

Assessing the moral and fiscal costs and impact of workforce instability in children's social work from a service user, and economic perspective

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Analysing the Moral Cost of Social Worker Turnover in Northern Ireland

An initial exploration involving Personal and Public Involvement (PPI) participants

Section

PERSONAL AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT (PPI)

We initiated this service user engagement to address growing concerns about the impact of social worker turnover on children, families, and carers in Northern Ireland. Persistent workforce challenges—high turnover rates, staff shortages, and increasing caseloads—have created instability in service provision, affecting the continuity of care and the well-being of vulnerable children, families, and carers.

PASNET, VOYPIC, Action for Children NI (foster carers), & Care Leavers. These service user groups were interviewed to tease out their ***lived-experiences*** and perspectives on Social Worker turnover.

Key Findings from Interviews with Service User Groups (PASNET, VOYPIC, Action for Children NI (foster carers), & Care Leavers)

1. Impact of Social Worker Turnover & Continuity of Care

- Service users across all groups expressed frustration over frequent changes in social workers, which disrupted relationships and trust.
- Many had to **retell their stories multiple times**, leading to distress and frustration.
- **No endings:** Lack of communication when social workers left their role made service users feel abandoned. One service user stated: ***'You (social work) were our last resort.....'***
- Variations in relationship quality were reported, with some workers being seen as supportive while others were distant.

Compassionate Perspective: High turnover is often due to overwhelming **caseloads and work-related burnout**. Investing in **better retention strategies, and mental health support for social workers can enhance workforce stability and relationship-based practice.**

Key Findings from Interviews with Service User Groups (PASNET, VOYPIC, Action for Children NI (foster carers), & Care Leavers)

2. Communication & Compassion

- Service users perceived some social workers as lacking compassion and sensitivity, particularly in how they communicated difficult information.
- Words used by social workers could have long-lasting negative effects, making service users feel unheard or dismissed.
- Concerns about a “**box-ticking**” **approach**, where paperwork was prioritised over relationship-building.

Compassionate Perspective: Social workers are often under immense time pressure, **balancing administrative duties with practice challenges and service demands.** Burnout includes **emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced feelings of accomplishment.** This might explain the reported incidents where examples of a lack of empathy were reported.

Key Findings from Interviews with Service User Groups (PASNET, VOYPIC, Action for Children NI, & Care Leavers)

3. Power Imbalance & Feeling Unheard

- Service users felt that social workers had **all the power** in decision-making processes.
- When complaints were made, social workers were perceived as closing ranks, leading to a lack of accountability.
- Service users often received no feedback when they raised concerns, leaving them feeling voiceless.

Compassionate Perspective: The hierarchical nature of social care structures can sometimes make service users feel disempowered. Ensuring **co-production approaches**—where service users are active partners in decision-making—could help improve trust and engagement.

Key Findings from Interviews with Service User Groups (PASNET, VOYPIC, Action for Children NI, & Care Leavers)

4. Access to Social Workers & Emotional Support

- Service users felt there was an expectation that social workers should be “on call,” but in reality, they were often unavailable when needed.
- Some care leavers described feeling abandoned at critical moments, particularly after significant life events like having a baby.
- Service users wanted more emotional support rather than just procedural interventions.

Compassionate Perspective: Many social workers juggle **high caseloads with limited resources**, making it difficult to be available at all times. Increased staffing levels, alongside peer support or mentoring programs, could help alleviate these pressures and provide better emotional support for service users.

Key Findings from Interviews with Service User Groups

(PASNET, VOYPIC, Action for Children NI, & Care Leavers)

5. Positive outcomes

Positive themes also emerged when service users reflected on relationships with social workers “who went the extra mile”. Consistent positive relationships, feeling heard, and supported through crises and challenges impacted on life outcomes for service users.

Examples included interventions at **critical life points** and feeling valued with authentic social, emotional and psychological support.

