



# **The regulation and development of education and training and the social work workforce**

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April 2022 - March 2023

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# Introduction

The Degree in Social Work (the Degree) is an important foundation for a career in a profession that can make a positive and lasting difference to people’s lives. The *Northern Ireland Framework for the Degree in Social Work*<sup>1</sup> (the Framework) makes it clear that those completing the Degree need to demonstrate their competence as fully rounded professionals, based on sound understanding of human growth and development, the systems in which social workers practice and evidence-based methods of intervention.

People who access social work services have a right to expect social workers to be skilled, knowledgeable and ethical in their practice. Their role in shaping and contributing to social work education was established in the *Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work*<sup>2</sup> and in the Framework specification which includes statements of expectation from those who access services and carers.

This thread of service user and carer involvement runs through the continuum of qualification and post qualification social work education and training in Northern Ireland, and predates similar approaches in other health and care professional training programmes.

The recently published *NI Review of Children’s Social Care Services*<sup>3</sup> acknowledged the value and richness of post qualifying development opportunities within the Professional in Practice Framework (the PiP Framework) and recommended further development linked to specialist areas and career development.

The Northern Ireland Social Care Council (the Social Care Council) sets and monitors standards for the education and training of social work students as well as qualified social workers for the whole of their career.

This report provides an overview of the Social Care Council’s regulatory activity in relation to social work education and training, and the regulation of the social work workforce in 2022/23.

## The context of our work

The social work and social care workforce are the largest workforce within the health and social care sector with 45,959 registrants on the Social Care Council’s Public Facing Register (the Register) in November 2023.

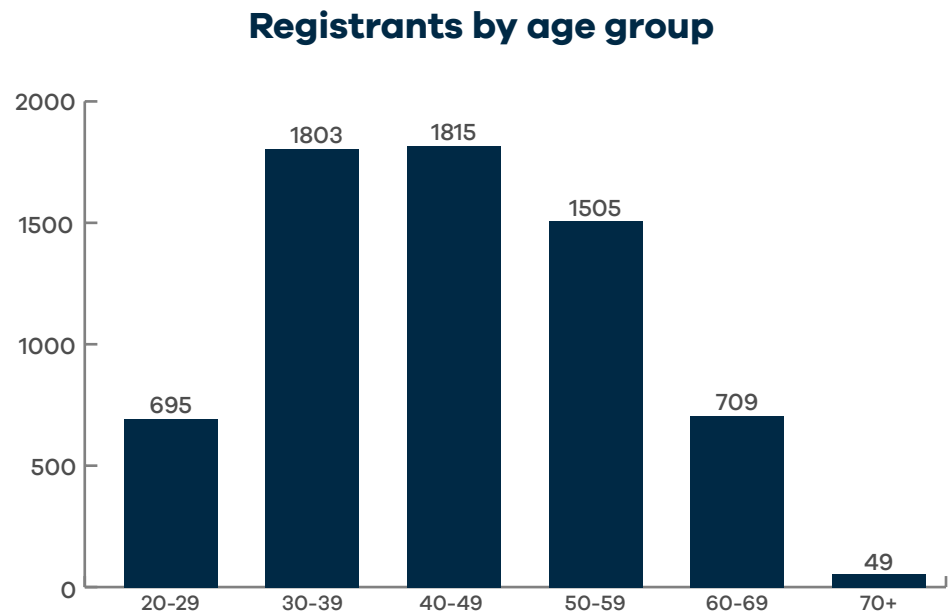
## The workforce

Figure 1. Social Care Council Register

Social care worker	<b>38,663</b> (2,371 more than the same period last year)
Social worker	<b>6583</b> (57 more than the same period last year)
Student social worker	<b>737</b> (+ 27 in process = 761)

1 DHSSP/NISCC (2015), Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work.  
2 Northern Ireland Social Care Council (2012), Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work, See: [Legislation, Regulations and Rules - NISCC](#).  
3 DoH (2023), The Northern Ireland Review of Children’s Social Care Services. See: [The NI Review of Children’s Social Care Services.pdf \(cscsreviewni.net\)](#).

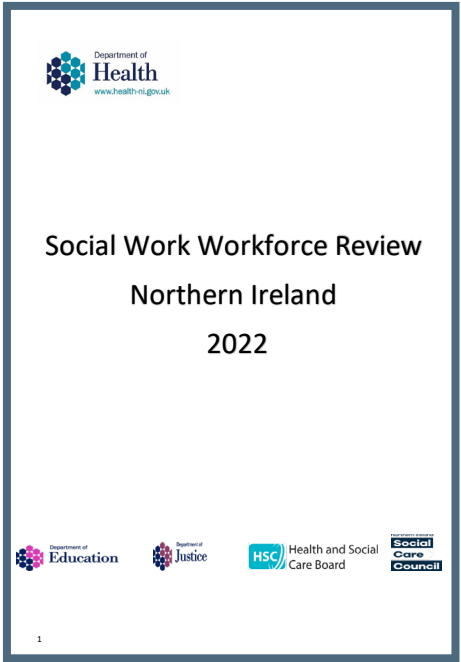
**Figure 2. Social work registrants by age**



Social Care Council data confirms that 34% of the registered social work workforce is over the age of 50, and 11.5% are over the age of 60. This reinforces the need to have sufficient numbers of new entrants on an annual basis to the profession. The combination of an aging workforce along with new and developing roles for social workers, and increased demand for services, has contributed to increased pressures being experienced in the workforce.

