and community sector as full partners in this work with better access to investment and funding in training and education, particularly pathways that enable social care workers from a range of qualification and social backgrounds to enter social work.
- 4.14. BASW NI is of the view that access to social work education must be fair and equitable. Support must be provided to people who have had more challenging life journeys and complicated trajectories to qualify as social workers. These individuals have often developed the personal qualities and life skills that make them excellent social workers. Social work student bursaries have been frozen for years despite the spiralling cost of living. Based on the findings of research⁷ conducted jointly by BASW NI and the Social Workers Union in 2024, the Association is calling for an uplift in the Student Incentive Scheme from £4,000 to £7,000 per year.

5. Impacts of the ‘Toxic Trio’ and poverty

- 5.1. Issues and difficulties for adults, identified in the Review as Northern Ireland’s unique ‘Toxic Trio’, directly impact on children’s well-being. The Review references the legacy of the personal traumas of *The Troubles* which are associated with high levels of mental health difficulties, misuse of alcohol and drugs, incidence of domestic violence and the impact of intergenerational trauma. The Review also noted the contemporary threat, fear and trauma created in Northern Ireland’s communities today and the need for social work to be responsive to people affected by current threats and violence. The Association is acutely aware of this toxic mix of factors and the impact it has on children and families.

⁷ Campaign to increase the Social Work Student Incentive Scheme: The case for change <https://basw.co.uk/sites/default/files/2024-05/Campaign%20to%20increase%20the%20Social%20Work%20Student%20Incentive%20Scheme-The%20case%20for%20change.pdf>

- 5.2. Poverty is part of the everyday context of social work and BASW NI is gravely concerned at the impacts inequality and economic hardship have for many of the children and families social workers support. The situation continues to deteriorate, with increasing numbers of children and families finding themselves in poverty and destitution in Northern Ireland. One in four (24%) children in Northern Ireland now live in poverty⁸. The Association is supportive of Recommendation 2: *Action should be taken to tackle through welfare benefit changes, the increasing prevalence and intensity of child poverty* and Recommendation 49: *There is without doubt the need for increased funding and investment to respond to the increasing poverty creating difficulties for children and families and to allow them to receive the help and assistance they need.*
- 5.3. The welfare safety net of society that protects people from poverty, homelessness, illness, and the impact of disability has been weakened by a decade and a half of austerity. The current cost of living crisis has highlighted how significant the deficiencies in the social security system have become.
- 5.4. The central issue of poverty and its devastating impact on children and their families must be addressed by the NI Executive via the creation and implementation of a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy. While publication of the anti-poverty strategy is the responsibility of the Department for Communities, it is vital that the Department of Health is involved in its production and invested in its implementation given the myriad impacts poverty has on users of children’s social care services, as recognised by the Review.

6. Creation of an Arms-Length Body and Minister for Children and Families

- 6.1. To ensure transformation is delivered, children’s services must receive much greater focus within the arenas of policy making and service delivery. While it is not a surprise, it is deeply concerning that the Review found that Directors of Children’s Services only spend approximately 30% of their time focussed on their children’s social care services. BASW NI supports Professor Jones’s assertion that the “Directors of Children’s services are distracted and disempowered in leading children’s social care” and that they need real authority to tackle the long-standing issue within their services.
- 6.2. A combination of factors, including: the pressures on the health service, the ever-increasing demand for children’s social care, the ongoing social care workforce crisis and the factors undermining focused and effective strategic leadership for social care services has led BASW NI to fully endorse Professor Jones’s view that “*Statutory children’s and families’ social care services need to be located within an organisation where this is the primary focus of the organisation.*”

⁸ https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/PII_report_2223.html

