

Northern Ireland

**Social**

**Care**

**Council**



# Strategic Plan

Supporting safety, quality, and improvement in  
social work and social care

2023 - 2027

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# Foreword from the Chair



*A thriving, capable and compassionate social work and social care workforce that makes a unique contribution to the care and protection of people in need.*

Social Work and Social Care matters – it matters to the thousands of children and adults who receive care and support every day. As we continue to navigate our way through the impact of Covid19 and the increasing financial pressures faced by society, this care and support is even more vital. The challenge, however, is how to deliver safe, quality care in a system that is under strain. Financial and workforce pressures are prevalent across the Health and Social Care (HSC) System and impact on the delivery of social work and social care services. Strategies to support social work and social care

workforce recruitment and retention are vital to secure the delivery of safe, quality care and protect the health and wellbeing of our registrants.

The Social Care Council must be responsive to these challenging and changing circumstances. Our focus is on the safety, quality and improvement of social work and social care services through a well-trained and supported workforce. Our Strategic Plan for 2023-2027 sets out our ambitions and priorities for the next four years. We are ambitious for the Social Care Council and for our registrants and through our work we will seek to support the HSC Improvement and Transformation Programme positioning social work and social care as key enablers in transforming our health and social care services.

We have worked in collaboration with the Department of Health (DoH) to established a new 'Social Care Collaborative Forum' whose purpose is to deliver reform, address service pressures, promote co-ordinated activity and collaboration, and provide strategic oversight, direction and governance.

Our Strategic Plan was developed at a significant period in the history of the Social Care Council. In addition to reaching its 21st birthday milestone

in October 2022, the organisation participated in a review of our services by the DoH. This review confirmed our role and function as the regulator for social work and social care in Northern Ireland and set some progressive recommendations supporting our ambitions, which we will deliver through this Strategic Plan.

Partnership is at the heart of our work. We will deliver our strategic priorities through the invaluable and enduring partnership arrangements we have in place, working with our registrants, people who use services and carers, providers of social work and social care services, education and training providers, and with Government, all of whom have contributed to the progress

we have made to date. Our ambition is to be a regulator of excellence, one we and our registrants can be proud of.

We have designed this Strategy to be flexible and relevant, and it will shape our work for the next four years as we seek to make a difference for our registrants and the people who use social work and social care services. I would like to thank everyone who took the time to give their views and helped to shape this Strategic Plan.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Martin', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

**Paul Martin**  
Chair, Northern Ireland Social Care Council

# About this Strategic Plan

As the regulator for social workers and social care workers, everything we do is focused on care. We regulate over 43,000 people working in social work and social care and it is our belief that through investing in our registrants, our people, and the systems we use to support our work, we can continue to make a difference. In this Strategic Plan we set out our vision and priorities for the next four years and outline the steps we will take to achieve our priorities and evaluate our progress.

This Strategic Plan has been developed during a period of intense pressure and uncertainty for the social work and social care workforce and for people who use services. A cost of living crisis and an economic recession, difficulties in the recruitment and retention of social workers and social care workers, unprecedented pressure on the Health Service leading to pressure on the social care system, are all factors influencing safe and effective delivery of social work and social care services. Complex social and economic change leads to new kinds of social need and creates demand for skilled social work and social care interventions. The four strategic priorities we have set aim to support our registrants to meet these challenges and provide safe, effective, quality care:

- Delivering effective workforce regulation
- Developing the capability of the workforce
- Leading with influence
- Innovating and improving

The work we do is underpinned by collaboration and partnership. We will deliver these priorities through working with our established Partnerships:

- People who use services and carers - *Participation Partnership*
- Registrants - *Registrants Forum*
- Social care providers - *Leaders in Social Care Partnership*
- Social work employers and education institutions – *Professional in Practice Partnership*

We aim to develop our technology to support our business and to enhance our use of the data and intelligence we hold. We will use this intelligence to inform social work and social care workforce leaders and government, so that the strategies for future development and growth of the social work and social care workforce are based on evidence, experience and need.

The priorities in this Strategic Plan are underpinned by our Purpose, Vision, Values and Ambitions.

# Our Purpose

To protect the public and safeguard service users through the regulation and development of the social work and social care workforce.



# Our Vision

To have a thriving, capable and compassionate social work and social care workforce providing the highest quality of care, protection and support to people in need.