The *NI Review of Children’s Social Care* (the Review) exposed particular pressures in the children’s social care workforce. The Review reported increases in the number of children in need (8%), children on the child protection register (10%) and

in care (21%) between 2017 and 2022. Vacancy rates between 26% and 40% across a range of children’s services were highlighted. The Review formally reported in June 2023 and made 53 recommendations, some of which have been reframed as guiding principles in the *Department of Health (DoH) consultation on the Review*.<sup>4</sup>



A number of the recommendations in the Review were related to education and training. These included recommendations to re-establish a trainee social worker scheme and enhance post qualifying development programmes linked to specialist areas of practice and career progression within statutory children’s social care. Consultation on the Review closed on 1 December 2023.

<sup>4</sup> DoH (2023), Consultation on Recommendations of Independent Review of Children’s Social Care Services in Northern Ireland.  
See: [Consultation on Recommendations of Independent Review of Children’s Social Care Services in Northern Ireland | Department of Health \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/consultation-on-recommendations-of-independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-services-in-northern-ireland).

However, the social work recruitment and retention issues being experienced in NI are not unique to children's services and have been reported across all programmes of care and sectors including justice, voluntary and community sectors.

The Social Work Workforce Implementation Board was established to implement the actions arising from the Social Work Workforce Review. The board has indicated that it will take cognisance of the Review's recommendations and the implementation of the 53 actions set out in the *Workforce Review Report*.<sup>5</sup> The Implementation Board's October 2023 newsletter<sup>6</sup> reported progress on:

- Safer staffing.
- Action plan to cease the use of recruitment agencies.
- Entry pathways into the profession.
- Social work data and intelligence.

Social Care Council executive staff are joint leads on two of the workstreams noted above.

## Strategic context

Social work services have witnessed considerable change and reform over the last decade. A number of the strategic drivers that predated the Covid-19 pandemic are progressing and include:

- *Health and Wellbeing 2026 – Delivering Together*,<sup>7</sup> and
- *Power to the People: Proposals to Reboot Adult Care and support in Northern Ireland*.<sup>8</sup>

The reform of social care and other strategic developments identified in the Social Work Workforce Review will continue to create demand for a dynamic, highly skilled and evidence informed workforce with a strong sense of professional identity.

An overarching strategic architecture has been created by DoH to ensure that both adult and children's social care reform is incorporated in the governance and DoH oversight structures. This has included the establishment of two strategic reform boards:

- Social Care Collaborative Forum, and
- Children's Social Care Services Strategic Reform Board.

Social Care Council executive staff co-chair and/or are joint leads on a number of workstreams linked to the strategic groups noted above.

The Social Care Council has lead responsibility for the implementation of the second *Social Work and Social Care Research and Evidence Strategy (2020 - 2025)*.<sup>9</sup> This strategy strives to support a culture that recognises the value and contribution of research evidence in social work. This is reinforced by the *Learning and Improvement Strategy* (DoH 2019).<sup>10</sup>

5 DoH (2022), Social Work Workforce Review Northern Ireland. See: [doh-social-work-review-ni-2022.pdf \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#).

6 DoH (2023) Social Work Workforce Review Implementation Board; October 2023 Newsletter See: [Microsoft Word - SWWIB Newsletter October 2023 \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

7 DoH (2016) Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together.

8 DoH (2017) Power to the People: Proposals to Reboot Adult Care and Support in NI. See: [power-to-people-full-report.PDF \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#).

9 HSCB (2020) Social Work and social care Research and evidence Strategy 2020-2025.

10 DoH (2019) A Learning and Improvement Strategy for social workers and social care workers.

# Social Work Leadership Framework

*April 2022*



*Improving and Safeguarding  
Social Wellbeing in  
Northern Ireland*

The *Social Work Leadership Framework*<sup>11</sup> (the Leadership Framework) was launched in April 2022. In September 2022, the DoH Chief Social Work Officer asked the Social Care Council to take forward the recommendations from the Leadership Framework, to consider how they might be applied in practice and to strengthen social work leadership. The Social Care Council is currently working with social work leaders across systems to develop an implementation plan to support this work.

The Leadership Framework recognises that social work as a profession operates beyond the health and social care system and seeks to support professional leadership in probation, youth justice, education authority and in the voluntary and community sectors. As in health and social care, social work in these sectors is also transforming to respond to the changing demographic, social, political and economic context in which they operate.

This dynamic post pandemic environment has framed the work of the Social Care Council during 2022/23, as it has sought to regulate and support the social work workforce to deliver safe and effective services. This report outlines the Social Care Council's regulatory practice to improve standards in partnership with registrants, their employers, education providers and those who access social work services.

<sup>11</sup> DoH (2022) Social Work Leadership Framework. See: [Social-Work-Leadership-Framework-final-version-15-April-22.pdf \(niscc.info\)](#).



