Reducing Bureaucracy in Childcare Social Work

Paper for Minister Edwin Poots MLA

March 2013
Executive Summary

Social work is a tremendously rewarding career. It is fundamentally about relationships and working with people, helping individuals and families make the changes that they want and need to make to achieve their full potential. It is also a challenging job as social workers are involved with people at critical times in their lives and are often, with others, involved in making difficult and complex decisions which will have profound effects on families, individuals and communities.

Social work must balance needs, rights, risks and legislative and policy demands on a daily basis whilst always striving to be person-centred and to involve and respect service users.

In recent years, social worker practice has been increasingly influenced by the consequences of high profile tragedies and from subsequent, usually adverse, media reporting and public inquiries. These have fostered a culture, particularly in child protection, of risk averse practice and over-recording of unnecessary information; in turn this has led to the embedding of a regrettable mantra – “If it’s not recorded, it didn’t happen!”

As a result there has been pressure for social workers to record, in detail, every telephone call or home visit, and all discussions of a case – day-in, day-out.

Yet social work recording should be about capturing key information and analysing the facts, empowering social workers to record salient details and important observations, enabling informed decision making.

This is not where we are at present and in our survey report ‘Social Work not Paperwork’ NIASW highlighted an over-bureaucratised system which burdens social workers with unnecessary levels of paperwork, duplication and excess use of proforma. It also revealed a significant imbalance in the amount of time professionals spend directly working with children and families, versus that spent on paperwork.

“78% of respondents reported that direct client work accounts for less than 30% of time in any average week.” NIASW 2012

Emerging studies from the University of Ulster at Magee exploring ‘Resilience and Burnout in Child Protection Social Work’ support our survey findings about bureaucracy. The report recommends that as a profession we “look at the bureaucracy to face-to-face social work ratio and make attempts to balance this (supported by Munro, 2011)” – Dr P. McFadden (2013).

Dr McFadden makes her recommendations based on empirical research, interviews and an international literature review spanning the ten years 1999-2009.

NIASW’s recommendations fall into five broad categories and these will form the structure of this paper. They are designed to change an unwieldy system which at present impacts negatively on social work practice, but in doing so our focus has also been on ensuring that the proposals do not, in the process, compromise excellent social work.

These are recommendations which will require a change in working practices and in mindset, as well as careful and determined implementation. This paper is NIASW’s response to the problems identified in our own survey, ensuring a clear focus on solutions to the issues our members have identified.

NIASW recommends that:

Reducing duplication

1. The current looked after children system is amended and the existing
Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland (UNOCINI) documentation is used for those children requiring short term placements.

2. The UNOCINI framework is used as the single common referral and assessment tool within children’s services and across agencies in Northern Ireland.

**Reducing the volume of forms required**

3. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) examines information requirements and who is best placed to gather what information with the express aim of reducing duplication of systems.

4. The obstacles to schools having secure methods of data communication are explored, whether as a result of securing access to a commonly agreed secure network or by some other means.

5. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) examines how best to produce a comprehensive list of all the statistical information which it requires. A review is then undertaken into what SOS CARE (the regional database used by Trusts to record client information) currently captures, to inform the development of future systems.

6. Employers should be required to examine the availability and role of administration staff within organisations providing services to children and families at risk and in need.

7. A minimum standard of administrative support should be agreed, implemented and audited to ensure skilled social workers are able to concentrate on the roles they are trained to undertake.

**Developing best practice**

8. To truly tackle unnecessary excessive paperwork requires a specific Regional Reducing Bureaucracy Task Force, driving forward the necessary change.

9. Northern Ireland establishes a National Social Work Forum as has been operating in Scotland.

10. A pilot NIASW Mentoring Scheme should be funded in Northern Ireland.

11. An urgent review of the caseload weighting system is needed: in particular, how it is audited and if it is consistently used by all teams.

12. A peer mentoring scheme for newly appointed Senior Social Workers.

13. Supervision of newly qualified social workers (NQSW) is regularly audited to ensure compliance with NISCC standards.

**ICT needs**

14. To improve effectiveness and safety, NIASW recommends that investment is made in an essential Social Work Kit.

**Increasing direct contact with children and families**

15. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) ensures an urgent review of family law arrangements and a particular focus on the child contact arrangements and the role of qualified social workers.