- 6.3. The Association agrees with Recommendation 38 calling for the introduction of a region-wide children's and families Arms-Length Body (ALB) which includes current Health and Social Care Trust statutory children's social care services along with other allied services and professions closely related to children's social care. This is the model referred to in the Review as option 5, the ALB+. Alongside children's social care services, the ALB+ model includes the Education Welfare Service, the Youth Justice Agency and the Youth Service.
- 6.4. Social workers involved in supporting children, young people and their families currently work in a range of services spread across three NI Executive departments—Health, Education and Justice. There are benefits to be accrued via increased integration of service planning and delivery, with improved strategic leadership enabling region-wide consistency in services.
- 6.5. However, the problems stemming from competition for resources and lack of strategic focus for children's social care are unlikely to be resolved by transferring them to an ALB under the remit of the Department of Health. To comprehensively address the challenges outlined in the Review, it is necessary to appoint a NI Executive Minister exclusively responsible for children's social care and for the Minister's portfolio to be outside the Department of Health.
- 6.6. To ensure the all-encompassing scope required to transform children's services, BASW NI believes the Minister for Children and Families should be a newly created junior ministerial role within the Executive Office (TEO), reporting directly to the First and Deputy First Ministers. A Minister for Children and Families in TEO would provide integrated leadership, strategic focus and enhanced accountability for all decisions taken across government which affect children and young people.
- 6.7. Politically, it would be more expedient, to 'elevate' all services (including the Youth Justice service, Education Welfare service and Youth Service) regarded by Professor Jones as central to the ALB, to TEO rather than transfer them to an ALB overseen by the Department of Health. In this scenario, no department held by a single party would be alone in transferring an area of responsibility. Furthermore, the functions of the new ALB would coalesce within a department shared by two parties—those being the largest Nationalist and Unionist designated parties. The shared nature of TEO may also help address concerns at the political level regarding the transfer of the Youth Justice Agency from the Department of Justice, the only Ministry appointed by a cross-community vote in the NI Assembly.

7. Supporting social work professional identity

- 7.1. BASW NI believes the integration of children's social work services within a single ALB could have the added benefit of creating a greater sense of professional identity among social workers currently working with children and young people by removing silos between service areas.

- 7.2. In 2019, BASW NI partnered with the NI Social Care Council, the Irish Association of Social Workers, and Coru—Ireland’s multi-profession health regulator—to conduct research exploring social workers’ sense of professional identity across the island of Ireland⁹. When respondents were asked if they identify more closely with non-social workers they work alongside, or with social workers outside their area of practice, just over half (53%) stated they identify more closely with non-social workers they work alongside. Furthermore, social workers in NI were slightly more likely to identify with non-social workers in their area of practice than their Rol counterparts.
- 7.3. Fostering a strong sense of professional identity is important to help ensure a clear understanding of purpose and will ground practice in social work values and ethics. This in turn will increase the confidence and ability of the profession to deliver the best outcomes for the children and families social workers support.
- 7.4. While recognising the potential benefits of enhanced professional identity for social workers currently working with children and young people across various services, consideration will need to be given concerning how to ensure a dilution in social work identity does not occur as a result of separating children’s services social workers from their HSC colleagues who work with adults and older people.

8. Co-production in service development

- 8.1. BASW NI acknowledges the vast contribution that children and their families make to our children’s social care system. Their lived experience, expertise, and the role they played in the Review to improve policies and services must be recognised.
- 8.2. Families have a right to participate in decision making about their lives. People with lived experience of social work services—which includes families at all points of the spectrum of intervention and support—need to be routinely included in the delivery, review, and development of services. As per Review Recommendation 6, the wisdom of all who have experience and engagement with and within children’s social care should be consulted.
- 8.3. The involvement of children and young people who are placed in foster or residential care, and those who have left care, deserve their voices to better heard and their active involvement in services further promoted. The inclusion of lived experience which was so evident during the Review needs to continue in the implementation of its recommendations. As per Recommendation 25, *previous reviews of foster care policies and services should be updated and acted upon and not allowed to drift.*

9. Opposition to the privatisation of care

⁹ *Shaping Social Workers’ Identity: An All-Ireland Study* (October 2020): BASW NI, NISCC, IASW, Coru.

9.1. BASW NI fully supports Review Recommendation 29: *Do not allow the privatisation of care of children*. As Professor Jones outlines in the Review concerning the privatisation of children's residential care in England, "the location of homes are determined by commercial cost interests, children are placed in children's homes at some considerable distance from their families and social workers, and with profit margins of over 20% taking more than £200m a year as profits from children's social care." This is funding the HSC can ill-afford to lose and the impacts for children are detrimental to their development, sense of place and wellbeing. In England, the proliferation of housing children in unregulated placements is wholly unacceptable and a scenario which should be avoided. A key step in preventing a similar scenario in Northern Ireland is the rejection of any move towards the privatisation of care of children.

