



A report on the regulation and development of education and training and the social work workforce

April 2023 - March 2024

Contents

Introduction	3
Context of our work	5
Supporting and developing the workforce	9
Degree in Social Work	9
Professional in Practice	13
Regulation of the Social Work workforce	19
Reflections and challenges	25

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Social Care Council (the Social Care Council) is the workforce regulator for the social work and social care workforce and for social work education and training in Northern Ireland (NI). As the regulator the Social Care Council has a range of statutory responsibilities set out in *Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2001*¹ (the Act). The Act is permissive in nature and allows the operational detail to be set out as secondary legislation. This has allowed the Social Care Council to develop a model of regulation that is dynamic and relational, with a focus on protecting the public through the development of safe and competent social work and social care practitioners.

The foundation of this approach to regulation is Partnership: with people who use services; with social work and social care registrants; with employers, education providers and government, to inform standards and improve quality. The Social Care Council's Board, as part of its governance structure, has established a number of partnerships with the standing of a committee of council. The formal partnership arrangements create opportunity for collaborative advantage through closer connections with the stakeholders noted above. Data gathered from these connections helps to identify gaps and areas for development, creating a 'system' of regulation where all stakeholders are interested in improving the quality of practice.

The intelligence gathering opportunities created by the formal partnership arrangements, that support the delivery of qualifying and post qualifying social work education, add a layer of assurance to evidence gathered through approval and quality assurance mechanisms. The arrangements for the approval, monitoring, review and inspection of social work education and training are set out in the *Social Care Council Quality Assurance Framework*.² 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 2023 – 2024.

Social work education and regulation

Each of the devolved nations in the United Kingdom (UK) has a different framework and regulatory system for social work education and training. The regulatory system in NI, as described above, supports learning across a social worker's career. Following qualifying education, which is designed to provide students with the foundations upon which to build their knowledge, skills and values, qualified social workers are required to continually develop these to practise competently and safely. As the regulator the Social Care Council has a handprint across the continuum from qualifying training, into the Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) and post qualifying education and training as the awarding body for the Professional in Practice (PiP) Framework.

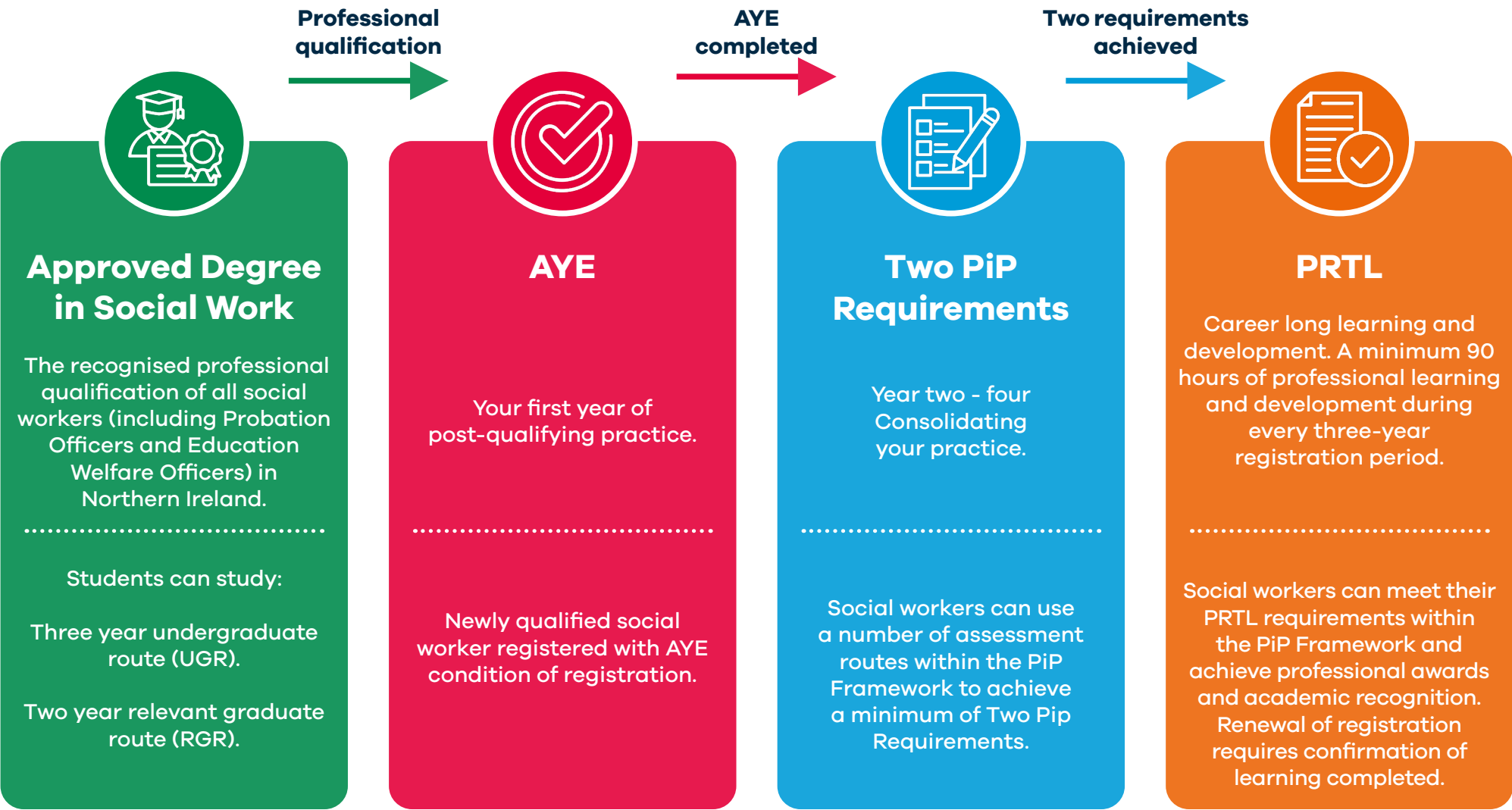
1 *Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2001* accessed at: [Health and Personal Social Services Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2001](#).