# Supporting and developing the social work workforce

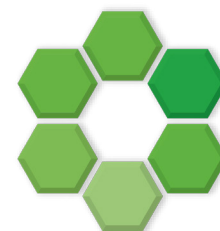
## The Degree in Social Work

We have approved Queen's University Belfast (QUB), Ulster University and the Open University (OU) alongside a wide range of Designated Practice Learning Providers (DPLPs) from all sectors to deliver education and training for social work students. Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC) and South West College (SWC) deliver years one and two of the three year Degree in Social Work before those students transfer to Ulster University for their final year.

**Table 1:** Approved Social Work Degree Programmes

Queen's University Belfast	Three Year Undergraduate (UGR) Two Year Relevant graduate (RGR)
Ulster University  (FE Collaborative – *45 places available to complete years 1 and 2 at Belfast Met or South West College).	*Three Year Undergraduate (UGR) Two Year Relevant graduate (RGR)
Open University (2020)	Undergraduate (UGR) Designated as flexible - DoH funded students required to complete in three years.

## Regional partnership arrangement for the Degree in Social Work



The Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership

Under the Rules for the Degree, we have approved the Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP) to coordinate regional arrangements for the delivery of the Degree and maintain regional consistency, thus ensuring that our partnership approach to learning and development is embedded from the first point of entry to the profession.

In regulating training for entry into the social work profession, the Social Care Council ensure that quality standards for the development of knowledge skills and values sit at the heart of social work practice. The Social Care Council are assured that quality standards are maintained through periodic review and annual monitoring of:

- Approved Degree Programme Providers (HFEIs).
- Designated Practice Learning Provides (DPLPs).
- Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP).

Most applications to the Degree are made through the UCAS system. Applicants need to meet academic standards set by the Universities and pass a regionally agreed interview designed to test their suitability to study social work. During the pandemic the NIDSWP moved to online interview processes and are currently reviewing methods of assessing suitability to study social work. In the interim an online platform, 'Modern Hire' is being used to interview applicants. Partners have worked together to develop guidance about the assessment of suitability to study social work and clarity about the respective roles of the Higher Education Futures institute (HEFI) and the Social Care Council.

When the Degree was introduced in 2004 there were 300 funded places available. This reduced to 260 in response to austerity measures in 2011/12, before increasing again in 2020 with the approval of the OU route. There are currently 285 funded training places on the Degree in Social Work (Table 2). At the same time, the rate of applications increased between 2019 and 2021 applications have decreased incrementally.

In 2023, there was a further reduction in applicants to QUB, UU, SWC and BMC of approximately 10% overall from 2022, with some variation across programmes and age range. While the reason for this is not clear, university admission staff indicate that other health and social care-related professional training programmes have also seen a reduction in applications.

Applicants to social work courses tend to be more mature than other undergraduate programmes and are more likely to have a range of commitments that may impede access to full time study. A regional, 'Promotion of Social Work' group coordinated by the Social Care Council has provided an opportunity for the HEFI and employers to work collectively to promote the degree and social work as a career.

The Social Work Workforce Implementation Board has initiated a workstream to review pathways into social work. An associated workplan has been agreed to focus on:

- Configuration of UGR/RGR funded places.
- Operationalisation of the Programme.
- Feasibility of a Masters level qualifying programme.
- Return to Social Work programme.



**#Yes2SocialWork campaign launches to attract the next generation of social workers**





**Table 2: DoH-Funded social work training places**

Institution	Route	2004/ 09	20120	2020/ 21	2021/ 22	2022/ 23
QUB	UGR	80	70	70	70	70
	RGR	50	42	42	42	42
UU	UGR Magee	55	63	63	63	63
	RGR Magee	40	40	40	40	40
	BMC	30	30	30	30	30
	NWRC	15	-	-	-	
	SWC	15	15		15	15
	SERC	15	-	-	-	
*OU N.Ireland	-	-	-	15	25**	25**
<b>Total</b>		<b>300</b>	<b>260</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>285</b>	<b>285**</b>

\*Open University approved by the NI Social Care Council in 2020.

\*\* Does not include additional 14 employer funded places which brings total to 299.

Open University (OU) applications are made through an employer nomination followed by shortlisting and interview. Employers continue to see a keen interest in the OU social work degree and have funded places in addition to those funded by DoH. In February 2023, DoH provided funding for an additional intake of ten social work students. Therefore, 299 students enrolled for the 2022 intake. The additional 14 OU places were funded directly by employers.