16. A morning and afternoon sitting be explored with the Northern Ireland Court Service to facilitate better planning and use of social work time.
Introduction

The Northern Ireland Association of Social Workers (NIASW) is part of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) – the largest professional association for social work in the UK, with offices in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. NIASW’s main aim is to promote the best possible social work services for all people who may need them, while also securing the well-being of social workers. Our members are committed to and sign up to the Code of Ethics, which incorporates the International Definition of Social Work (see below).

BASW represents the United Kingdom within the International Federation of Social Workers and maintains strong international links.

International Definition of Social Work

“The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.”

The Northern Ireland context

There are just over 5,450 social workers registered in Northern Ireland, an additional 765 students and 77 internationally qualified registrants. Social work is a protected title, protected by law and is regulated by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC).

Social work in Northern Ireland leads the way across the UK in a number of aspects:

1. Northern Ireland has an oversubscribed and highly respected degree in Social Work.

2. The Northern Ireland Post-Qualifying Framework is robust and is recognised as a model of excellence. Qualifications are at Masters Level and there is a strong culture of post-qualifying learning amongst the social work community.

3. The Assessed Year in Employment (AYE), regulated by NISCC, provides employers and social workers with a means to develop and support newly qualified social workers.

4. Having the Practice Teachers programme at Masters Level ensures that students get the best possible practice learning experience.

5. Northern Ireland has a Chief Social Services Officer at the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety.

6. Following the Review of Public Administration Northern Ireland has a statutory requirement that the Director of Children’s Services in each Trust, who also acts as the Executive Director of Social Work, must be a registered social worker.

The first ever Ten Year Strategy for Social Work was launched by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in April 2012. The document, ‘Improving and safeguarding social wellbeing’, is very significant in setting the strategic vision and direction for social work over the next decade. The vision is summarised by three overarching themes:

- Strengthening the capacity of the workforce;
- Improving social work services; and
- Building leadership and trust in the profession.

NIASW welcomes the fact that Minister Poots has pledged to keep child protection as a
priority for the Assembly, in response to increasing referral rates to social work services every year between 2007-2012. We see the Minister’s request for this paper as a clear and welcome sign of his commitment to that pledge. For the year 2011-2012 there were 35,516 childcare referrals to Social Services, of which three quarters required follow up social work services (DHSSPS figures).

As the number of social work referrals continues to grow it is vital that social workers are given the time and means to allow for this. Hopefully this report and the work being undertaken as part of the Department’s Ten Year Social Work Strategy will address the issues and concerns faced by the social work profession.

**The current situation**

NIASW undertook a survey of child care social work across Northern Ireland and launched our findings in November 2012, leading to a meeting in January 2013 with Minister Edwin Poots to discuss the results. The Minister requested that we produce this paper detailing the changes needed to address the imbalance in the time social workers spend on paperwork instead of with children and families.

NIASW’s ‘Social Work not Paperwork’ report highlighted that more than two thirds of respondents spend less than 30% of their working week seeing vulnerable children and families. Social workers regularly and routinely go the extra mile by working 20-60 additional unpaid hours every month; they do so to keep children safe and because they are committed to the people they work with.

However, they are further hampered by restrictive and bureaucratic systems. Ninety six per cent of respondents cite ‘report writing’ and 90% highlight ‘recording in client files’ as the two key activities which directly impact on their ability to see clients.

It is noteworthy that only 8% of those who responded were able to spend more than 50% of their working hours in direct work with clients. This is simply unacceptable. When interviewed on the UTV News, Carolyn Ewart, NIASW Manager, was asked: “Why have we allowed this to happen?” This is a question that we must be prepared to answer. Why have we allowed highly skilled, highly qualified social workers to become tied down by administration tasks when there are other ways to do things?

Does the public need social workers to be desk-bound, filling in forms and inputting statistics on a computer, or do they need us to be engaging therapeutically with some of the most vulnerable, in need and at risk members of our communities?