2 *NISCC (2022) Quality Assurance Framework for Education and Training Regulated by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council*.

Figure 1: Regulation and continuous professional development in NI

Supporting social workers in career long learning

How continuous professional development is supported through regulation.



The context of our work

The social work and social care workforce are the largest workforce within the health and social care sector with 48,164 registrants on the Social Care Council’s Public Facing Register (the Register) in November 2024.

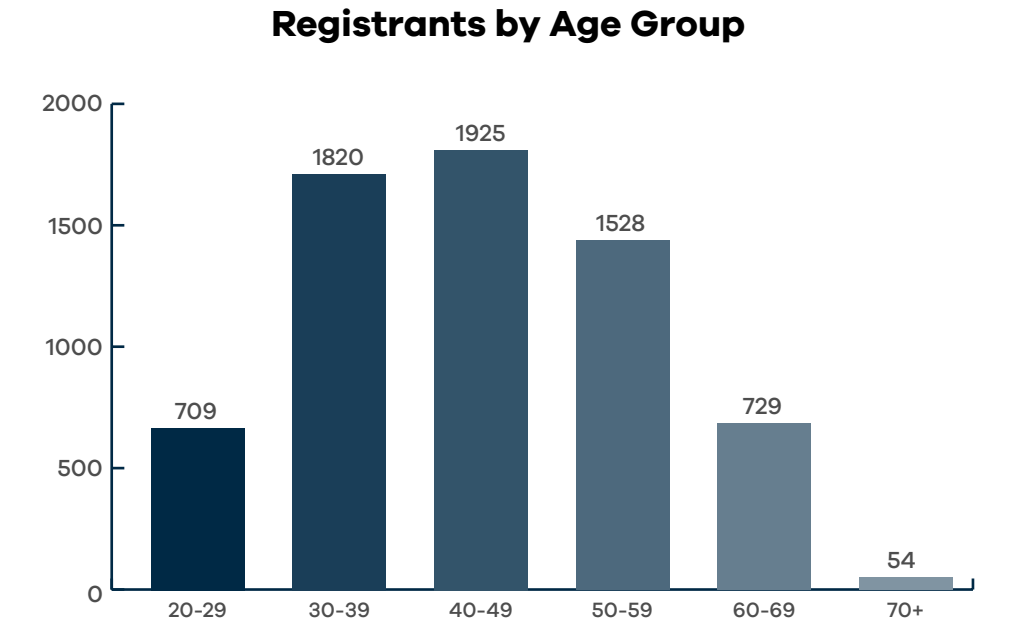
The workforce

Table 1. The Register (as at 02.12.2024)

Social care practitioner	40,587 (1,924 more than the same period last year)
Social worker	6765 (182 more than the same period last year)
Student social worker	799 (38 more than the same period last year and 65 more than same period in 2022)

The figures set out in Table 1 above reflect the growth in the social work workforce and in student numbers, with 65 more registered student social workers than there were in 2022. While this growth in the social work workforce is welcome it is also important to understand demographics of the registered workforce.

