

Northern Ireland Social Care Council Participation Partnership

Confirmed Minutes
Monday 9th March 2026
Social Care Council Office, James House



9th March



Please note – this summary was drafted from the meeting transcript using Co-Pilot



Members at the meeting:

- Sarah Browne (Chair, Board Member)
- Alan Ritchie (Co-Chair)
- Anne Mallon (Member)
- Declan McAllister (Director of Registration and Corporate Services)
- Denise Hunt (Board Member)
- Gerard McWilliams (Member)
- Mandy Cowden (Professional Advisor)
- Andre McKeown (Head of Business Services)
- Ruth-Naomi McNeill (Note Taker)
- Rita McCullagh (Head of Strategic Communications and Engagement)
- Carolyn Ewart (Social Worker – presenting)
- Tricia Devlin (Professional Advisor – presenting)


Apologies:





- David Gillen (Member)
- Gerard Forrestal (Member)
- Nicholas Campbell (Graphic Designer and Animator)
- Ronnie Patterson (Member)
- Susan Croy (Cedar Foundation)

1.		<p>Welcome and Apologies</p> <p>1.1. Member introductions – new Board Member Carol Diffin</p>	<p>apologies</p> 
1.1	<p>Sarah Browne welcomed members to the meeting. Gerard McWilliams joined online.</p> <p>Apologies as noted above</p>		

2.		Previous Meeting's Minutes – Paper A, Minutes from previous meeting of 15th December 2025
2.1	Minutes from the previous meeting were agreed as accurate and approved by those present.	
2.2	Action points from the previous meeting were reviewed: 1.1 – David Hayes confirmed that he is unable to remain as a member of the group. He has commitments with the NISCC Research Partnership. 9.1 – Discussions are ongoing regarding remuneration for members. This action has been updated to reflect that Martin McCrory from PCC to attend the June meeting to share their approach to volunteer recruitment and remuneration. Also updated to note ongoing engagement with Department of Health to identify options for Volunteer's remuneration in line with other partnerships in the HSC.	
3.		Matters Arising
3.1	<p>Social Care Reform Board & Neighbourhood Model Update - Update provided by Declan McAllister, with discussion among members.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Care Reform Board has adopted a new structure including an Oversight Group and six Implementation Groups. • Significant focus on aligning the Social Care reform work with the Integrated Neighbourhood Model. • The Neighbourhood model will bring more healthcare into community based teams and will integrate with social work and social care. • Work is being taken forward with the implementation team to better understand: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The role of social work and social care in community-based integrated teams ○ Ensuring service users and carers are included meaningfully in early-stage design • Members raised concerns regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Funding for the model ○ Balancing responsibilities between social care practitioners and qualified social workers ○ Avoiding duplication of professionals entering service users' homes ○ Ensuring true integration rather than shifting hospital-based teams into community locations without structural change <p>ACTION: Declan will share a summary note with members after the upcoming meeting with Cathy Harrison from the Neighbourhood Model Implementation Team.</p>	

<p>3.2</p>	<p>Fair Work, Real Living Wage, and Employment Rights Bill - Update provided by Declan McAllister, with discussion among members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lot of work was done in the last two years to review pay terms and conditions for the social care workforce. It was disappointing when it was not possible for the Health Minister to introduce the Real Living Wage for social care workers earlier year as intended. This has caused a lot of disruption to social care partnerships. • On a positive note, the Real Living Wage will be a condition of HSC procurement contracts from 1 April 2026. The challenge will be ensuring this passes through to the wages of frontline workers. • Fair Work Forum considering re-running the social care practitioner survey to monitor impact of the changes in contracting. • Government has developed new legislation to improve Employment Rights. The draft Bill proposals include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ending zero-hours contracts ○ Stronger redundancy and rehire protections ○ Improved holiday pay calculation ○ Mandatory written terms from day one ○ Enhanced trade union access ○ Stronger flexible working rights, carers' leave & neonatal leave provisions • The Bill hasn't been taken all the way through to become part of legislation. This may not happen until after the upcoming NI Assembly elections. • Members reported concerns about viability for smaller providers and potential impact on workforce retention if employment costs increase significantly.
<p>3.3</p>	<p>Social Care and AI IMPACT Group - Update provided by Declan McAllister and Alan Ritchie, with discussion among members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Declan and Alan are both members of the IMPACT groups which involves service users and carers in the use of Artificial Intelligence in Health and Social Care. This group has been looking at how technology can be used for social care and at developing information to help people understand about technology and how to use it safely. <p>Members noted the increasing use of technology to store and access Health and care information in particular, MyCare and Encompass:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Encompass system is now used across all Health and Social Care Trusts to manage people's Health and care information. There is also the MyCare mobile app. Members of the public can use it to download their health and care information to their phone. • There are concerns among families about who can see the information. More information is needed to make sure only staff who support the person should see it. Anne is attending a briefing in Southern Health and Social Care Trust. She will feedback at the next meeting.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Declan and Alan will provide an update on IMPACT AI at the next meeting.
3.3	<p>Landscape Review of the Social Care Council - Update provided by Declan McAllister</p> <p>Every public body must be reviewed every five years. This is called a Landscape Review.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Social Care Council review is almost complete. All the interviews with members and staff are being written up now. The report will be ready for the Department of Health in April. This will be shared once the Department has had time to see what it recommends.
3.4	<p>Membership of the Partnership - Update by Mandy Cowden and Declan McAllister, with discussion by members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The group had previously discussed recruitment of new members. This was to replace members who had stepped down and also to widen the range of experience amongst group membership. Options discussed included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing clearer role descriptions Reaching out to youth organisations (e.g., Voice of Young People in Care) Targeting community and voluntary groups to broaden representation Providing informal “sit-in” opportunities for prospective members <p>ACTION: Mandy to confirm with Patient Client Council representative (Mark McCrory) to attend the June meeting to discuss their approach to volunteer remuneration and involvement processes.</p>
4.	 <p style="text-align: center;">Chair’s Update</p>
4.1	<p>Sarah Browne confirmed this is her final meeting as Chair as her Board Member term ends 31 March 2026.</p> <p>Sarah expressed appreciation for the group’s commitment and reiterated the value placed on the Partnership by the Board and senior leadership team.</p> <p>Members formally recorded thanks to Sarah for her leadership and contribution.</p> <p>New Board Members are being appointed and expected to be in post during April. Alan, Declan and Mandy will work together to support the group in the interim period.</p> <p>ACTION: Declan to share details of the new Chair for this partnership when this is confirmed. Details are expected in early May.</p>

