

RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE CONFERENCE REPORT

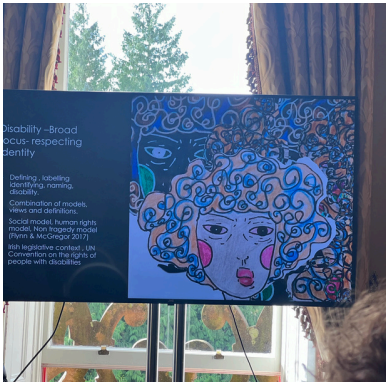
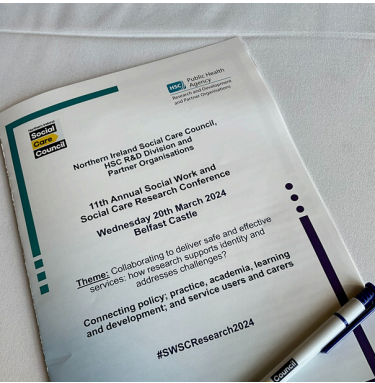


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Conference Background



As Chief Executive of NI Social Care Council I was delighted in March 2024 to welcome delegates, speakers and other presenters to the rather charming setting of Belfast Castle to enjoy the proceedings of the 11th Annual Social Work and Social Care Conference. In July 2023 we were delighted to take on responsibilities for leading the strategic social work and social care strategic agenda, fulfilling a commitment that we included in our Strategic Plan for 2023 – 2027.

In hosting of the annual social work and social care research conference in Northern Ireland the intention has, since its inception, always been to provide a unique opportunity for connecting policy; practice, academia, learning and development; and service users and carers. Since 2013 when other colleagues in health and social care hosted the first ever event of this nature the event has gone from strength to strength. In 2024 we in the Social Care Council are delighted that we upheld the well-established reputation of the conference. We believe that its success lies in striving continually to deliver on the original ambition of offering a truly unique event. An event that emphasises and creates the opportunities for dialogue and engagement providing an equal platform for practitioners, researchers, service users and carers and academia to present their research and evidence findings. The opening up of dialogue and debate helps create the conditions necessary for supporting getting evidence into policy and practice.

We invite you to learn a bit more about the day over the following pages and discover what we did to create a unique event that brought energy commitment and dialogue.

CONFERENCE FORMAT

Four Keynotes inputs
chaired with opportunity
for delegate questions
and comments

One promotional session
on NIHR's support for
knowledge mobilisation

23 Workshops
9 posters
6 display stands
Musical interludes
Award Ceremony

Twenty three Workshops

Throughout the conference 23 oral workshops were delivered. Each session had up to 30 delegates and was supported by a chair who enabled and facilitated dialogue and discussion. All presentations were rigorously assessed in advance by the Conference Abstract Committee. We were thrilled to see that all workshops were well attended and conference participants engaged actively in the discussions. We were equally thrilled with the willingness of presenters to share their findings.

Nine posters

Audience participation was facilitated through poster voting. We are delighted that so many delegates engaged in this process which allowed awards to be presented for first, second and third place. All poster presentations were however excellent and offer a creative method for delivering research and evidence messages.

Six display stands

These display stands and representatives offered delegates wider opportunities for engagement and networking and connectivity with a range of organisations.

CONFERENCE FORMAT

Musical interludes

Karen Diamond and Equal Notes provided a warm and uplifting musical interlude that brought joy and wellbeing into the room. Whether one considered oneself as musical, or otherwise, Karen had the capacity to bring to the surface any suppressed or hidden musical talents that delegates possessed.

Award Ceremony

Twenty two students including social workers, service users and carers received their Post Qualifying award for successfully completing the Research Methods Programme at Ulster University (Certificate, Diploma or Master's level). We are delighted with this achievement and hopefully this marks a start for many of them on the research and evidence journey.



Conference Summary

The conference was organised as a one-day event on the 20th March 2024 with over 130 delegates and speakers drawn from policy, practice, management, academia and service users.

The theme of the conference was Collaborating to deliver safe an effective service: how research supports identity and addresses challenges?. This offered the opportunity for an extension on the narrative of the value of research and evidence to inform decisions especially now that the Health and Social Care system is experiencing unprecedented high levels of staff vacancies turnover, burnout, issue of identity and increasing complexity of needs.

The value of having a conference that draws on a diverse range of perspectives and evidence helps provide transparency in any discussions, focusing not just on the challenges, but also in the potential supports and enablers. It is hoped that given the diverse range of delegates that also included both policy and management the learning from the event will be utilised in any such workforce policy and service discussions currently happening across the system.

KEYNOTE INPUTS

1. Professor Paula McFadden from Ulster University and Dr Patricia Nichol from Queen's University whose presentation titled 'Filling the bath with the plug out? Perceptions of safe staffing, self-reported mental wellbeing' and intentions to leave the profession among UK social work', got to the heart of the workforce challenges. This presentation, drawing on a four nations UK study but also reference to international evidence, was both timely and very relevant. It examined the factors that predict outcomes related to social worker wellbeing and intentions to stay or leave. In a call to improve working conditions for staff, the researchers also referenced the need for additional research to explore different interventions and strategies in place to support staff retention.

To view the presentation [click here](#).