Figure 2: Graph showing the number of social work registrant by age group



Social Care Council data confirms that 34% of the registered social work workforce is over the age of 50 years, and 11% are over the age of 60 years. This reinforces the need to have sufficient numbers of new entrants to the profession on an annual basis. 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.

Strategic context

The reform of both children and adults social care and other strategic developments identified in the *Social Work Workforce Review*³ continue to create demand for a dynamic, highly skilled and evidence informed workforce with a strong sense of professional identity.

The Social Workforce Implementation Board leads a programme of work to take forward recommendations identified in the workforce review including issues about the supply, recruitment and retention of social workers in the workforce. In April 2024, the Department of Health (DoH) Office of Social Services (OSS) released phase one of a Safe Staffing in Social Work Research and Policy Development project. The findings were presented, by DoH and academic colleagues at a Social Care Council Lunchtime seminar (see below).



Source: Social Care Council YouTube Channel.
See: <https://youtu.be/6KeU1N1VvoFM>.

In the last 12 months reform agendas across both adult and children's services have progressed. As part of a programme of transformation and service improvement, the DoH has established a strategic architecture to provide direction and take forward agreed actions.

The Children's Social Care Strategic Reform Programme⁴ was established to deliver reform within children's social care services to address a range of known service challenges. The Children's Social Care Services Reform Programme Board provides vision, strategic oversight, direction and governance for the delivery of the programme. Their annual report acknowledged the challenging context in which organisations who provide social care services are operating in and sets out the achievement of the nine workstreams that includes workforce. The Social Care Council executive staff co-chair and/or are joint leads on a number of workstreams of the Reform Programme Board.



³ DoH (2022), *Social Work Workforce Review Northern Ireland*. See: [doh-social-work-review-ni-2022.pdf](https://health-ni.gov.uk/doh-social-work-review-ni-2022.pdf) (health-ni.gov.uk).

⁴ DoH (2024) *Children's Social Care Strategic Reform Programme – Annual Report 2023/2024* accessed at: [Children's Social Care Strategic Reform Programme - Annual Report 2023/24 | Department of Health](#).

The Social Care Collaborative Forum (the Collaborative Forum)⁵ was set up in response to the DoH proposals for the reform of adult social care. As a partnership, its purpose is to provide a formal mechanism for the DoH and representatives of the social care sector to work together as partners to build shared values and deliver improvements that will support and sustain social care now and into the future.



The Social Care Council executive staff co-chair and/or are joint leads on a number of workstreams of the Collaborative Forum.

The Social Care Council now has lead responsibility for the implementation of the second *Social Work and Social Care Research and Evidence Strategy (2020 - 2025)*.⁶ The 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)*.⁷ In order to support the Social Care Council Board to discharge its duties in relation to the research and evidence strategy a partnership as a subcommittee of Council has been established. The role of the Research and Evidence Partnership, which held its inaugural meeting in September 2024, is to encourage, promote and support strategic research and research-related activity within social work and social care.



Caption: Pictured is the inaugural meeting of the Research and Evidence Partnership, September 2024.

5 DoH (2024) Social Care Collaborative Forum – [Annual Report 2023-2024 accessed at: doh-sccf-annual-report-23-24.pdf](#).

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

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

*The Social Work Leadership Framework*⁸ (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.