Our social worker respondents told us overwhelmingly that they want to spend more time with clients. In this paper we suggest alternatives to current practices and are keen to work with the department and all other stakeholders to make the necessary changes to improve and develop social work services.
Main Report

Reducing duplication

NIASW recognises that good quality record keeping is an integral part of social work practice; we are in no way advocating that the quality of records should be reduced but it is clear from our survey and emerging studies that the current level of paperwork is disproportionate and imbalanced.

Further to our original survey of members we have since consulted further on the ways forward, work that underpins the proposals contained within this document.

At present the Looked After Child (LAC) System requires that any child who needs a respite placement enters the full LAC process and becomes subject to all the documentation this currently necessitates. The LAC system also requires a meeting to be held within two weeks of the care episode starting and then reviewed at three and six monthly intervals thereafter. This meeting will agree a care plan and under current Children Order requirements this will involve completion of full LAC documentation, including Essential Information 1 & 2, Placement Plan 1 & 2, a Looked After Children report and personal education forms. All of these are lengthy documents and have been included in NIASW's submission for information.

The meeting will involve a social worker, a Senior Social Worker and Principal Social Worker, as well as the child, parents and carers. This meeting will be recorded, minutes shared and records completed in the case file. The care plan agreed will be drawn up, recorded, shared and filed, and will be subsequently reviewed by the social worker for the child. The child takes on the status of a Looked After Child and the Trust assumes corporate responsibility. This entire process will often have to take place even if the respite placement is for 24 hours.

As set out in the current legislation all children with a disability will automatically meet the criteria set out in the Children (NI) Order 1995 and so upon entering a respite placement be fully subject to this process. Most parents of children with a disability are opposed to their children taking on this status as they do not see them as having to be formally looked after by the Trust as their corporate parent.

Most social workers would support a change to the current legal framework to enable children with a disability and those children requiring a short placement to have their needs met outside the LAC system. The definition of a short term placement requires exploration by the profession.

This practice for short placements is cumbersome, overly bureaucratic, disproportionate, unnecessary and inefficient. NIASW is not proposing that this changes for medium to long term placements but that it should end for short placements. Without compromising on social work processes or client care the child's needs could be met within the existing Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland (UNOCINI) framework. A UNOCINI assessment will already be in place for every child known to children's services, documentation that stores all the demographic information which is duplicated on LAC forms EI 1&2. The UNOCINI forms also contain the assessed needs of the child and family and a care plan, which is required to be reviewed, in the first instance, at three months and, thereafter, at six monthly intervals.

1. **NIASW recommends that the current LAC system is amended and the existing UNOCINI documentation is used for those children requiring short term placements and for disabled children.**

This would have the effect of immediately reducing the amount of time that social workers spend on paperwork; it would alleviate the pressure of duplicating information and free up front line staff to spend more time on direct client work.
UNOCINI was developed as the single common assessment tool for children's services. It has been rolled out across Northern Ireland since April 2008 and has been widely used within social work teams and by a range of other statutory and voluntary sector organisations.

However, despite this, a number of other services within the Trusts have developed their own referral documentation, therefore increasing the burden of paperwork and duplicating work for the profession. Examples of this include the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), Family Centres and other organisations that have service level agreements with Trusts – for example, Barnard's and Thorndale.

Creating the need for additional forms not only increases duplication of effort but often serves to diminish the quality of information subsequently entered into these forms.

2. NIASW recommends that the UNOCINI framework be used as the single common referral and assessment tool within children’s services and across agencies in Northern Ireland.

There has been an increasing tendency to use kinship care as part of the solution for children requiring placements, promoted by the principles contained within the Children Order. However, kinship care has been under-resourced by Trusts and is viewed by professionals in some instances as a ‘Cinderella service’.

Supporting kinship care placements requires all the resources available to fostering placements and we would urge the DHSSPS to ensure social work services in this area are fully funded and backed, both financially and through the underpinning of Children Order guidance and regulations – which need updating and, in some parts, re-writing to provide clarity of intention.

To further explore ways of reducing duplication within social work, NIASW examined the communication pathways which most frequently presented difficulties. It became clear that the two major departments with which social workers interface are the DHSSPS and the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI). We received reports that communication between these departments, in areas affecting social work, can be problematic, leading to more duplication and unnecessary paperwork for staff.