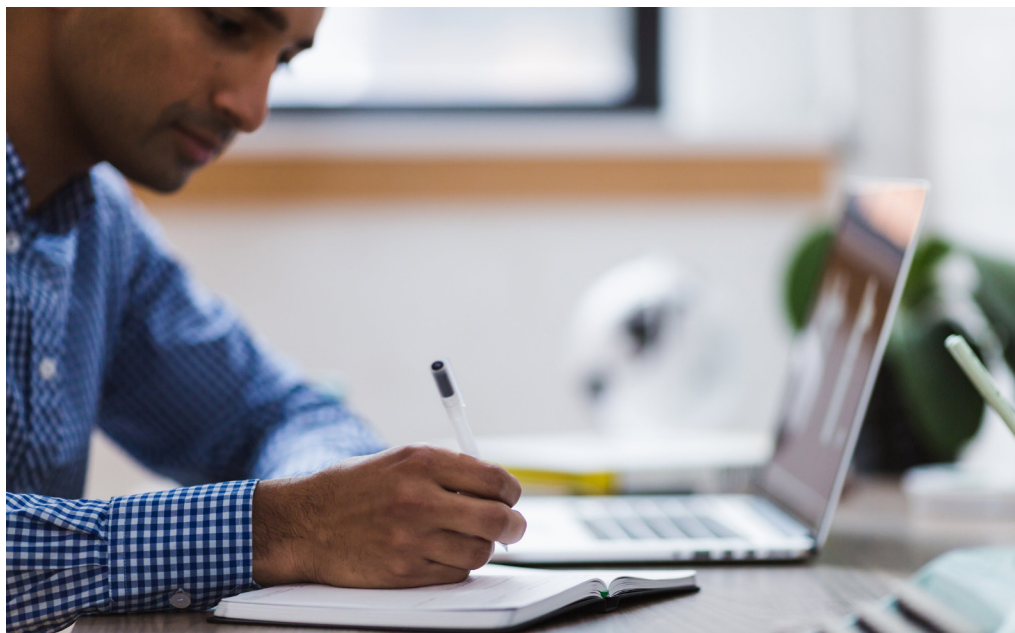
13% of new entrants to the Degree were male, a slight increase from the previous year. While this is a welcome increase it demonstrates an ongoing challenge of attracting suitable male applicants. All but one of the students starting the degree lived in Northern Ireland. It is important that social work education is attractive and welcoming to all irrespective of gender, race, ethnicity, and other Section 75 categories so that the profession is reflective of an increasingly culturally diverse society.

Despite the reduction in applicants for the 2023 entry to conventional university programmes, interest in social work remains healthy with approximately five applicants per place. The NIDSWP's analysis of trends in applications will help to target promotion of a career in social work over the next year.

## Degree delivery

As the pandemic subsided during 2021/2022, and many services returned to in person provision, approved providers resumed in person teaching for the most part, while keeping the capacity to facilitate learning online when required. The Social Care Council has worked closely with the NIDSWP, approved programme providers and employer practice learning leads, to ensure standards were maintained during this period of readjustment.

As part of annual monitoring course providers are required to provide information to the Social Care Council to evidence their compliance with *Standards for Approval of the Degree in Social Work* along with an improvement plan. Monitoring information received in 2022/2023 relates to degree delivery in the academic year 2021/2022. Analysis of evidence received provides assurance that approved programmes continue to meet the required standard despite the challenges of delivering a professional training programme within the Covid-19 restrictions, which applied at the time.



## Practice learning opportunities



The allocation of Practice Learning Opportunities (PLOs) is managed by the NIDSWP, supported by course providers and social work employers. It is a complex process that takes account of student learning needs, individual circumstances and PLO availability. The increase in funded places, returning students that had previously deferred and workforce pressures contribute to concerns about the availability of sufficient PLOs.

The NIDSWP works closely with employers to support practice learning and when necessary alert the Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG) and the DoH, as the commissioners of practice learning, to emerging issues. The allocation process was reviewed by NIDSWP in 2021 and an improvement plan is currently being implemented. An IT solution to allocating PLOs is also currently being explored by NIDSWP supported by the Office of Social Services, DoH.

Practice Learning Opportunities (PLOs) as part of the student experience, support the Social Care Councils aim to train social workers who are safe, competent and effective practitioners. Students complete two periods of assessed practice at different stages of their training (85 days + 100 days = 185 days). Most employers were able to resume offering PLOs following the pandemic.

The Social Care Council assess employers that wish to offer PLOs against the Social Care Council, *Standards for Practice Learning*<sup>12</sup> for the Degree and complete an annual quality assurance process once approved. 21 Designated Practice Learning Providers (DPLPs) deliver more than 500 PLOs annually across a range of sectors and service user groups. Annual monitoring visits were carried out in 2022 for the first time since 2018. PLO site visits had been paused due to the Covid 19 Pandemic and associated public health guidance. Despite ongoing residual challenges from the Covid pandemic, 29 new sites were developed, 14 of which were in children and family settings and 17 in adult services.

Of the 48 sites not used, 23 were in adult and 25 in children and family services. Student withdrawals, travel related issues, PLOs remaining unallocated and conflicts of interest accounted for a number of the sites being unused. In light of increasing pressures on the availability of PLOs the NIDSWP and Social Care Council will continue to focus on maximising the use of available sites.

The Voluntary and Community (VCS) sector in Northern Ireland continues to provide a diverse and dynamic range of social work led services. Three Practice Learning Centres (PLCs) have been approved by the Social Care Council to deliver PLOs in the VCS. The provision of practice learning in the wider Sector is supported by Voluntary Organisation Community Learning

Service. (VOCALS). VOCALS is an important role that provides assurance of quality standards for practice learning in the sector. The VOCALS contract includes a role in supporting the coordination of VCS applications to the OU programme. A review of PLO Provision was completed in 2022/23 and the outcomes of this shall help inform how PLOs in the sector are configured moving forward.