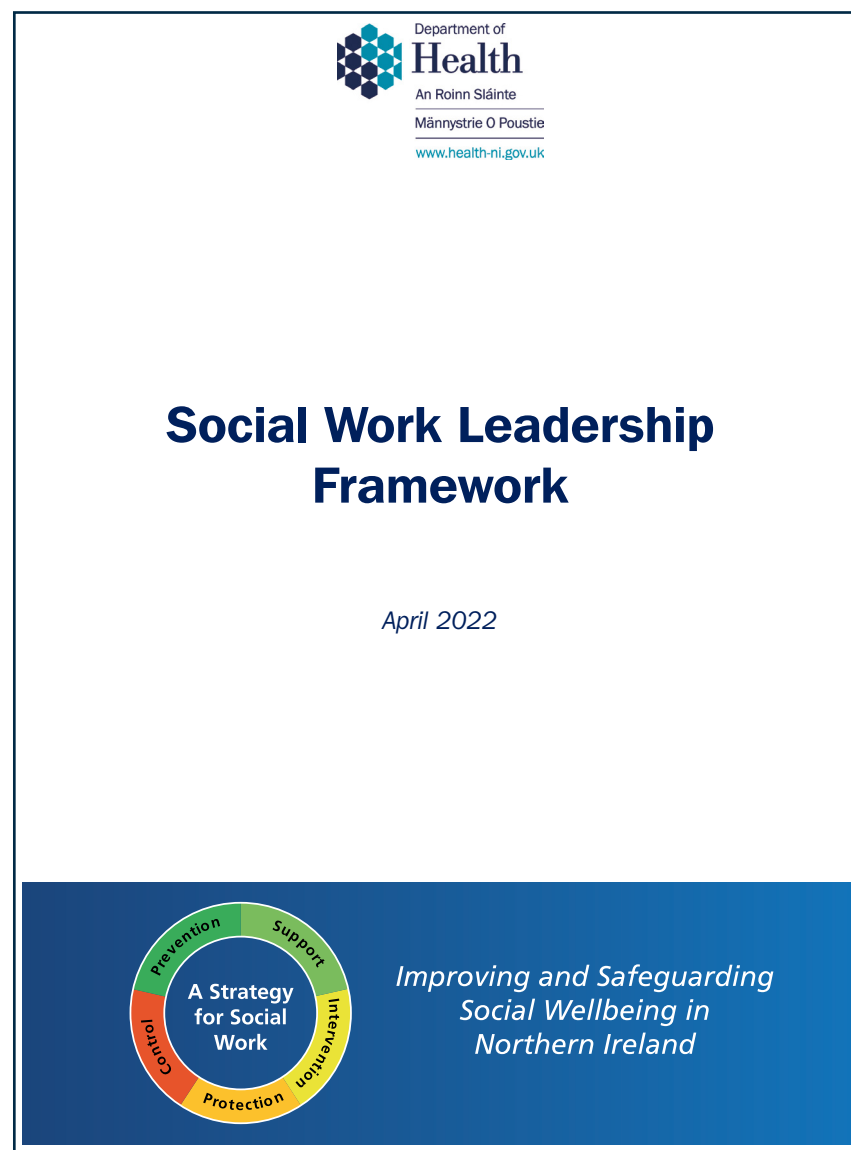
The Leadership Framework recognises that social work as a profession operates beyond the health and social care system and seeks to support professional leadership in probation, youth justice, education authority and in the voluntary and community sectors. As well as in health and social care, social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

The Social Care Council has worked with social work leaders across systems, supported by the Centre for Effective Services (CES), to develop an implementation plan to support this work. Four workstreams have been established including: Education and Continuous Professional Development (CPD), Employers, Research and Evidence and Communications and Engagement.

These major reform programmes are likely to impact social work services across all sectors including the community and voluntary sectors, justice, and education. In addition to these cross-cutting reforms, social work in a range of sectors contributes to significant transformation programmes,⁹ as part of a wider transformation of public services in NI.

This dynamic environment has framed the work of the Social Care Council during 2023-24, 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.



8 DoH (2022) *Social Work Leadership Framework*. See: [Social-Work-Leadership-Framework-final-version-15-April-22.pdf](#).

9 CJINI (2024) [Transforming the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland](#).

Supporting and developing the social work workforce

The Degree in Social Work

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. We have approved Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University and the Open University alongside a wide range of Designated Practice Learning Providers (DPLPs) to deliver the NI Degree in Social Work.

Table 2: 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 (BMC) or South West College(SWE).	*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 arrangements for the Degree



The Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership

Under the Rules for the *Approval of the Degree in Social Work*,¹⁰ we have established the Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership (the Degree Partnership) to coordinate regional arrangements for 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.

The Degree Partnership plays a critical role in ensuring regional consistency in the selection process, delivery of regional modules and in practice learning. The Degree Partnership will celebrate its 20th anniversary in December 2024.

Quality assurance

The Social Care Council provide assurance of quality and consistency through annual monitoring of the Degree Partnership; by considering outcomes and quality assurance reports from the Universities and their external examiners; and by considering outcomes and feedback on student experience of teaching and practice learning.

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 2023 – 2024, relates to degree delivery in the academic year 2022 – 2023. 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 current service delivery and workforce retention demands.

