

Introduction

The British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI) is part of BASW, the largest professional body for social workers in the UK. BASW has 21,000 members employed in frontline, management, academic and research positions in all care settings.

In NI there are over 6,000 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.

Pressure on services

The social work sector is experiencing mounting pressures resulting from financial constraints, growing demand for services, increases in the complexity of cases and rising levels of poverty resulting from the UK Government's austerity agenda.

- In 2018/19 there were 3,281 children in the care of social services, the highest number since the introduction of the Children (NI) Order 1995 and a 33% increase in the ten years since 2008/09.
- There was a 38% increase in the number of people aged 65 and over referred for assessment of social work or social care need from 2010/11 to 2018/19 and an 8% increase in the number receiving services.
- There is a shortage of social workers and social care packages to support service users on discharge from hospital and an increasing reliance on carers to provide support, highlighted by a 105% increase in the number of adult individual carers assessments conducted in 2018/19 compared to 2011/12.

Key issues

To ensure the interests of social workers—and those we support—are met, the following issues require the attention of the Health Committee, and action by the Minister for Health.

Social work vacancies

Between March 2017 and March 2019, the number of vacant social work posts rocketed by 236%, from 151 to 508. While the most recent Department of Health (the Department) vacancy statistics, published in February 2020, indicate the number has reduced to 366, significant progress is still required to address the problem.

The Department must prioritise, as part of its ongoing workforce review, reductions in the use of expensive agency staff by expediting recruitment to vacant posts and implementing measures to retain staff in services where turnover is greatest. It must also establish normative social work staffing levels and caseload guidelines on a region-wide basis and ensure enough social workers are trained to meet current and future demand. Approximately a third of registered social workers are aged 50 or older, meaning a significant proportion of the workforce will retire in the next 10 to 15 years.

Bureaucracy and workload pressure

The efficient delivery of social work services in NI is significantly encumbered by bureaucracy-heavy processes which focus social workers' on completing paperwork, to the detriment of time spent with service users. This is a key factor in staff working additional unpaid hours, leading to burnout, which in turn contributes to the high rate of vacancies.

Despite the Department's 2012 Social Work Strategy which emphasises the need to reduce bureaucracy, no tangible impact has been felt by front-line staff.

We have called on the Department to urgently implement the Westminster NI Affairs Committee recommendation for the establishment of a task force to remove unnecessary paperwork. The Committee stated this work should be completed by summer 2020. It also recommended that in the medium-term, the Department should implement IT solutions and increase the number of administrative staff available for supporting social workers.

Pay parity

BASW NI is deeply concerned at the lack of pay parity between social workers in NI and their counterparts in GB and wholeheartedly supported industrial action by trade unions which began in December 2019. The *New Decade New Approach* agreement's commitment to immediately settle the ongoing pay dispute is welcome, however, while the document makes specific reference to nurses' pay, it is essential that social workers also benefit from resolution of the dispute.

Primary care multidisciplinary teams (MDTs)

The Department must provide sufficient funding to ensure it keeps to its commitment that including social workers in primary care MDTs will not lead to gaps in existing services. It is also essential the Department conducts a detailed analysis of the effectiveness of the initial roll-out before further resources are committed to expand the initiative.

Threats and violence against social workers

In response to BASW NI's 2018 *Insult and Injury* report, which highlighted deeply worrying levels of violence and abuse directed at social workers, the Department established a Task Force responsible for developing an employer guidance framework to protect HSC social workers and social care staff.

Initially scheduled for publication in April 2019, BASW NI encourages the Department to complete the guidance and disseminate it to employers as soon as is practicable.

The mental health crisis

NI is in the grip of a mental health crisis. Incidents of suicide in have risen from 73 in 1970 to 307 in 2018. The *New Decade New Approach* commitments for a Mental Health Action Plan to be published within two months and a Mental Health Strategy by December 2020 must be accompanied by an increase in the number of mental health social workers and publication of the Protect Life 2 suicide prevention strategy implementation plan.

Implementation of the Mental Capacity Act (NI) 2016

BASW NI is concerned at the piecemeal implementation of the Mental Capacity Act (NI), which has been limited to the section concerning deprivation of liberty. This has resulted in confusion among HSC social workers, all of whom will be required to practice under the legislation.

There is no guidance regarding use of DOLs in the context of end of life care and the Department should review the use of DOLs to discharge people from hospital. Paperwork for DOLs is excessive and must be streamlined and there is a need for role-specific training for all professionals involved with DOLs.

Finally, the number of Approved Social Workers (ASWs) is wholly inadequate to safely deliver the implementation of this significant legislation. As a first step, BASW NI believes an audit of the number of ASWs across the HSC Trusts should be conducted without delay.