We will realise our vision by taking forward four priorities:

**Regulate**



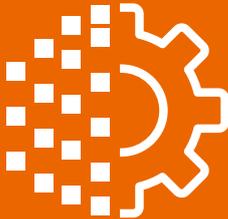
Deliver effective regulation

**Support**



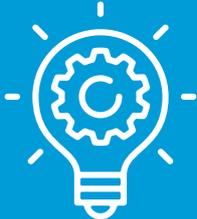
Develop the capability of the workforce

**Influence**



Lead with influence

**Innovate**



Innovate and improve

# Our Values

**We promote  
respect**

**We work with  
integrity**

**We believe in  
partnership**

**We strive for  
excellence**

# Our Ambitions

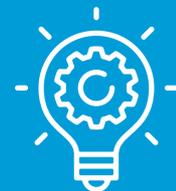
The strategic themes and actions described in this Strategic Plan are designed to deliver a number of outcomes (the difference we want to make and the difference we want to see). All of this activity, collectively supports our **Ambitions**.

Our ambitions are long term strategic goals that extend beyond the life cycle of this Strategic Plan - and pave the way for this plan and the future for both the Social Care Council and the social work and social care work workforce.

Enable social care transformation – supporting the development of a sustainable social work and social care workforce capable of contributing to transformation and improvement. (Priorities 1,2,3,4)



Develop a Centre of Excellence: for social work and social care education, learning, leadership and research to support evidence based and high-quality practice. (Priorities 2 and 3)



Generate workforce data and intelligence - providing and connecting workforce information which can inform and influence policy, strategy and improvements. (Priorities 3 and 4)



Regulate through agile and innovative practices: investing in our people and technology to ensure regulatory effectiveness. (Priority 4)

# Strategic Priorities and Actions for 2023-2027



# Deliver effective regulation



## Deliver effective regulation

Through our regulatory activity we protect anyone who uses social work and social care services by supporting our registrants to be person-centred, values driven, competent, confident and compassionate. All social workers and social care workers must comply with our Standards of Conduct and Practice.

We are a fair, robust and enabling regulator with responsibility for the regulation and development of the social work and social care workforce, and the regulation of social work education and training. Effective regulation provides assurance for those in receipt of social work and social care services and is empowering both to the public and practitioners. It supports high standards in the care provided, in education, learning and development, and inspires a sense of shared achievement of these standards.

We will build on existing work to embed a Fitness to Practise model of workforce regulation that focuses on improving performance. We are committed to advancing our regulatory approach through ongoing dialogue and collaboration with our registrants, employers, people who use services and carers, and other regulators. This will ensure we continue to meet the needs of a modern workforce, following best regulatory practice informed by national and international research.

We will continue to develop our registration system and streamline our processes to ensure we support registrants and employers in maintaining registration.

## Strategic actions - to deliver effective regulation

**Through the systems and processes set out in our regulatory frameworks, we will:**

- 1.1 Develop our model of regulation to ensure it focuses on improving standards and supporting registrants to be the best they can be.
- 1.2 Ensure our standards of conduct and practice are aligned with the changing context of social work and social care.
- 1.3 Enable social workers and social care workers, through education and training, to put standards at the heart of their practice.
- 1.4 Ensure employers understand their responsibilities in relation to the Standards for Employers of Social Workers and Social Care Workers.
- 1.5 Ensure the experience of people who use services and carers informs the Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Workers and Social Care Workers.

## The difference we want to see

- Social work and social care registrants use the Standards of Conduct and Practice to support their practice.
- Regulation enables people who use services and carers to have confidence in the social work and social care workforce by ensuring that registrants work to their standards and deliver high quality care.
- Social workers and social care workers are supported by their employers through the Standards for Employers of Social Workers and Social Care Workers.

# Develop the capability of the workforce



W O R K F O R C E



## Develop the capability of the workforce

Social work and social care services are delivered within diverse communities and multi professional environments. In order to improve outcomes for people who use services and their families, carers and communities, we will help develop a confident and competent social work and social care workforce that delivers safe, effective and high-quality care.

Through a commitment to partnership and co-production, supported by a culture of continuous learning and development, we will ensure the right qualifications and learning and development opportunities are available and accessible to the workforce. We will use our knowledge of the future skills needs of the workforce and how they learn, to shape and define their qualifications, learning and professional development for the future.