In 2023, a review team was established to complete the fourth periodic Review of the Degree in Social Work. The aims of this review of the Degree were agreed by the DoH Office of Social Services and the Strategic Advisory Group for Social Work Education and Training.¹¹ They agreed the following:

- The purpose of the Review of the Degree in Social Work is to examine the quality of provision measured against the Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work¹² (2015) and the Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work (2012).¹³
- Professional social work needs to be responsive and anticipatory to meet the challenges of changing need, growing demand and new ways of working. This review will therefore, test the extent to which the Degree in Social Work is forward looking and agile.

The review is now complete and has been approved by the Social Care Council Board. It will be distributed to partner organisations and stakeholders in December 2024. For the most part, the review revealed a positive picture of delivery of all aspects of the Degree, including practice learning. Some areas for development were identified, and an implementation plan to progress actions arising from these shall be developed in 2025.



The overall learning during my course has so far opened the door for me to develop my own sense of ethics and personal integrity something I hope to build on when I begin my practical education.

(First year student, UGR Review of the Degree Report 2024)



¹¹ The Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) was established by the Social Care Council to provide strategic direction for social work education and training in NI. Membership is drawn from government, employers and Higher and Further Education (HEFE) institutions.

¹² DHSSP/NISCC (2015), *Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work*.

¹³ NISCC (2012) *Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work*, see: [Rules-for-Approval-of-Degree.pdf](#).

Admissions

In regulating entry into the profession, through the Degree, we are ensuring that quality standards for the development of knowledge skills and values sit at the heart of social work practice.

With the exception of the Open University course, applications to the Degree are made via the UCAS system. Open University applications are made via employer nomination and interview process. Employers continue to see a keen interest in the OU Social Work Degree and have funded additional places on the programme. In 2022, during the pandemic, the Degree Partnership agreed to pilot an online interview platform as part of the admissions process. Due to technical issues and the stakeholder feedback the Partnership has agreed to return to in-person interviews for 2025 entry to the Degree.

In 2024, the DoH increased the number of funded social work training places available by 40, bringing the total for entry to the Degree to **325**. It has not yet been confirmed if the additional places shall be available for 2025 entry.

While the rate of applications increased between 2019 and 2021, the number has incrementally decreased since 2021. In 2024, there was an approximate 8% reduction in applicants to QUB, UU, SWC and BMC compared to 2023, with some variation across programmes and age range. One university did increase its applications to the Relevant Graduate Route (RGR) by approximately 21% on the previous year, but this was not sufficient to ensure that the additional places for 2024 could be allocated solely to the RGR as planned.

These figures are consistent with UCAS data on declining applications to UK universities across a range of professional training programmes, particularly from mature students. The effect of this trend in reducing applications from mature

students is most likely to be seen in RGR applications and will need to be monitored closely in the next few years.

Despite the reduction in applicants for the 2023 entry to conventional university programmes, interest in social work remains fairly healthy. In response to the continuing decline in applications the Social Care Council reconvened the Promotion of the Degree in Social Work group, consisting of academic and employer partners. The Degree Partnership analysis of trends in applications helps to inform DoH funded and other promotional activity.



Practice learning

The allocation of Practice Learning Opportunities (PLO) continues to be a complex process. The Degree Partnership ably manage the continuing challenges posed through specific student learning needs, individual circumstances and PLO availability. The Degree Partnership work closely with employers to support the delivery of practice learning and to resolve issues as they arise.



Being on placement really made me realise that I do want to be a social worker it was only on placement that all of elements clicked together and I enjoyed the variation and human element of PLO.

(Level 2 student, UGR – Review of the Degree Report 2024)



Good quality PLOs, as part of the student experience, supports our 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, with 185 days in total. Employers wishing to provide PLOs are required to meet Social Care Council's *Standards for Practice Learning for the Degree in Social Work*¹⁴ to become a Designated Practice Learning Provider (DPLP). There are currently 21 DPLPs delivering more than 500 PLOs annually across a range of sectors and service user groups. In 2022-2023, 42 new sites were developed, 16 of which were in children and family settings and 26 in adult services.

Of the PLO sites available, 68 were not used. 18 were in adult and 50 in children and family services. Student withdrawals, individual circumstances and conflicts of interest accounted for a number of the sites being unused, but the majority were unallocated. This highlights the complex nature of PLO allocation in order to meet the needs of the system and individual students. In light of increasing pressures on the availability of PLOs the Degree Partnership and Social Care Council will continue to focus on maximising the use of available sites. An IT solution to allocating PLOs is currently being explored by the Degree Partnership and the Social Care Council.