2. Mindfulness training programmes among other allied health and social care professionals and students have been found to be associated with reduced stress. Exploring the effectiveness of an intervention designed to support staff wellbeing presented by Dr Alan Maddock from Department of Health Psychology, School of Population Health, RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences Dublin provided details on a study that adopted a randomised control trial methodology of a six-week evidence-based Mindfulness Social Work and Social Care (MBSWSC) programme. This training which was delivered on line by mindfulness practitioners who were also qualified social workers. Positive results emerged as indicated below;

- Results revealed moderate to large significant reductions, post programme, in stress; burnout; anxiety; depression and worry in MBSWSC compared to the more general Mindfulness Based Programme (MBP),
- Moderate to large, significant improvements in mindfulness; attention regulation; self-compassion; non-attachment and non-judgement in MBSWSC compared to general programme,
- Small to moderate significant positive changes in acceptance, empathy for service users, observation skills, rumination and wellbeing in MBSWSC compared to general programme,
- Suggestions for next steps included,;
 - Embed in social work practice,
 - Standardise roll-out/scale up, and
 - Ongoing Evaluation programme exploring long-term effects and sustainability.

To view this presentation [click here](#).

3. Carolyn Ewart, Chief Executive of British Association of Social Workers NI delivered a presentation on an All-Ireland study 'Shaping Social Work Identity' (supported by the regulators) based on 1,691 responses which of 63% Northern Ireland and 37% Republic of Ireland. Response rate was equivalent to 15% of all social workers in Ireland. Messages emerged were:

- Possessing a positive identity was clearly associated with empowering service users and carers, improving their life opportunities, promoting values, respecting diversity and having qualifications.
- A less positive identity was associated with a range of issues. Bureaucracy; Workload pressure; Insufficient time to spend in direct engagement with service users; Media portrayal of social work; Insufficient time or opportunities to keep up to date with relevant knowledge and research, views of public service users or other professions.
- Views from the regulators were also explored which highlighted the importance of training, standards and continuous professional development

Next steps

- Further focus group research: with
 - Students and education providers.
 - A mix of voluntary, community & statutory social workers.
 - The cohort who were most satisfied.
 - Based on the research and focus groups Draft profession wide guidance.

To view her presentation [click here](#).

4. Nick Andrews from Swansea University and Fiona Verity from Brunel University delivered a very interesting and creative discussion using a more workshop style approach. Entitled 'If love is the answer, community is the context and tenderness the methodology'

The tenderness part of the methodology resonated well with delegates. Engagement and building relationships in research and practice should be integral to the value base to which we all aspire. In the session they introduced an approach to gathering, exploring and using evidence called 'Magic/Tragic Moments' (MTM). Whilst the notion of evidence-based practice can imply following a set of top-down research recommendations, this approach, they argued, is respectful of the people and the context of their work. It does not impose research evidence on them. It makes connections between research evidence and their own stories and experiences and applies a particular approach to talking and thinking together that encourages collective reflection, learning and action.

Whilst this short summary does not do justice to this approach there is so much written on Evidence Enriched Evidence Practice.

Nick has also very helpfully shared with us for the benefit of delegates a whole range of tools and examples. To request these tools please send an email to SWSCResearchConference@hscni.net

To view the presentation [click here](#).



BREAK OUT ROOMS

To ensure that the event remained varied the day was structured to allow a wide range of research, evidence, innovations and good practice initiatives to be shared with delegates. These initiatives were delivered from health and social care, probation, academia, independent researchers and service users and carers. An impressive array of research methodology was also demonstrated in the presentations including: -participatory approaches; drama; simulations; qualitative and quantitative primary data collections approaches, as well as the use of larger secondary data sets and secondary data.

The keynote sessions were interjected by the small oral sessions both during the morning and the afternoon to allow delegates to discuss and listen to a range of topics and service areas. Some of which specifically linked themes to the event covering diverse workforce issues: burnout; safe staffing; safe and effective care; retention and resilience of staff; trauma related practice and regulation. Research was also conducted in a range of service areas: children and family services, adults, older people and community development.

All presentations were reviewed and selected by a Conference Abstract Committee. Thank you to Paul Webb from Praxis Care, Emily Wilson Carer and Rachel Naylor from Ulster University in their commitment to assessing the quality of submissions.

To view full programme [click here](#).



Comments from delegates

Congratulations on another excellent conference. We really enjoyed the day – the sessions, the singing(!) and the opportunities to meet and network.

Congratulations on another excellent research conference. Each and every presentation was excellent, so much inspiration for the whole system. The conference reminds me of the wisdom and potential across the region. One of the key messages I took away was the importance of relationships and paying attention to the small things that can make a big difference.

I am really hoping that we can maintain the optimism from the conference and stitch some of this learning into practice. I am looking forward to progressing this within the Research work-stream within the SW Leadership Framework and the Research Stakeholder event.

So what's the learning and take away messages

Maximising our potential and building years of commitment to research and evidence in Northern Ireland remains so important. Research leadership as demonstrated by so many of the presenters remains the key ingredients. This needs to be continued. Our strategic work as we move forward will strengthen our well established commitment in building research capacity, identifying priorities and delivering research and evidence of high quality. Engagement and partnership remains the way forward.

All steps, even little ones can lead to changes, if based on inclusion and involvement of trusted research evidence.

What's next

A massive thank you to all presenters, participants and delegates who attended this conference. As a number of you took the time to complete our feedback questionnaire we commit to take the time to consider your views. We will use those views what planning our 2025 conference.



**SAVE
THE DATE**

**Save the date
5th March 2025**