A young care leaver had 30 social workers during their care journey. One of those social workers were upheld as ‘outstanding’, providing care which felt authentic. Examples of care included **accessibility, empathic engagement and going above and beyond to provide support.**

Addressing the Challenges – Systemic Solutions

- **Workforce Investment:** More funding for staffing to reduce turnover – service users will benefit if social workers aren't burnt out and leaving. Intention to leave is highest among those who are at the higher end of burnout (McFadden et al, 2024)
- **Training improvements:** Embedding burnout training in undergraduate and post-graduate curriculum
- **Service user involvement:** Ensuring service users have a voice in social care planning and service delivery and in research which informs policy decisions

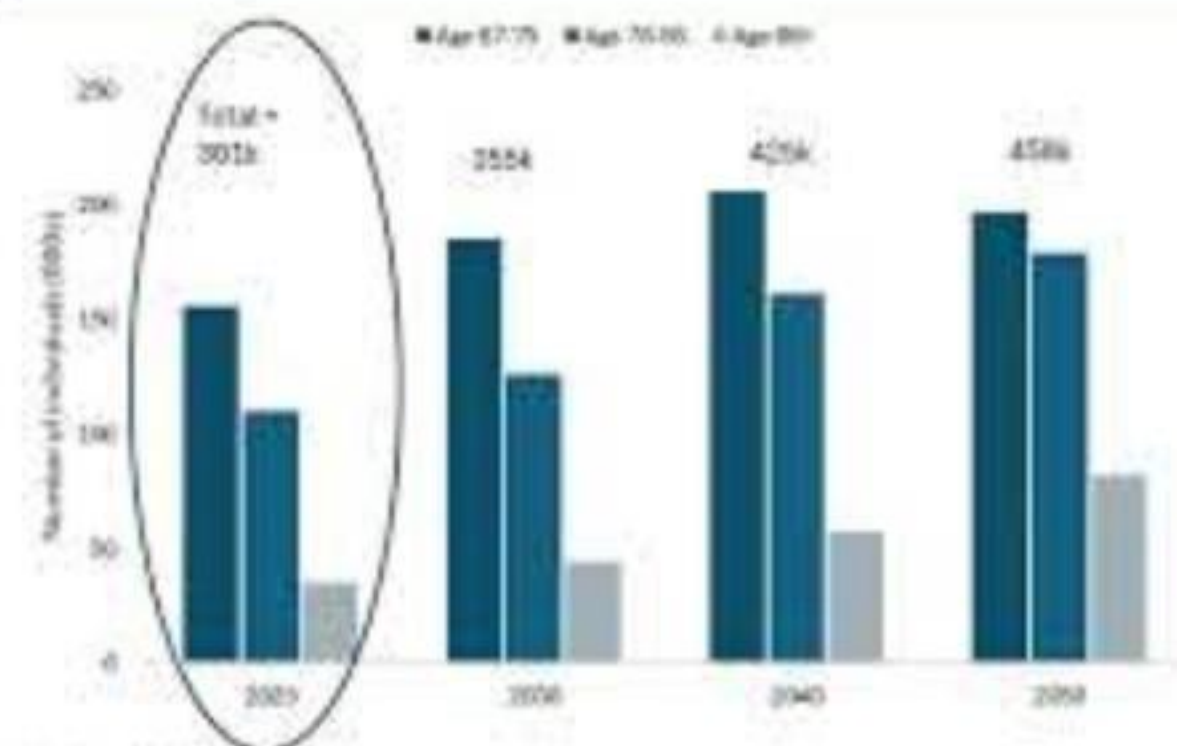
Conclusion – Moving Forward

- Key themes highlight service user concerns about social worker turnover and support gaps.
- Systemic pressures—high caseloads, staff shortages, and funding constraints—impact social workers' ability to build consistent relationships.
- Addressing these issues requires structural solutions, including workforce funding, evidence informed workforce planning, and enhanced training.

Older People Social Workers

Is social work prepared for changing demographics?

Age profile of older population (67+), NI, 2023-2050



Source: ORF & UUEPC

In 2023 there were 301,000 people in NI aged 67+, meanwhile there were 500 Older People Social Workers across the Health and Social Care trusts.

This equates to 16.6 Older People Social Workers per 10k population aged 67+ in 2023.

The 67+ population is anticipated to grow by 54,000 by 2030 which will put more demand on this category of Social Workers.

Thank you



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