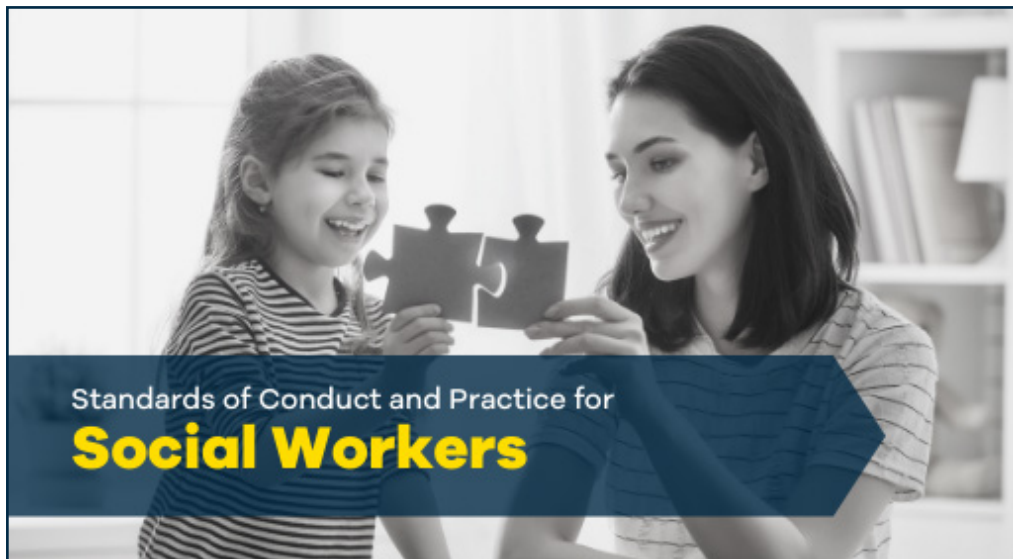
The community and voluntary sector in NI continue to provide a diverse range of social work led services. The provision of practice learning in the sector is supported by the Voluntary Organisation Communication and Learning Service (VOCALS), a coordinating body funded by DoH through the Social Care Council to support social work education and training. VOCALS have an important role and provides assurance of quality standards for practice learning in the sector. A review of PLO provision was completed in 2022-23 and the Social Council Council shall engage with the sector to determine how the outcomes inform PLO configuration going forward. Three Practice Learning Centres (PLCs) are contracted annually to provide PLOs in the third sector and ensure the availability and quality of PLOs in the in community and voluntary sector.

¹⁴ NISCC (2020) The Standards for Practice learning for the Degree in Social Work, accessible at: [Standards-of-Practice-Learning-for-the-D-in-SW-Dec-2020.pdf](#).

Professional in Practice

The *Rules for Approval of Post Qualifying Education and Training for Social Workers and the Recognition of the Attainment of Standards of Proficiency*¹⁵ establish the Social Care Council's role and function in relation to post qualification education and training for social workers in NI. These PiP Rules give the Social Care Council authority to set standards of proficiency and to approve education and training courses within the PiP Framework.

As the continuous professional development framework for social workers, the PiP Framework is the mechanism for social workers in NI to gain recognition for their learning and development. It aims to support and recognise social work professional development across the spectrum of learning, providing a quality benchmark for knowledge, skills and values that underpin safe and effective practice.



Engagement with the PiP Framework demonstrates commitment by social workers, their employers and educators to work in partnership to improve the delivery and experience of social work for people who need and use services. Qualified social workers are required, as part of their registration, to continuously improve and develop their knowledge and skills on an on-going basis. The PiP Framework provides a comprehensive system that allows us to support and recognise all professional development activity.

As a social worker, you must be accountable for the quality of your work and take responsibility for maintaining and improving your knowledge and skills.

¹⁵ NISCC (2020) Rules for Approval of Approval of Post Qualifying Education and Training for Social Workers and the Recognition of the Attainment of Standards of Proficiency, accessible at: [2020-11-18_PiP_Rules_Final4-2.pdf](#).

The Social Care Council work with the Professional in Practice Partnership Committee to agree the strategic direction for the Framework and Council staff manage the operational business as the awarding body for Framework. As such we confer professional awards on social workers who have demonstrated competence and capability in their chosen area of practice.