### Strategic actions - to deliver workforce capability

**Building on the strong foundations of social work and social care education, training and development, we will:**

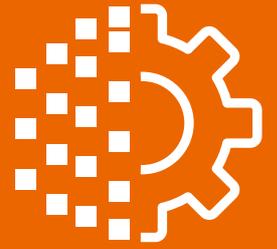
- 2.1 Establish a qualifications and continuous learning framework which can support a career in social care that strengthens the capability of the social care workforce.
- 2.2 Ensure the delivery of high-quality qualifying and post-qualifying social work education and training that is accessible, flexible and equips social workers to meet the needs of the people they work with in an increasingly diverse society.

- 2.3 Embed the Professional in Practice Framework for social workers as the benchmark for safety, quality, improvement and continued fitness for practice.
- 2.4 Support the development of social work leadership capability using the DoH Leadership Framework.
- 2.5 Promote uptake and engagement in continuous learning through the development of a Digital Learning Strategy.

### The difference we want to see

- Career choices for the social care workforce are supported by continuous learning and development.
- There is increased engagement in the Professional in Practice Framework and Digital Learning Resources to support learning and development.
- Leadership capability is embedded in qualifying and post-qualifying social work education and training.
- The social work and social care workforce are supported to work effectively with people of various cultural backgrounds and understand how their own cultural beliefs may differ from other cultures.

Lead with influence



Leadership

## Lead with influence

As the workforce regulator, we have a key role to play in empowering social workers and social care workers to effectively contribute to the delivery of high-quality services. In order to support and develop the workforce, we need to understand the environment in which they work. There is a need to build our evidence base, using research, data and intelligence, to inform the provision of sufficient numbers of the right people, with the right knowledge, skills and values, are in the workforce. Our focus will be on supporting them in a way that reflects the value of their work and the contribution they make to the wider health and social care system. This is critical to the improvement and transformation of health and social care services.

Extending our system leadership role, we will work with our partnerships and engage more broadly across sectors and Government. This will include providing advice to Government to inform their consideration of social work and social care, in relation to policy and practice, to ensure that social work and social care is connected into policy and practice development, future skills and recruitment strategies, and workforce planning. We will ensure the value and contribution of social work and social care is understood and recognised in the wider HSC programme of improvement and transformation and in the Programme for Government.

## Strategic actions – to lead with influence

**Using our unique insight into the social work and social care workforce as a regulator, we will:**

- 3.1 Develop our capacity and capability for data analysis and insight to unlock intelligence about the workforce, and the context of social work and social care practice.
- 3.2 Work with our partnerships and networks to promote a collaborative working environment to enable transformation and improvement.
- 3.3 Work collaboratively with Health and Social Care Workforce regulators and the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA), using our data and insights to inform, improve and enhance service user safety and experience of social work and social care workforce and services.
- 3.4 Influence the recognition of the value and contribution the social work and social care workforce make to society.
- 3.5 Promote careers in social work and social care that reflects the diversity of our communities.

## The difference we want to see

- Workforce data and intelligence improves understanding of the role and value of social work and social care and informs the development of policy and strategy.
- The contribution of social work and social care is recognised and valued by those who engage in the services they provide.
- There is greater diversity in the social work and social care workforce.
- A more stable and sustainable workforce exists across both social work and social care.

# Innovate and improve



## Innovate and improve

We are an innovative regulator, with a culture that supports inclusion, collaboration and creativity. We will develop our digital systems to deliver efficient and effective workforce regulation, and will support our registrants to engage with digital innovation.

We are open to listening to others to inform our understanding of the reality of workforce pressures and the changing practice context. As we embrace the use of technology we are progressing digital solutions to support our registrants, communicate with our stakeholders, and develop learning resources for social workers and social care workers. Our aim is to provide a better and more seamless service for our registrants, and to provide real time intelligence and information about the state of social work and social care in Northern Ireland.

To ensure this is possible we will also invest in developing the digital skills of our staff to enable them to provide a high-quality service to our registrants.

## Strategic actions – to innovate and improve

4.1 Work in partnership with our registrants and employers to co-produce a future proofed regulation and registration system.

4.2 Embed a culture and model of continuous improvement to ensure the efficient delivery of Social Care Council services.

4.3 Improve our digital registration, regulation and learning and development systems to ensure a seamless and efficient service for registrants and all of our stakeholders.

4.4 Engage with the DoH Digital Strategy to inform our digital innovation and system improvement.

## The difference we want to see

- Stakeholders' experience of engaging with us is positive and our services fulfil their needs.
- Registrants are able to engage effectively and easily with our systems and processes.
- The Social Care Council maximises the use of digital innovation to deliver high quality services.