10. Encompass

10.1. Following extensive discussion with BASW NI members, the Association is clear that social work in Northern Ireland requires a new data system that will efficiently capture the information social workers and service users need it to. Any new system introduced must be an asset to practitioners, not a bureaucratic obstacle to overcome.

10.2. The feedback BASW NI received from members highlighted clearly that the Encompass system in its design as a healthcare record management system will fail to meet the information management needs of children's social care. For this reason, BASW NI supported Review Recommendation 19—*the existing children's social care information systems should be compared and the best performing adopted as the region-wide system rather than Encompass being developed to incorporate the information systems requirements for children's social care*.

10.3. There now appears to be a recognition on the part of the Department of Health that the current Encompass model is not fit for use for social work in children's social care. The system was never designed to be used by a community-based service and BASW NI understands an agreement has been reached to design a bespoke children's system which will be tailor made for use by children's services with a planned roll out in 2027. It is essential that practitioners involved in frontline work with children and families are actively included in the design of the system.

11. Reducing bureaucracy in social work

11.1. High quality record keeping is vital to good social work practice. However, all too often paperwork constrains rather than supports practice. 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. It is vital that the Department of Health, in implementing the Independent Review, delivers meaningful change to reduce the bureaucratic burden on social workers in Children's services.

- 11.2. BASW NI has been campaigning to reduce unnecessary and duplicative bureaucracy in social work for more than a decade. In 2012, the Association published *Social Work not Paperwork: Cutting Bureaucracy in Childcare Social Work*¹⁰. The report highlighted that over two thirds of children's services social workers spent less than 30% of their working week in direct client contact. Report writing, recording in client files and entering information into computer systems were identified by the vast majority of social workers as activities which limit the time they have to spend with service users.
- 11.3. Among BASW NI's recommendations outlined in the report were calls for employers to examine the availability and role of administrative support for social workers and for the Health and Social Care Board to examine ways to reduce duplication in recording. The Association also recommended the social work strategy should lead on a review of recording requirements, explore practical ways to reduce bureaucracy and administration, and identify ways in which Information Technology could be used to reduce the administrative burden.
- 11.4. BASW NI's 2016 report *Above and Beyond: At What Cost?*¹¹ highlighted that social workers continued to identify the burden of bureaucracy as an obstacle to spending time with the service users they work to help. Nearly half of the social workers who participated in the research reported the burden of paperwork and lack of administrative support as the single or joint greatest challenge they faced in their role. In response to the findings, BASW NI reaffirmed its call for social work teams to have adequate dedicated administrative support to ensure social workers spend the majority of their time engaging directly with service users and carers. The Association also urged the Department of Health to establish a task force to take forward a whole systems approach to tackling unnecessary bureaucracy.
- 11.5. The *Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services—Core Social Work Roles Survey* found that while nearly two-thirds of social workers highlighted administration / bureaucracy as a task or one of a number of tasks they spend most of their time on, half consider it as something that could be undertaken by non-social workers. In response, two-thirds of social workers explained the addition of administrative support staff to their team would lead to improvements for the children and families they work with.

12. Need for systemic reform

- 12.1. BASW NI acknowledges the commitment of social work practitioners and their managers to deliver for children and families throughout Northern Ireland and concurs with Review Recommendation 52 that they are being hindered by long standing systemic issues. Review Recommendation 5 noted that changes need to

¹⁰ https://basw.co.uk/sites/default/files/resources/basw_123352-5_0.pdf

¹¹ https://basw.co.uk/sites/default/files/resources/basw_62154-7_0.pdf

happen quickly without drift or delay. BASW NI is concerned that the need for urgency stressed by Professor Jones does not appear to be shared by the Department of Health or evidenced in its work to advance the findings of the Review.

12.2. In addition, the structural reform required for children's social care cannot happen without genuinely transformational investment. There is now an ethical imperative for our system to reform, adjustments need to be made, and the recommendations set out in the Independent Review must guide this change effort.

12.3. The challenge of reform is unarguably formidable due to the complex nature of the systems involved. The problems that child protection and children's social care systems seek to redress have intergenerational and broader societal strands and exceed the parameters of what can be achieved by the Department of Health alone.