The strategic actions arising out of the last periodic review of the degree, 2018/2019, were finalised during 2022/23. Actions about social work in a digital age and the integration of teaching on selfcare strategies for social work students were of particular relevance during the pandemic. The 2023/24 Review of the Degree has now commenced and is due to report in 2024/25.

<sup>12</sup> NISCC (2020), The Standards for Practice Learning for the Degree in Social Work.



# Professional in Practice (PiP)

Northern Ireland

**Social**

**Care**

**Council**

**Professional in Practice**

The PiP Framework is the mechanism for all qualified social workers in Northern Ireland to gain recognition for their continuous professional development. Qualified social workers, as part of their registration, need to continuously improve and develop their knowledge and skills on an ongoing basis.

The PiP Framework provides a comprehensive system to support and recognise all professional development activity. A social worker's achievement through the PiP Framework provides evidence that they have met their registration requirements in relation to Post Registration Training and Learning (PRTL).

The Professional in Practice Partnership (the PiP Partnership), as a Committee of the Social Care Council, manages the operational business and agree the strategic direction for the PiP Framework. As the awarding body for the PiP Framework, the Social Care Council give professional awards to social workers who have demonstrated competence and capability in their chosen area of practice.

The PiP Framework currently consists of four professional awards:

- The NI Consolidation Award in Social Work.
- The NI Specialist Award in Social Work.
- The NI Leadership and Strategic Award in Social Work.
- The NI Advanced Scholarship Award in Social Work.

Each award comprises of up to nine requirements, which are competence statements that a social worker must provide as evidence of proficiency in each requirement to achieve their professional award.

Social workers currently have four pathways to achieve this:


- Credit Accumulation Route (CAR).
- Approved Programme Route (APR).
- Work Based Learning Route (WBLR).
- Individual Assessment Route (IAR).

Continued engagement with employers, registrants and learning providers to improve participation and achievement within the PiP Framework is critical to embedding the PiP Framework as the benchmark for safety, quality, improvement and continued fitness for practice for social workers.

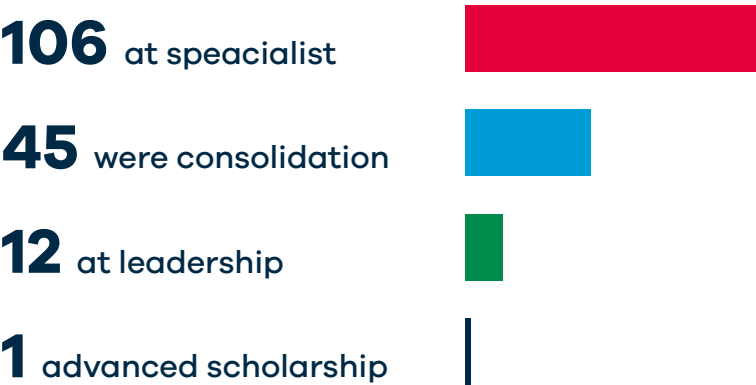
## Professional in Practice awards and achievements

Achieving a professional award in the PiP Framework is the culmination of hard work, commitment and dedication by social workers. Each year the accomplishments of social workers are recognised at the annual Professional in Practice Award ceremony.



**35%** 

Increase from the previous year and a return to pre-covid levels



We see the largest cohort achieving full Specialist Awards and this can be attributed to the majority of PiP Approved Programmes being aligned to this award **(15 out of 21)**. In addition to those completing full Awards, **949** social workers attained part-achievement, meaning they have the potential to become award holders in the near future.

The 2022 award ceremony was an online event with the theme ‘Celebrating Inclusion and Diversity’. We were entertained at the ceremony by the Belfast LGBTQ+ Singers ‘QUIRE’ and heard from one of our Internationally Qualified Social Workers and members of our Participation Partnership about the importance of inclusion and diversity and value of continuous professional development.





## Professional in Practice routes to achievement

### Approved Programme route

There are a total of **21 programmes** approved in the PiP Framework. As the awarding body for the framework, quality assurance of intake and outcome information for all social workers who participate in these programmes ensures good governance in respect of awards. Annual monitoring of individual programmes along with executive staff attendance at Joint Management Board (JMB) meetings supports development and ensure standards are maintained.

**Table 3:** PiP awarding body for Approved Programmes

	Ouputs	Outcomes
All PiP Approved programmes	1180 Social work places on modules processed and quality assured	891 Competent assessments  (289 deferrals, withdrawals or assessed as not yet competent)
Initial Professional Development Programme	437 Social work places on modules processed and quality assured	342 Competent assessments  (95 deferrals, leave of absence, withdrawals or assessed as not yet competent)

The Initial Professional Development (IPD) programme delivered at Ulster University remains the programme with the highest numbers of participating social workers. The high volume of candidates on IPD is reflective of Health and Social Care Trusts use of the programme to support their post- Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) social workers to achieve the mandatory PiP requirements.