For instance, all Trusts must complete OC2 returns – these forms are the Trusts’ corporate parenting reporting mechanism; they require detailed information about Looked After Children’s educational attainment. However, Trust recording systems do not currently capture this information, so social workers must actively locate, record and produce this information to their managers, who then pass it on through the organisation to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Yet the Department of Education Northern Ireland has access to this information through its systems, so this work appears unnecessary.

3. NIASW recommends that the DHSSPS examine information requirements and who is best placed to gather what information with the express aim of reducing duplication of systems.

Again, this will reduce duplication of information recording and unnecessary time spent on recording, freeing up time for practice instead of administration.

Paperwork is also duplicated in the way information is shared between schools and social work teams. At present, schools do not have access to the secure computer system, Criminal Justice Secure Mail (CJSM), which allows high level communication between Trusts, Police, Probation, Criminal Justice and the NSPCC. This means that all communication surrounding Looked After Children between social workers and teachers must be duplicated onto hard copy files and manually posted.
4. **NIASW recommends that the obstacles to schools having secure methods of data communication are explored, whether as a result of agreed encryption methods or securing access to a commonly agreed secure network.**

This would also solve a problem with the current MARAC (Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference) system, for women and children at high risk from domestic violence. Where presently paper copies of the agenda and minutes are circulated to education and library board staff, use of the Criminal Justice Secure Mail system would allow for quicker and more efficient electronic transfer of this sensitive information between these services and the police.

**Reducing the volume of required forms**

**NIASW** recognises that many professions and jobs could describe themselves as over-bureaucratised but few have such consistent levels of complaint about the volume of forms that are required to be completed on a daily basis. Many of the high profile inquiries of recent years have recommended changes to recording systems but unfortunately this has led to an increase in paperwork and in the burden of bureaucracy.

Social workers understand that it is important to collect information about their work but are frustrated by the lack of efficient processes to capture the required information. SOSCARE, the computer recording system in place within Trusts, does not have the capacity to produce the information needed by the Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety, the Health and Social Care Board and employers. Also, there is a lack of clarity about what information is required.

5. **NIASW recommends that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety produces a comprehensive list of all the statistical information which it requires. A review of what SOSCARE currently captures could be undertaken to inform the development of future systems.**

NIASW is aware that there has been work undertaken in this area but its current status is unclear and, to date, there have been no outcomes.

Whilst carrying out the survey NIASW became aware of examples of best practice and presented a case study to the Minister and Chief Social Services Officer from the South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust. It is undoubtedly the case that there are many and varied similar examples of practitioners, managers and employers working together to identify problems and resolve them with innovative ideas. However, there appears to be a roadblock to sharing such examples across Trusts and the voluntary sector.

6. **NIASW recommends that to truly tackle the widespread problem of paperwork that this needs a specific Regional Reducing Bureaucracy Task Force to drive forward change.**

This should include employers, unions, professional associations and front line practitioners and could form part of the implementation of the Ten Year Strategy, though with a clearly defined remit for reducing unnecessary bureaucracy.

One of the key elements in the South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust’s example of best practice, referenced above, was the transference of administration tasks to administration staff within the team. Whilst NIASW recognises that investment in additional administration staff may be difficult in the current financial climate, it was clear from the survey that NIASW members felt that inadequate support for their role was a major challenge towards achieving the desired outcome of spending more time completing therapeutic work with children and families at risk and in need. Equally, it should be recognised that administrative staff are trained and qualified to complete administration tasks, often proving more efficient and effective in completing such work.
7. NIASW recommends that employers should be required to examine the availability and role of administration staff within organisations providing services to children and families at risk and in need.

8. NIASW recommends that a minimum standard of administrative support be agreed, implemented and audited to ensure social workers are able to concentrate on the roles they are trained and skilled to undertake.

Developing Best Practice

As the professional association for the social work profession, NIASW is committed to promoting, sharing and developing best practice. This includes developing models to support and develop the workforce in a way that properly equips them to deal with the high demands of the job.