The Framework consists of four professional awards at Consolidation, Specialist, Leadership and Strategic and Advanced Scholarship levels. Each award is comprised of up to nine requirements, crafted as competence statements. A social worker must provide evidence of proficiency in each requirement to achieve their professional award.

Social Workers currently have four pathways to achievement:

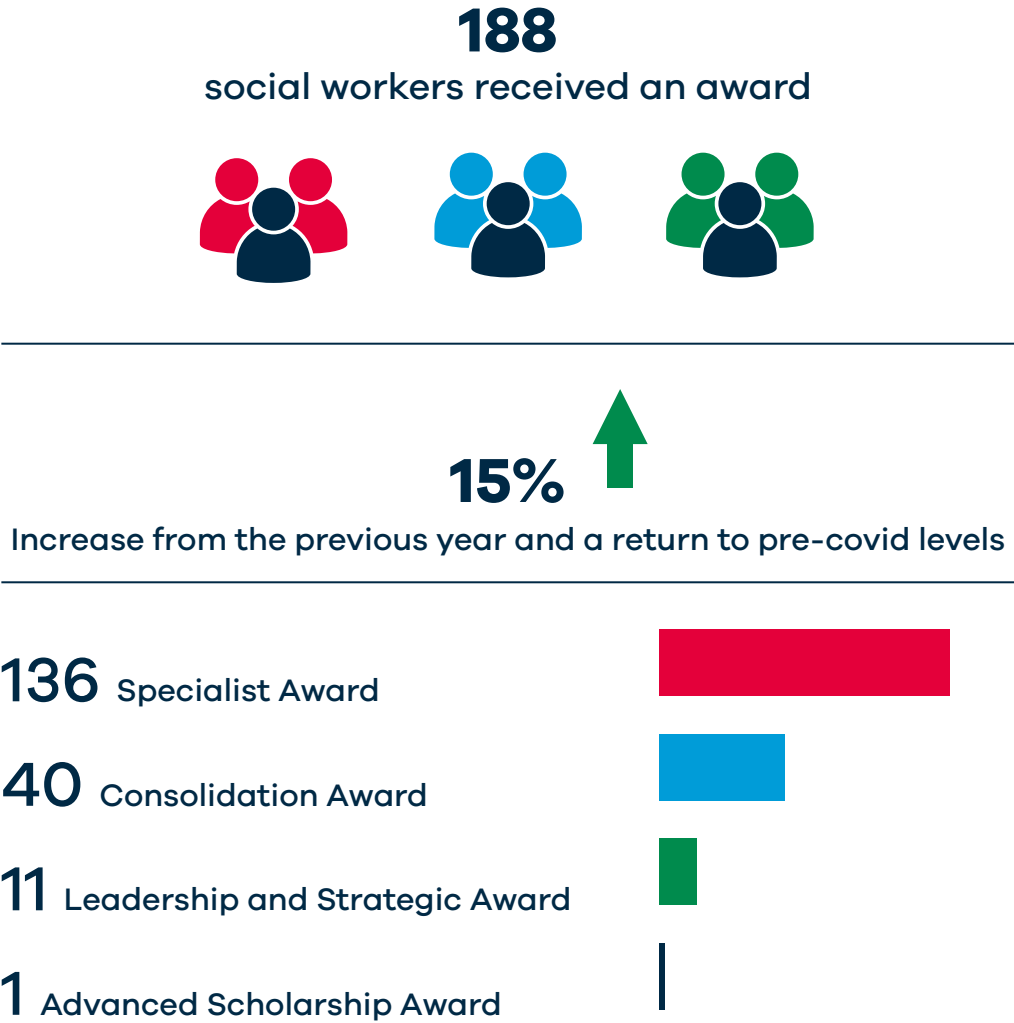
- Credit Accumulation Route (CAR) (Under review).
- Approved Programme Route (APR).
- Work Based Learning Route (WBLR).
- Individual Assessment Route (IAR).

A social worker’s achievement within the PiP framework provides evidence that they have met their registration requirements in relation to continuous professional development.