The NI Practice Teaching Programme, Mental Health Social Work and Systemic Practice and Family Therapy programmes have all seen growth in the numbers of social workers participating. This has been driven by the need to increase the numbers of social workers able to take on the role of Practice Teacher and Approved Social Worker (ASW). The Systemic Practice course has also experienced growth which may be explained by a pause in the delivery of the Child Care Programme at QUB and recognition of the importance of having specialist learning opportunities for social workers working in family and childcare settings.

A total of 14 programmes were subject to monitoring, with nine of these requiring monitoring for two years due to a pause in the process during the pandemic. All of those monitored were assessed as continuing to meet the *Standards of Approval* and the needs of the workforce. A key theme arising from the annual monitoring process was the development and adaptation to programme delivery resulting from experiences during the pandemic. For the majority of programmes this resulted in a move to a blended learning approach, with some teaching facilitated virtually to help with time management and travel, whilst reflection and/or skills development returning to in-person delivery.

Being responsive to changes in social work practice, society and workforce need is crucial to the approval of programmes and as a result a number of programmes are reviewing their structures and content with a view to presenting proposed changes to the PiP Approval Panel in the coming years.

A new Palliative Care Social Work programme developed by QUB in partnership with employers was approved within the PiP Framework . The programme is designed to be the first international programme of its kind specifically for social workers, with five funded places reserved for social workers from Northern Ireland. The programme started in September 2023, with all the places filled by social workers from NI, supported by a diverse range of employers and across sectors.

### **Individual Assessment Route (IAR)**

The Individual Assessment Route (IAR) offers accessible and flexible arrangements for social workers to gain recognition within the PiP Framework by submitting pieces of work for assessment against specified awards. There are a range of methods available for the IAR including: assignments, direct observations, verbal presentations, Accreditation for Prior Learning (APL) and In-Service Training submissions. In this business year, a total of 52 submissions were made using the IAR and the majority of these were for requirements in the Consolidation Award (45).

There is a high success rate for candidates submitting using IAR, with over 82% being assessed as competent this year. The assessment process for the IAR is quality assured by the Social Care Council through the training and standardisation (provided by a provided by a professional adviser) of assessors nominated by their employers and by engaging an external assessor who reviews all unsuccessful submissions and a percentage of those assessed as competent. In this business year 11 new IAR assessors were trained and 31 completed standardisation training, enabling them to assess for another calendar year.

‘The standard of work I reviewed included submissions of a very high standard, (they) represent a broad spectrum of practice and display ways in which social workers contribute to society, often under-acknowledged for the complex work they carry out with many groups who are often denied their voice.’

IAR External Assessor

### **Credit Accumulation Route (CAR)**

Modern workplace and professional learning are achieved through different modes and are most effective when the learning opportunity is aligned to the learning style of the individual. The Credit Accumulation Route (CAR) was developed in 2015 as a system that allows social workers to achieve and build up credits from their application of learning to practice and use to submit for requirements within the PiP Framework.

The CAR has undergone a root and branch review over the past two years and is now at a redesign stage. The Social Care Council, along with partners are engaged in an iterative process which involves making incremental changes to the route and then evaluating the impact. In this business year social workers submitting to claim PiP Requirements have had the option to use a specially designed workbook for their submission. This has resulted in an increase in success rate from 30% to 60%. The January 2023 assessment point had seven submissions, six of which were assessed as competent or partially competent and one was referred for further work.

Levels of engagement with CAR remain lower than expected. The next stage of the review will involve remodelling the system and processes for engaging in the route. This will be done using the feedback from the review and outcomes from focus groups with social workers.

### Work-based Learning Route (WBLR)

As noted above the PiP Framework needs to develop in response to workforce needs, emerging knowledge about how professional learning takes place to support social workers to respond to the increasing complex and multifaceted needs of the people they support. The Work-based Learning Route (WBLR) was introduced in 2018 following a period of development and consultation with employers. This route has the potential to enable employers to fully integrate a growing range of in-house training opportunities into the PiP Framework and to allow social workers to gain recognition for their training and development.

Following the initial implementation period, the route was reviewed in consultation with the Information and Development Forum (IDF), the PiP Approval Panel and key stakeholders. The new guidance that was developed aligns governance arrangement with other routes. The new WBLR pathway and Guidance was endorsed by the PiP Partnership in June 2023.

A number of regional training courses are working towards approval or re-approval in the WBLR. Building on the learning from earlier WBLRs programmes the Social Care Council have actively engaged with the development of new approaches and training programmes at an early stage to ensure PIP requirements are stitched into learning and assessment. Given the current workforce pressures, and challenges in releasing staff to engage in lengthy taught programmes we anticipate increased demand for WBLR approval.

**Table 4: Work-based Learning Outcomes 2022/2023**

Programme	Outcomes
Signs of Safety	Ten individuals achieved a Specialist Award
Quality Improvement in Social Work	17 individuals achieved (three Strategic and Leadership Award requirements)

## Regulation of the social work workforce

### Maintaining registration

All registrants need to maintain their registration by meeting specific conditions and learning and development requirements, and by renewing their registration and paying an annual fee. Whilst the requirements of registration include a number of things, this section of the report will focus on our regulatory activity connected to the AYE, mandatory PiP requirements, Post Registration Training and Learning (PRTL) and Internationally Qualified Social Workers (ISQW).