# Delivering our Strategy for 2023-2027

Achievement of the priorities set out in this Strategic Plan will be underpinned by investment in four key areas across the organisation.

## Our people

**A great place to work:** we will invest in the capacity and capability of our people, empowering creativity, continuous learning, and improvement in everything we do. The Social Care Council is an Investors in People Gold Standard employer. The organisation also holds the Gold IIP Health and Wellbeing Award. We will continue to develop our people to ensure they can achieve their full potential in a safe and supportive environment.

## Communication and engagement

**Building connections with our stakeholders:** we will maximise our ability to inform, connect, engage, support, collaborate and empower registrants, people who use services, carers, and stakeholders. The Social Care Council values the contribution of stakeholders and will continue to support and engage all those with an interest in our work to ensure their views are reflected in what we do.

## Evaluation

### **Measuring the difference we make:**

we will develop an effective model of evaluation that will measure our progress against our outcomes, demonstrate the impact of our work and use this to inform our annual business and operational plans. The Social Care Council reviews progress against workplans and business objectives on a monthly and quarterly basis, with analysis prepared for Senior Management and the Board throughout the year. This will include follow up activity with stakeholders to evaluate the impact of our work and provide evidence of successful outcomes.

## Resources

**Sustainable funding:** we will work with the Department of Health to ensure we have adequate resource for the sustainable growth necessary to realise the outcomes of this Strategic Plan for 2023-2027.

# Checking our Progress

Throughout the next four years, we will evaluate the work that we undertake, gathering evidence and analysing it in a structured way to establish the difference we have made. We are committed to involving our stakeholders in our evaluation, asking for their views and experiences on our effectiveness in delivering on our objectives.

Opinion will be gathered routinely throughout the year. Regular performance reports will be provided to the Social Care Council Board and management teams. Annual reports will be available on the Social Care Council website: [nisc.info](http://nisc.info).

## Annual planning:

- Set baselines and objectives
- Map out success indicators and milestones
- Develop annual evaluation plan

## In-year activity:

- Ongoing monitoring and sense-checking
- Stakeholder engagement
- Testing data collection systems

## Evaluation of outcomes:

How much have we done?  
How well have we done it?  
Have we made a difference?

## Looking forward:

- Business and team planning for the year
  - Apply learning from evaluation
- Involve stakeholders to test plans

## Year end evaluation:

- Measure success against achievement of annual business plan objectives
- Assess progress towards four-year strategic objectives

# Glossary of terms and definitions used in this plan

Board	The Social Care Council Board is made up of a number of people and a Chair who are appointed by the Minister for Health to make sure that the organisation is managing its work properly and carrying out the functions they were set up to do.
DoH	Department of Health – the government body responsible for Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland.
HSC	Health and Social Care – the people, systems and facilities that provide medical and personal care and support.
ICT	Information and Communications Technology – computers, networks, websites and Apps we use.
IiP	Investors in People – an award for good standards in staff and organisation management and development.
PiP	Professional in Practice – a Continuous Professional Development framework for social workers’ learning and development.
PRTL	Post Registration Training and Learning – a minimum of 90 hours of learning that all registrants must complete during the cycle of registration.
Register	The Social Care Council’s register is an electronic list of social workers and social care workers working in Northern Ireland (and also students studying for the Degree in Social Work in Northern Ireland). By law, social workers, social care workers and social work students must be registered. All those on the register are checked to make sure they are suitable to work safely in social work and social care. They must agree to meet standards for their behaviour, their work and their learning. They have to renew their registration regularly to confirm they are still suitable to remain on the Register.
Registrant	A person approved for registration on the Social Care Council’s Register – social workers, social care workers and social work students.
RQIA	Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority – inspects Health and Social Care organisations to ensure standards are being met.
Social Care Worker	Individuals who provide support and/or personal care for people in their own homes, day care, residential care, or nursing home settings.
Social Worker	Individuals with a recognised social work qualification who improve and safeguard the social wellbeing of individuals, families and communities.
Stakeholders	People who are involved with our work or who are affected by what we do.

# Glossary of terms and definitions used in this plan

HSC Improvement and Transformation Programme	The Department of Health's 10 year' strategy (2016 – 2026) to transform health and wellbeing services in Northern Ireland.
Programme for Government	The Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government sets out the strategic vision to improve the wellbeing of the people of Northern Ireland.
DoH Digital Strategy	The Department of Health's Digital Strategy for 2022 – 2030 explains how digital transformation will improve health and care outcomes, alongside the standardisation of health and social care services.

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