5.		<p style="text-align: center;">Co-Chair's Update</p>
5.1	<p>Alan raised concerns about the report from the Being Open Framework Consultation. There are a number of repetitive responses within the analysis. There is also limited scope to provide a regional standard across the HSC. Copy of the analysis report has been shared with members.</p>	
6.		<p style="text-align: center;">Member Updates</p>
6.1	<p>No formal updates provided. .</p>	
7.		<p style="text-align: center;">Break</p>
7.1	<p>Members had their break.</p>	
8.		<p style="text-align: center;">Reviewing the Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work</p>
8.1	<p>Review of the Degree - Tricia Devlin provided an update on the Social Work Degree Review – Expectations of Service Users & Carers</p> <p>The review of the Social Work Degree Framework includes updating workforce standards and the and expectations of qualified social workers.</p> <p>Key themes within the framework include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Respect, communication, confidentiality ○ Recognition of service users' expertise ○ Clear explanations of decisions, processes, and recording ○ Multi-disciplinary working and advocacy ○ Knowledge of relevant services, legislation, and benefits <p>Members supported the recommendations for the review. In particular they recognised:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The importance of attitude, equality based relationships, and innovative practice ○ Ensuring students develop awareness of community resources ○ Supporting independence rather than encouraging dependency <p>Members' feedback will be incorporated into the recommendations for the revised framework.</p>	

9.



Returning to the Register – Guidance for Employers and Social Workers

9.1

Returning to the Register Social Work Guidance - This project was presented by Carolyn Ewart (Independent Social Worker) and Mandy Cowden).

The Social Care Council is developing guidance for social workers in Northern Ireland returning to practice after a number of years absence.

The review has looked at models used in the UK and other countries for social work and other regulated professions. Findings include:

- Other UK nations use hours based models (typically more than 200 hours) – which can be restrictive for some returners.
- Early feedback suggests NI may consider a more flexible, qualitative model.

Issues discussed included:

- The importance of balancing safety with workforce need
- Addressing barriers for returners with caring responsibilities
- Options to use a structured support similar to an Assessed Year in Employment (AYE)
- Providing learning resources via existing Council platforms
- Using a proportionate, tiered approach for those away from work for less than 3 years, compared to those absent for 3–15 years and 15+ years

First draft of the proposed guidance should be ready for review by end of April. This will be brought back to the Partnership for further discussion.

10.



Being Open Framework – Consultation Analysis Report

10.1

The analysis report was shared with members before the meeting. Item was discussed under Co-Chair's update.

11.



Any Other Business?

11.1

None.



Dates of proposed meetings:

Next meeting:	• 8 th June 2026
Approved by:	Denise Hunt
Signature:	
Date of Approval:	8 th June 2026

Annex I

Action List – date of meeting: 9th March 2026

<u>Listing no:</u>	<u>Action:</u>	<u>Due Date:</u>	<u>Owner:</u>	<u>Status:</u>
1.1 (Dec 2025)	Sarah Browne to check with David Hayes whether he wishes to remain a member of the Participation Partnership.	31 December 2025	Sarah Browne	Closed
9.1 (Dec 2025)	Remuneration for Volunteer Members (updated from Dec 2025 action note) - Declan McAllister to consider and discuss remuneration of members participating in meetings with Tracy Reid, before discussing with Aine Morrison on her return to post.	8th June 2026	Declan McAllister	Closed
3.1	Social Care Reform Board & Neighbourhood Model Update - Declan to share a summary note with members after the upcoming meeting with Cathy Harrison from the Implementation Team	31 April 2026	Declan McAllister	Closed
3.4	Partnership Membership and Remuneration - Mandy to confirm with Patient Client Council representative (Mark McCrory) to attend the June meeting to discuss their approach to volunteer remuneration and involvement processes	8 June 2026	Mandy Cowden	Closed
4.1	Change in Chairperson for the Partnership - Declan to share details of the new Chair for this partnership when this is confirmed. Details are expected in early May	May 2026	Declan McAllister	Closed