9. As part of a UK-wide organisation we have the opportunity to learn from other countries and NIASW recommends that Northern Ireland establishes a Regional Social Work Forum, as has been operating in Scotland.

This group could take the lead in sharing best practice, raising the profile of the profession and forming the foundations of a much needed community of social work leaders. NIASW shared this suggestion with the DHSSPS Social Work Strategy Steering group in February and understands from that meeting that this proposal will be taken forward. NIASW is clear that this should not be a ‘top down’ management-led forum, which simply adds a layer of bureaucracy, but that it should unite the profession and inspire and lead our social work community.

The Social Work Task Force (2009), Munro (2011) and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing (2012) all recognise the need to build confidence within the profession and to develop the future leaders of the profession.

We know from practice and many years of experience that regular supervision is essential, especially but not exclusively at the start of a professional’s career. Recently published research into Case Management Reviews by Queen’s University Belfast and the NSPCC highlights the need for additional support for newly qualified social workers. Due to the lack of jobs in other programmes of care most newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) will find themselves working in child protection services – very often their first experience of the field.

It is essential that if we ask our least experienced staff to take on the most complex level of work that we ensure they are equipped to carry out their duties to the best of their abilities and supported by sound regular advice and supervision. The children and families who use our services are entitled to nothing less.

10. NIASW recommends that supervision of NQSWs be regularly audited to ensure compliance with NISCC standards.

NIASW has been working on a proposal to develop a Mentoring Scheme, aimed initially at newly qualified social workers or those moving into a new programme of care. The scheme will be based on the contribution of volunteers – NIASW members prepared to mentor those NQSWs who request a service. Our model will be based on UK and international research from across the health and social care world about how other professional associations support their staff. Mentoring is a way of supporting best practice and sharing knowledge and experience, supporting an increased awareness of professional identity firmly based on BASW’s Code of Ethics.

Mentoring is also an excellent way, in addition to formal supervision systems, to develop and encourage newly qualified social work staff. We have already approached employers with this proposal and have received an enthusiastic response from the Association of Directors.
There are a number of informal schemes operating within Trusts and NIASW would be keen to support these, as well as to develop new programmes.

NIASW would welcome the opportunity to bid for support from the Innovation Fund as part of the Social Work Strategy. With such external funding it could develop into a much larger service which would welcome mentors and mentees from across Northern Ireland. A central database would be administered by NIASW, matching NQSWs and experienced practitioners on the basis of professional background and, where possible, geography. A clear contract would be drawn up with details of the mentoring remit, confidentiality, availability, boundaries and timescales.

In England, the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) funded 11 local authorities to pilot mentoring schemes in support of social work practice. In Tower Hamlets, for example, the specific aim of its pilot was twofold:
1. Reduce bureaucracy burdens on social work staff.
2. Facilitate more direct work with service users.

Outcomes of the pilot in Tower Hamlets:
1. It has appointed more and better qualified administrative staff.
2. It has appointed a full time mentor.

The mentor role in Tower Hamlets is to model good practice, support social work practice in action and help solve problems. The mentor also helps prepare the new social worker for home visits, case conferences and court work. This project has on-going funding of £200,000 across Tower Hamlets and offers a model of excellence.

As we detailed earlier, there is a need to ensure that there are adequately skilled and trained administration staff as a part of every social work team. This model of best practice, offering professional expertise to support NQSWs, combined with clerical assistance to free them up for the skilled work they are expected to undertake, emphasises the need to invest in mentoring and support staff to ensure the most efficient and effective services for the public.

11. NIASW recommends that a pilot NIASW Mentoring scheme should be funded in Northern Ireland.

This will address some of the issues raised in the QUB and NSPCC Case Management Reviews report. It would also deal with issues raised in Dr McFadden's research into Burnout and Resilience, which highlighted the need for and benefit of mentoring as a source of increasing resilience and decreasing burnout amongst social workers. Dr McFadden reported: “Inexperience in teams is a concerning consequence of high turnover in child protection.”

The DHSSPS Strategy for Social Work also recognises the need to support staff so that Northern Ireland can have a confident and capable workforce who can meet the demands of the public.

