

Northern Ireland Social Care Council Participation Partnership

Confirmed Minutes
Monday 15th December 2025
Social Care Council Office, James House








15th December



Members at the meeting:




Sarah Browne (Chair, Board Member)
Alan Ritchie (Co-Chair)
Anne Mallon (Member)
Carol Diffin (Board Member)
Declan McAllister (Director of Registration and Corporate Services)
Denise Hunt (Board Member)
Gerard McWilliams (Member)
Mandy Cowden (Professional Advisor)
Rebecca Smyth (Note Taker)
Rita McCullagh (Head of Strategic Communications and Engagement)
Ruth-Naomi McNeill (Observer)
Susan Croy (Cedar Foundation)
Mervyn Bothwell (Agenda Item 8 only)

Apologies:

Andre McKeown (Head of Business Services)
David Gillen (Member)
David Hayes (Member, Board Member)
Gerard Forrestal (Member)
Nicholas Campbell (Graphic Designer and Animator)
Ronnie Patterson (Member)

<p>1.</p>		<p>Welcome and Apologies</p> <p>1.1. Member introductions – new Board Member Carol Diffin</p>	<p>apologies</p> 
<p>1.1</p>	<p>Sarah Browne welcomed members to the meeting, which started at 10:40am, and noted the above apologies. Members discussed suitable days for meetings, with Sarah agreeing to contact David Hayes to confirm if he is still available to be a member of the Partnership.</p> <p>Sarah welcomed Carol Diffin (Social Care Council Stakeholder Board Member since May 2025) and members introduced themselves. Carol is observing as part of her induction and sits on the Leaders in Social Care Partnership (LSCP) sub-committee. She is a Health and Social Care (HSC) Leadership Centre associate with a background in social work, and interests in children’s statutory social work services, learning disability, and mental health within social work and social care.</p> <p>ACTION: Sarah Browne to check with David Hayes whether he wishes to remain a member of the Participation Partnership.</p>		
<p>2.</p>		<p>Previous Meeting’s Minutes – Paper A, Minutes from previous meeting of 15th September 2025</p>	
<p>2.1</p>	<p>Members agreed and signed off the previous minutes from 15th September 2025. <u>Proposed by:</u> Alan Ritchie; <u>Seconded by:</u> Anne Mallon.</p>		
<p>3.</p>		<p>Matters Arising</p>	
<p>3.1</p>	<p>Matters Arising from the previous meeting are closed.</p>		
<p>4.</p>		<p>Chair’s Update</p> <p>4.1. Learning Disability Consultation Report</p>	
<p>4.1</p>	<p>In relation to the Learning Disability Consultation Report Social Care Council response, Sarah updated that Rebecca Smyth had circulated this. Mandy added that the response focuses on learning and training opportunities and resourcing required to professionalise and expand the social care workforce.</p> <p>Anne attended a public meeting in Newry with Department of Health (DoH) and Southern Health and Social Care (SHSCT) representatives. There were several repeated proposals and queries around resourcing. Gerard McWilliams raised concerns around implementing and resourcing the new Learning Disability Service Model, which may not be a regionally consistent approach.</p>		

4.2	Sarah updated that the Public Health Agency (PHA) Partnership and Engagement Strategy 2025-2030 public consultation closes on 19 th December 2025, with Rita McCullagh adding that Patient Client Council (PCC) have submitted a response.
4.3	A call closed at the beginning of November 2025 for a new round of bids for IMPACT. Declan McAllister added that the Social Care Council in partnership with Digital Health and Care Northern Ireland (DHCNI) were taking forward an IMPACT network on Artificial Intelligence (AI) and social care.
5.	 <p style="text-align: center;">Co-Chair's Update</p>
5.1	<p>a. Alan submitted an individual response to the Learning Disability Consultation and raised concerns around the Model.</p> <p>b. He is involved with IMPACT, with one session organised by PCC on General Practitioner (GP) use of AI.</p>
6.	 <p style="text-align: center;">Member Updates</p>
6.1	<p>Anne raised concerns around how the Learning Disability Model will benefit service users, and she has submitted an individual response to the Consultation. Mike Nesbitt (Minister of Health, DoH) met with respite carers. Anne shared that her previous 3 respite sessions were cancelled at short notice. She acknowledged the problems of understaffing but noted that the Trust have also used respite nursing beds as placements for a small number of people requiring highly specialised care. This means that planned respite cannot be provided.</p> <p>Members discussed further areas of concern around the Learning Disability Consultation, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • funding; • the diagnosis of learning disabilities; • mental health and learning disabilities being grouped together, despite needing very different programmes of care; • how programmes of care are defined by departments in Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCT); • the Social Care Council not being mentioned in the Consultation.
6.2	<p>(a) Susan Croy is part of the IMPACT network with Declan and Alan focusing on AI in social care and there have been two meetings so far. This network has the potential to educate individuals on AI and the potential to improve trust in the use of new technology within communities.</p> <p>(b) Susan has started her 1st year of the service users/lived experience Post Qualifying (PQ) Research Methods programme at Ulster University (UU) and has submitted her research proposal on how AI technology contributes to the independence of adults with disabilities. There are 14 students focusing on a wide range of topics, with 2 on the lived experience pathway</p>