### Assessed Year in Employment (AYE)

On successful completion of the Degree in Social Work, all newly qualified social workers are registered with a condition to complete an AYE. This means that during this important first year in practice newly qualified social workers should have enhanced supervision and support to consolidate their learning on the degree and the transition to an autonomous practitioner.

## AYE audit



Reforms to social work education introduced in 2004 included a requirement for Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) to complete an Assessed Year in Employment (AYE). AYE requirements are set out in a government circular (HSS (SSI) AYE 1/2005, revised 2015). The Social Care Council has a responsibility to satisfy its self of the quality of evidence used by employers to assess successful completion of the AYE and that processes are rigorous and consistent. The Social Care Council do this through an annual audit of a sample of AYE registrants in accordance with this circular.

In June 2022, 250 social workers were registered to complete their AYE. 10% (N=25) were selected for audit and six social workers who had been granted extensions in 2021 were included in the audit (N=31). Seven social workers were granted extensions until 2023 due to delayed start dates or prolonged absence from work. The number of social workers who submitted for AYE audit was 24. The audit sample represented a range of employers across sectors with a majority of 77% (N=24) from Health and Social Care Trusts and 23% (N=7) from Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and agency employers, reflecting the employment trends for newly qualified social workers. The audit provides assurance that the AYE process and assessment is rigorous and consistent across all sectors.

37.7% of social workers in the sample moved post during their AYE (N=9). Movement occurred across and within sectors and ranged from one to three moves. Moving posts was not confined to agency staff, and was also evident within and across employers. It was evident from submissions reviewed that AYE social workers with the opportunity to remain in a single post achieve more in-depth learning and are enabled to develop more effective working relationships with service users and carers. While HSC Trusts no longer employ social workers through agency contacts it is important to continue to track movement during the AYE to fully understand patterns and effect of that.

Data received as part of the audit indicated that the quality of data used by employers to verify the registrant's suitability for registration met the Social Care Council's standards. The audit showed that these standards were met consistently across all sectors in relation to:

- Personal development plans.
- Training and development days.
- Reflective summaries.



Reflective summaries reviewed in this audit provided insight into the experience of the NQSWs who entered the workforce in 2022/23. Factors that encouraged AYE social workers to remain in post despite challenges include: approachable line managers, peer and team support and protected time in supervision to discuss cases and reflect on the impact of the work.

These elements were not universally available and AYE social workers also reflected on reduced opportunities for learning from peers and team colleagues due to hybrid working arrangements and workforce pressures. High caseloads contributed to some AYEs moving post due to feeling 'overwhelmed' and several social workers talked about feeling conflict between personal and professional values and not being prepared for the realities of practice, even when they had a PLO in the same team or service area.

An AYE Leadership Group, chaired by the lead Social Care Council Professional Adviser, brings learning and development staff with AYE responsibility from across HSC Trusts, Voluntary and Community Sector, Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNi), Education Authority (EA) and Youth Justice. This group provides an opportunity to share best practice and ensure a consistent approach across sectors.

Reflection on audit outcomes and AYE submissions over the last three years, along with research evidence, builds a clearer understanding of what is required to support social workers to make the transition from student to social worker. The AYE audit information reinforces the importance of prioritising a strong and supportive infrastructure around each AYE post with the goal of keeping the registrant in one post to help develop skills and professional confidence and competence.

Developmental support and learning from a line manager and team together with supervision and mentoring can also contribute to retention of staff and positive experiences for AYE social workers even when they are situated in a pressurised post.



## Assessed Year in Employment for Newly Qualified Social Workers

'I have challenged myself to take on this role, that I never thought I would manage and can say wholeheartedly that I have enjoyed the challenge to date' AYE Social Worker,

Gateway Team



## **Mandatory two PiP requirements**

Social workers entering their first three-year period of registration are required to complete a minimum of two requirements within the PiP Framework as a condition of registration. During 2022, 236 social workers completed these requirements (this figure includes those previously granted extensions for exceptional circumstance).

Since the introduction of this requirement in 2014, almost 2,000 registrants have satisfied the requirement. Those seeking an extension require agreement from their line manager and senior manager for governance prior to the extension being granted. Applications for extension are considered by a monthly 'Two Requirements Extension Panel' comprising staff from Fitness to Practise (FtP) and Workforce Development Teams. Registrants that are granted extensions are tracked by registration and FtP to ensure they meet the registration condition.

## **Post Registration Training and Learning (PRTL)**

All social work, and social care managers, registrants need to complete 90 hours of PRTL during their three-year period of registration to ensure their knowledge and skills remain current. All registrants are required to confirm they have met this requirement at the point of registration renewal, through audit, or by confirming achievement in the PiP Framework.