Caseload weighting systems are an integral part of managing caseload sizes and are a valuable tool for managers to use in managing the competing demands of a busy social work team. Whilst NIASW acknowledges that there is a regional caseload weighting system in place across children’s services in Northern Ireland, our respondents told us that it is not being utilised consistently and that it is not being routinely audited.

We had examples of practitioners repeatedly and routinely being expected to work at dangerous levels, in terms of their caseload numbers; for example a social worker on their Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) working at a caseload weighting of 90 when standards dictate it should be 45.

Lord Laming made it very clear that his criticisms of the events leading to Victoria Climbie’s death were not only levelled at the inexperienced of front line practitioners but also that
“the greatest failure rests with the mangers and senior members of the authorities whose
task it was to ensure that services for children, like Victoria, were properly financed, staffed,
and able to deliver good quality support to children and families.”

The Reform Implementation Team (RIT) has been the DHSSPS and the Health and Social
Care Board’s response to Laming’s report and NIASW supports the work it has done and
continues to undertake. What NIASW can offer, however, is the voice of the practitioners
who are telling us what it is like at the front line and who are telling us that systems
continue to be ineffective. There is no point in giving managers tools to assist if they are
not being properly used and audited.

12. NIASW recommends an urgent review of the case load weighting system, in
particular how it is audited and if it is consistently used by all teams.

Again this suggestion is supported by the research carried out by McFadden, who states
that caseload weighting must be examined within the actual constraints of a social worker’s
contracted hours, not the additional unpaid hours far too many are forced to commit to get
anywhere near managing unmanageable caseloads.

NIASW members have reported ongoing concerns about the size of social work teams
and the number of staff each Senior Social Worker is expected to effectively manage.
Learning from Lord Laming’s report, suggests that to have effective teams Senior Social
Workers need to be the lynchpins who hold things together – they quality assure the
work, assess practice and competence, and support, develop and set the culture for the
team. They also lead on governance and decision-making consistency. To ensure that they
can adequately undertake this pivotal role they, in turn, need support, training, supervision
and mentoring.

13. NIASW recommends a consistent and co-ordinated peer mentoring scheme for
newly appointed Senior Social Workers.

ICT needs
Whilst NIASW recognises the stringent financial times within which we operate and the
limited funds available, we continue to strive for the best for social work. As such, we
recommend the need for investment in IT equipment for social work. Making best use of
our social work knowledge and skills means ensuring that social workers are freed from
unnecessary recording and duplication and that their time with clients is maximised. This
aim can be aided by using technology. For example, ready access to a tablet device would
mean social workers can record details of a home visit immediately, on the scene,
preventing the need to travel back to the office to record on paper and desktop machines.
Our survey highlighted that some social workers do not even have access to a mobile
phone, which is simply unacceptable and counter productive.

14. To improve effectiveness and safety NIASW recommends that investment is
made in an essential Social Work Kit, commencing with an audit of need and
exploring technologies that could rapidly secure a return on investment through
the better use of professionals’ time.

A Social Work Kit could include a smart phone with secure email access, portable
laptop/tablet, and secure remote access to the important, confidential information needed
do the job effectively, whatever a social worker’s location. This would have the effect of
reducing duplication, reducing travel costs and increasing responsiveness and flexibility.

Increasing direct contact with children and families

At the heart of all NIASW’s proposals is the aim of continuing to improve the quality of
service being offered to social work service users. NIASW members overwhelmingly told
us that they wanted to be able to spend more time with their clients – 96% want to be able
to offer more time to families, to engage in therapeutic work, to have time to really talk to
parents and children and to use their social work skills.
“There is good research evidence to show the benefit to children and their families of 
early intervention in providing support before a crisis point is reached.”
Devaney et al 2013

Social workers are unhappy that they spend less than a third of their week with the people 
they are supposed to be helping and all the proposals outlined here have been designed 
to free up time for real social work practice.

An area that our respondents reported hugely impacted on their time was court work – 
in particular, the sheer amount of time spent waiting in court and on court directed 
family contact.