	<p>and 12 registered through the social work department. Susan will report back to members and is happy to meet with anyone considering registering for the next cohort. She is grateful for the opportunity to participate and recognised the Social Care Council in her report. Susan will send Rebecca a summary of her research through the Lived Experience Pathway.</p> <p>Mandy shared that Anne McGlade (Social Care Research Lead, Social Care Council) and the Social Care Council encouraged those with lived experience to consider registering for the next cohort.</p> <p>ACTION: Susan Croy to provide a summary of her research through the Lived Experience Pathway.</p>
7.	 <p style="text-align: center;">Break</p>
7.1	Members had their break.
8.	 <p style="text-align: center;">Update on National Occupational Standards Review</p>
8.1	<p>Sarah welcomed Mervyn Bothwell to the meeting. Mervyn presented on the National Occupational Standards (NOS) review, with the following key highlights:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • there has been a 4-nation approach to leadership; • the NOS review was a large piece of work. (It took Sharon Foster (Workforce Development Officer, Social Care Council) 7 hours to upload the NOS); • several NOS which were no longer relevant were removed and amalgamation of similar NOS helped reduce the numbers; • the NOS are reviewed every 5 years but has been 10 years since the last review; • a new standard has been introduced around digitalisation and Mervyn will send this to Rebecca for sharing with members. <p>Members thanked Mervyn for the NOS review update.</p> <p>ACTION: Mervyn Bothwell to send Rebecca Smyth the new National Occupational Standard introduced around digitalisation for sharing with members.</p>
9.	 <p style="text-align: center;">Discussion around remuneration for members participating in meetings</p>
9.1	Mandy shared that a draft PCC and PHA paper on member remuneration sent to the DoH in June 2025 is awaiting an outcome. Mandy is liaising with Martin McCrory (PHA) around sharing this. Several pilots were identified but did not go ahead due to no formal Departmental circular.

Equality and engagement are ongoing issues as individuals previously excluded may face different circumstances. A policy is required to explain remuneration and show the funding breakdown, with hopes this will be considered again.

Gerard McW noted that some people with lived experience are receiving benefits whereas others are means tested and so could not accept payment. He referred to a letter from His Majesty's Revenue's and Customs (HMRC), noting the HMRC could be an opportunity. Mandy advised that different levels of involvement need considered and individuals with lived experience are vital. Remuneration can affect benefits, with vouchers having the potential to be taxed. Mandy suggested that Martin McCrory could attend the next Participation Partnership meeting to discuss the topic further or provide a one pager summary.

Members discussed the paid associate model used by Queen's University, Belfast (QUB) and Open University (OU), particularly service users contributing to written pieces and podcasts, how this work is reflected in job descriptions and issues with contracts involving paid employees with terms and conditions.

Anne noted that learning disability is part of nursing training, with Rita suggesting engagement with Aine Morrison and the Office of Social Services (OSS), which would be the equivalent sponsor about taking forward a Remuneration Policy for service users and carers. Declan noted that Aine is due back in January 2026 and agreed to discuss this topic with Tracy Reid (Chief Executive, Social Care Council) and Aine for including on a future agenda.

ACTION: Declan McAllister to consider and discuss remuneration of members participating in meetings with Tracy Reid in the first instance, before discussing with Aine Morrison in the New Year.

ACTION: Mandy Cowden to contact Martin McCrory to discuss arranging a slot at the next Participation Partnership meeting (9th March 2026) or to submit a one pager summary of the draft paper on remuneration of members participating in meetings.

10.



**Social Care Collaborative Forum –
update on progress**

10.1

Declan updated that the Social Care Collaborative Forum (SCCF), chaired by Peter Toogood and Co-Chaired by the Social Care Council, works together as partners to build relationships through strong leadership and engagement. The next SCCF meeting is scheduled for 27th January 2026.