Of the registrants selected for audit with a June 2022 submission date, 36 were social workers. Representing a 5% sample of those due to renew in 2021/22. 12 social workers called for audit were unable to submit within the time period, equating to 33% (N=36) and requested deferrals. This higher percentage of deferral request was due, in part, to the impact of covid infection or lengthy periods of shielding. All deferrals are negotiated and tracked. Two registrants voluntarily removed themselves from Part 1 of the register and one registrant moved to Part 2 of the

Register. In total, 22 social workers submitted for the PRTL audit. The standard of submissions from social workers was deemed to be high, with clear evidence of the relevance and impact of their learning, particularly in complex areas of practice and an increasing mix of hybrid ways to access learning was evidenced.

Given that the timing of this audit point, registration period 2019/22, many of submissions referred to the challenges and importance of learning and development during the pandemic. Social workers and social care managers reflected on the personal and professional challenges they faced in, dealing with their own or, supporting others through illness, fear, stress, isolation, loneliness and bereavement. A common theme was that learning and development through self-directed, online learning and webinars was important in order to support service users and to allow social workers to feel confident in their role.

Learning and development records reflected a move away from whole day training to shorter but more frequent opportunities delivered online and through self-directed learning. Many of these and more hybrid approaches to learning have been kept post covid.

## **Internationally Qualified Social Workers (ISQWs)**

The Social Care Council welcomes applications from Internationally Qualified Social Workers (IQSWs) to join the Register. There are currently 111 IQSWs registered with the Social Care Council. This figure includes those employed in the Republic of Ireland but needed to hold dual registration to practise as a social worker in Northern Ireland where families and service users straddle both sides of the border.

Before 2021, applications from social workers that qualified in European countries were managed in line with a European Directive. When the United Kingdom left the European Union on the 31 January 2020, a transition period was in place until

31 December 2020. The subsequent *Professional Qualifications Bill, 2022* created a new legal framework for the recognition of professional qualifications gained outside the UK and reformed the practice of regulators.

There has been a reduction in IQSW applications from European countries in this period and an increase in applications from countries outside the European Union. In 2022, the Social Care Council's *Registration Rules* were amended to include a requirement that applicants for registration that complete social work training outside the United Kingdom, must demonstrate that they have the necessary knowledge of English to practise social work.



Internationally Qualified Social Worker

Between April 2022 and March 2023, the Social Care Council received 23 applications from internationally qualified social workers. Five IQSW assessment panels were held and seven applications were approved, one application was unsuccessful. 15 applications from this period remain in process along with a further eight which predate April 2022. Delays in processing are usually as a result of further information being required from registrants and/or academic institutions overseas.

## Social work education and workforce regulation: Reflections and challenges

Supporting the development of the social care and social work workforce to meet their standards of conduct and practice and provide safe, effective and quality care is at the forefront of the Social Care Council's work as a regulator. The Social Care Councils model of regulation is dynamic and relational, with a focus on protecting the public through development of safe and competent social work and social care practitioners.

Working with others to maintain standards, in the exceptional circumstances that we have all faced since the beginning of this decade, has served to reinforce the value of the strong and formalised partnership arrangements supporting social work education and training in Northern Ireland. These effective working relationships with the workforce, educators, people who use social work services and to government helps to create a 'system' of regulation where all parties are interested in improving the quality of practice and outcomes for those who use services.

The Social Work Workforce Review captured many of the strategic and demographic drivers likely to increase demand on social work services over the next decade. The review predated the impact of a global Covid-19 pandemic which has exacerbated many of the predicted pressures. We are aware from intelligence gathered from our partnerships and networks that recruitment and retention pressures, cost of living and the impact of poverty are impacting on the delivery of services and those who work in them. We also hear about the commitment and skill of social workers and social care workers operating in this context.

Our role as a systems leader connecting social work across sectors positions us to support the profession to meet these challenges and ensure that we have a skilled and agile workforce. The DoH sponsored strategic reform boards, offer an opportunity to ensure the wider system has an increased understanding of the role and value of social work and social care and that these workforces are sustained to fulfil their role in supporting the social wellbeing of our population.

The periodic review of the Degree, which is taking place during 2023/24, provides an opportunity to hear directly from student social workers, academics and employers to ensure that courses lay the foundation for the next generation of social work leaders. The implementation of the *Social Work Leadership Framework* clarifies social work leadership capabilities and will enable social workers to participate effectively in collective leadership across all systems and sectors.

It is vital that we listen to the experience of our registrants as we continue to embed a culture of continuous improvement so that social work education and training meets the needs of the workforce. The work we have carried out during 2022/23 to review our engagement with registrants emphasised the range of ways in which registrants can and do engage and the appetite for different kinds of engagement. We will continue our work to increase engagement within the PiP Framework as the benchmark for safety and quality and consider best evidence as to how the framework can capture all learning and development activities. We anticipate sustained growth within Work-based Learning and Credit Accumulation Routes in the medium to longer term.

As the regulator for social work education and training and the social work workforce the Social Care Council can say with some confidence that it has a sound base on which to build a strong, confident and competent social work workforce. Despite the challenging context of service delivery, this report demonstrates good outcomes and cause for optimism for the future of the social work workforce.



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