It is not atypical for a social worker to spend six hours waiting outside a court for a case to 
be heard, there is limited privacy and so confidential work cannot be done. Private rooms 
which are on offer to other professionals are not currently available to social workers. 
NIASW believes that similar provision for social workers should be explored with the court 
system.

In planning court attendance, social workers do not know how long they will be out of the 
office so greater flexibility to support their professional needs would be welcome. Part of 
improving the system and promoting greater flexibility is the time the court is open for 
business. NIASW believes it would help if courts could sit in AM and PM sessions so that 
social workers could plan their diaries more effectively, instead of the current situation 
where they are required to arrive at 9am, even though their case may not be heard until 4pm. 
This is surely also unfair on families involved in court proceedings.

We are aware both the Department of Justice and Department of Health, Social Services 
and Public Safety are scouring out a possible review of family law. This is welcome and 
NIASW supports a full review to ensure the system is fit for purpose. Our members are 
spending huge amounts of time interfacing with the court system and face major issues 
around the length of time family law cases are taking, with repeated use of Interim Care 
Orders. There are major issues to address relating to issues including models of alternative 
dispute resolution, expert witnesses, timetabling and the training of the judiciary, which 
need to be urgently examined to ensure our system is fit for purpose.

Another area to be explored within the court service is family contact. Our members tell us 
that they may have to spend two-three hours daily on transporting children to contact 
meetings. NIASW is not questioning the situations where professional social work 
supervision of contact is required, due to the clear risks often associated with such matters, 
but in cases where contact is not supervised it is unnecessary to have a highly qualified 
social worker providing transport. This is not an efficient use of resources or skills.

Some employers employ contact workers and others use approved taxi firms but there is 
no consistency of approach and in many cases it is viewed as a legitimate task for a 
professional to carry out. NIASW would challenge this and we believe there should be an 
urgent review – this is an example of where the proposed Regional Social Work Forum 
could take a helpful lead.

Emerging studies from Dr McFadden, comment on contact arrangements thus: “Contact 
arrangements can eat into social workers time – Band 4 social work assistants could take 
on this part of the role much more cost effectively than Band 6 social workers.”

15. NIASW recommends that the Department ensure an urgent review of family 
law arrangements, with a particular focus on child contact arrangements and 
the role of qualified social workers.

16. NIASW recommends that a morning and afternoon sitting be explored with the 
Northern Ireland Court Service to facilitate better planning and use of social 
work time.
Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to respond to the findings of the Social Work Not Paper Work survey report, which clearly highlighted that social work practitioners working in children’s services in Northern Ireland are currently being prevented from spending sufficient time with children and families at risk and in need, due to the unnecessary and disproportionate demands of bureaucracy within the current system.

This paper has focused on providing practical solutions which will:

- reduce paperwork
- avoid duplication
- reduce the volume of forms required
- develop best practice regionally
- support social workers with appropriate ICT equipment
- increase direct contact with children and families

Freeing up social work time to allow for an increase in direct work with children and families will provide an opportunity for earlier intervention and the possibility of preventing families in difficulty from escalating into dangerous situations which require a safeguarding response. It would also allow social workers to remain involved with families following a period of support and intervention to ensure that changes made have been consolidated and will last. Both these outcomes have been highlighted as potential improvements in the current child protection system by the recent review of Case Management Reviews in Northern Ireland.

In-depth assessment and developing a therapeutic relationship with families does not happen overnight. It takes time, patience and the development of trust to truly engage with families who are experiencing difficulties. Early intervention is more likely to result in service users who want to engage with the service and support provided. When a situation reaches crisis point or the service user is a reluctant engager, an additional barrier is created which has to be overcome. Additional time would enable social workers to plan and deliver evidence-based interventions with families and would also allow time for reflection and analyses of the effect of the intervention on safety levels, family dynamics, parenting capacity, carer stress or communication.

NIASW’s vision for the future is that social workers will continue to deliver high quality services but that the balance of their work will have shifted substantially from that of form-fillers and information gatherers to that of empowered practitioners whose skill and talent in working with people will be given the recognition it merits. Not everyone can communicate with children, families and those in need, or in a time of crisis or despair. But social workers can.