	<p>Focus has shifted to a revised implementation structure through 6 implementation groups and a change of name for the board to the Social Care Collaborative Reform Board (SCCRB), under the following areas aligned to the strategic direction and themes of the Reform Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theme 1 – individual choice and control (innovation and enhancing quality of care); • Theme 2 – supporting unpaid carers; • Theme 3 – prevention and early intervention; • Theme 4 – sustainability; • Theme 5 – a valued workforce; • Theme 6 – sustainable system building; <p>The SCCRB have approved a 3-year implementation plan. Members discussed frustrations felt by carers around delivery of this plan with strain on a limited workforce and healthcare service.</p> <p>Gerard McW noted that service user and carer representatives are required on each implementation group and that the groups manage their own communications as a result of the Communication group being stood down. Rita advised that the Campaign will still progress under the LSCP, with Alan adding that a Communications Strategic Group is required to focus on AI.</p>
10.2	<p>Several organisations have temporarily stepped away from the Fair Work Forum (FWF) on 25th November 2025 as a response to the disappointing decision taken by the Minister not to fund the real living wage for the independent sector from September 2025. An independent report of work completed by the FWF recognised that 54% of social care practitioners were receiving the real living wage. The Independent Health and Care Providers (IHCP) met with Mike Nesbitt and agreed the publication of the report and commitment that the real living wage will be a priority in 2026/27.</p> <p>Gerard McW agreed that the social care workforce should be involved throughout the 10-year strategy, with Declan adding that under the new social value procurement guidance, the real living wage should be paid by every commissioner.</p> <p>Declan referred to the Neighbourhood Model of Care, highlighting social work and social care and the role it will play in this reformed structure is still under review. It was noted that this is a very medical focused model, with members emphasising that community-based organisations need to be heard.</p> <p>In relation to the current position of the FWF, Declan noted that some stakeholders (e.g. Association for Real Change (ARC)) are still engaged and the next FWF meeting is scheduled for 4th February 2026.</p>

	Sarah thanked Declan for the update, noting the disappointment when so much progress had been made.
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11.	 Discussion around Participation Partnership membership
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11.1	<p>Sarah shared that the Partnership are recruiting 2 or 3 members after Joanne Sansome and Grace Price stepped down. Members discussed the potential of additional PCC membership, with Declan adding that he had spoken to Meadhbha Monaghan (PCC) regarding a callout list.</p> <p>Gerard McW noted that membership could be encouraged through an advertisement on the Social Care Council and PCC websites, through service providers, and through social work teams. Mandy added that any decisions must be agreed by the Partnership, and a younger individual with care experience would be a good representative. Grace suggested that a video could be used to encourage recruitment. Members agreed that Declan, Sarah and Mandy would meet to discuss recruitment of Participation Partnership members in the first instance.</p> <p>ACTION: Declan McAllister, Sarah Browne and Mandy Cowden to meet to discuss recruitment of Participation Partnership members.</p>
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12.	 Any Other Business?
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12.1	None.
12.2	Sarah thanked members for attending the meeting and wished everyone a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

	Dates of proposed meetings:
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Next meeting:	• 9 th March 2026
Approved by:	Sarah Browne
Signature:	<i>Sarah Browne</i>
Date of Approval:	9 th March 2026

Annex I

Action List – date of meeting: 15th December 2025

<u>Listing no:</u>	<u>Action:</u>	<u>Due Date:</u>	<u>Owner:</u>	<u>Status:</u>
1.1	Sarah Browne to check with David Hayes whether he wishes to remain a member of the Participation Partnership.	ASAP	Sarah Browne	Closed
6.2	Susan Croy to provide a summary of her research through the Lived Experience Pathway.	9 th March 2026	Susan Croy	Closed
8.1	Mervyn Bothwell to send Rebecca Smyth the new National Occupational Standard introduced around digitalisation for sharing with members.	9 th March 2026	Mervyn Bothwell / Rebecca Smyth	Closed
9.1	Declan McAllister to consider and discuss remuneration of members participating in meetings with Tracy Reid in the first instance, before discussing with Aine Morrison in the New Year.	9 th March 2026	Declan McAllister	Open – discussions ongoing
9.1	Mandy Cowden to contact Martin McCrory to discuss arranging a slot at the next Participation Partnership meeting or to submit a one pager summary of the draft paper on remuneration of members participating in meetings.	9 th March 2026	Mandy Cowden	Closed – Martin to attend June 2026 meeting
11.1	Declan McAllister, Sarah Browne and Mandy Cowden to meet to discuss recruitment of Participation Partnership members.	9 th March 2026	Declan McAllister / Sarah Browne / Mandy Cowden	Closed