It is the wish of social workers and of those who receive our services that they are freed up to do more. They want to do more to help prevent family breakdown – to be able to work with a family, the parents, children, schools and significant others – and to offer support and guidance to prevent a crisis. Presently, however, social workers do not have the time to undertake this crucial preventative role.

If the recommendations in this report were implemented, social workers would be far better placed to take on this complex, time consuming but vital work. For instance, they could become engaged in therapeutic work with children who have been traumatised by abuse and neglect. At present, the majority of social workers across Northern Ireland do not get to do this work; it is seen as the preserve of a small number of specialist teams. Yet why should this be the case?

If, as a last resort, a child is placed away from its birth family, social workers want to be able to spend time with that child helping them to adjust. More than any other professional, social workers can help with the transition from the known, their family, to the unknown,
their foster family, and make this a less traumatic event for that child. They should be able to see a child regularly to spend time talking with them and help them understand the complex events unfolding around them. Instead, they are so stretched and overburdened by paperwork and bureaucracy that this, not the child, becomes the focus of their time and effort. We strongly believe this should change.

Social work could and should be about positive transformation. All too often, dysfunction, poor parenting and abuse span through generations and without therapeutic intervention the cycle is rarely broken. This has a knock-on effect on society as a whole. Social work could take on this challenge if given the space and time to do so.

A significant reduction of bureaucracy associated with the childcare social work role would also offer the opportunity to explore new ways of working which may not have been possible before. More than one social worker could be allocated to complex cases, allowing for a different perspective or allocation of roles within the intervention.

This document outlines a swathe of measures to help us reach this end but across the profession individual practitioners and teams will have many more. The proposed National Social Work Forum could take a lead on constantly ensuring the best ideas are being advanced in the best interests of service users.

We are aware of the deeply challenging financial climate within which public services are currently being delivered and of the demands placed on the Assembly. As such, any request for additional investment is not made lightly. However, the stark reality is that children's services in Northern Ireland are already significantly underfunded compared with those in England. According to the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People in 2011, services in Northern Ireland receive 30% less funding than those in England.

The investment we ask for is to help improve the services that some of the most vulnerable, in need and at risk children in our community require. We all have a role to play in protecting the vulnerable and in improving our society. By improving the working lives of social workers and ensuring that they are freed up to do the job that they are trained for, ministers and policymakers will do their part.

NIASW is fully committed to working with the DHSSPS and all relevant stakeholders to see the changes needed be put into place. We hope to be invited to take part in Ten Year Strategy implementation groups, as well as becoming active participants in leading on the change agenda and in bringing our members and the social work community along with us.

None of this will happen, however, if bureaucracy remains at its current levels. It is imperative that swift action be taken to tackle this clearly unacceptable and unsustainable situation.

The recommendations contained in this paper have been developed by social workers with expertise in all aspects of children's services, from frontline practitioners to managers of all levels. This paper may be challenging and complex but it is the voice of the social work profession and they have been clear, speaking with real authority, that these are the changes which will impact positively on their day-to-day practice and let them get back to social work.
## Glossary of Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BASW</td>
<td>British Association of Social Workers</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAMHS</td>
<td>Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services</td>
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<td>CJSW</td>
<td>Criminal Justice Secure eMail System</td>
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<td>CMR</td>
<td>Case Management Reviews</td>
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<td>EI &amp;2 forms</td>
<td>Essential Information 1&amp;2 forms</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFSW</td>
<td>International Federation of Social Workers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kinship Care</td>
<td>A child is cared for full-time by a member of the child’s extended family or a friend</td>
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<td>LAC</td>
<td>Looked After Children</td>
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<td>MARAC</td>
<td>Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences</td>
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<td>NIASW</td>
<td>Northern Ireland Association of Social Workers</td>
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<td>NQSW</td>
<td>Newly Qualified Social Workers</td>
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<td>NSPCC</td>
<td>National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children</td>
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<td>SOSCare</td>
<td>Social Services computer system</td>
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<td>SSW</td>
<td>Senior Social Worker</td>
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<td>UNOCINI</td>
<td>Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland</td>
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<td>OC2</td>
<td>Statistical report required for all looked after children</td>
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