Professional in Practice awards and achievements

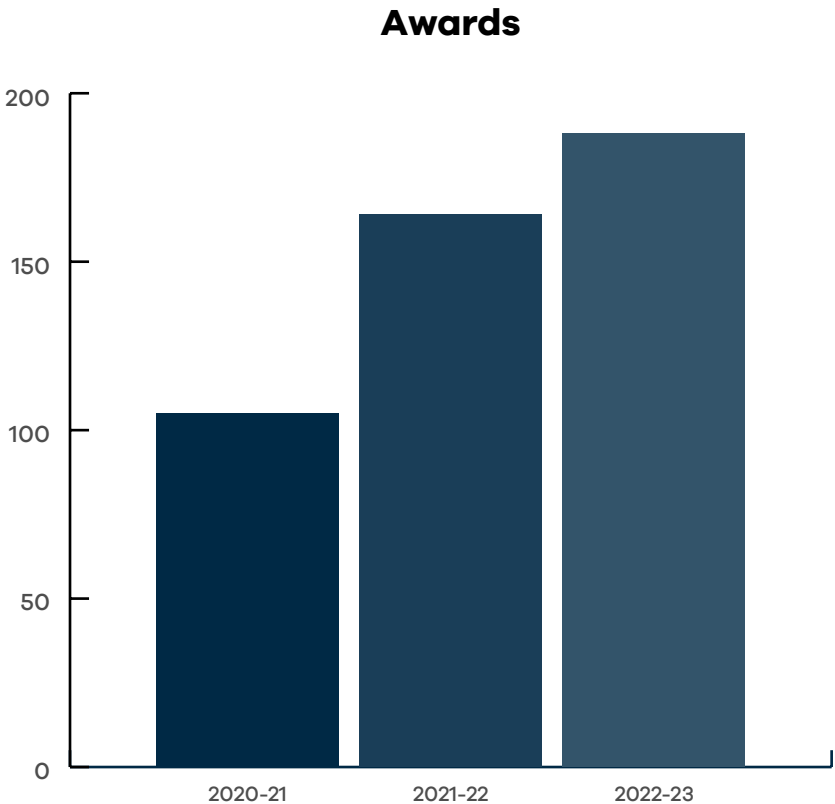
Achieving a Professional Award in the PiP Framework is the culmination of hard work, commitment and dedication by social workers, their employers and support network. Each year the accomplishments of social workers are recognised at the Annual Professional in Practice Award Ceremony.

Figure 3: Awards outcomes 2023



The Specialist Award continues to account for the majority of awards. This is reflective of the number of PiP Approved Programmes aligned to this award (15 out of 21). In addition to those completing full awards, **908** social workers attained part-achievement, meaning a total of **1,096** social workers achieved in the Framework in this business year.

Figure 4: Graph showing the number of social workers completing PiP Awards 2020 -2023



We have witnessed an upward trend in the number of social workers completing PiP Awards over the past 3 years. Figure 3 shows an increase of 35% from 105 Awards in 2020-21 to 164 in 2021-22 and the further increase of 15% in 2022-23. This brings levels of full achievement beyond pre-pandemic levels.



The Professional in Practice Awards are a unique opportunity to demonstrate the dedication and innovation of many of Northern Ireland’s dedicated and compassionate social workers and to hear about the commitment they make to ever improving their social work practice.

Paul Martin, Chair of the Social Care Council Board,
September 2023

Professional in Practice routes to achievement

Approved Programme Route

There are currently 19 programmes approved within the PiP Framework, this number has reduced due to the amalgamation of two programmes into one and the pausing of a programme for redevelopment. The following programmes were presented for re-approval during the year:

- PG Dip in Health and Social Care Management.
- PG Cert/PG Dip Perinatal Mental Health.
- Child, Adolescent and Family Work: A Psychoanalytic Observational Approach.
- MSc Professional Development in Social Work.

All four programmes were approved with conditions and/or recommendations. As part of the re-approval of the MSc in Professional Development, delivered through a collaboration between UU and employers, the Approval Panel set a condition that the Social Care Council shall appoint 'independent visitors' to review the Initial Professional Development and NI Practice Teacher Training programmes at the end of the first year of delivery. The MSc in Professional Development in Social Work incorporates seven PiP Approved programmes as modules of the MSc. The Social Care Council has had authority to appoint visitors to any relevant course, as set out in Section 13 of the Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland) since 2001 but has not previously used this authority. The independent visitors will review the content and delivery of both programmes against the Social Care Council Standards for Programme Approval.



The partnership arrangements between employers and providers are excellent and to be admired. The employer voice is heard effectively, which is not always widespread. There is significant collaborative practice.

Approval Panel, External Assessor comments, 2024



As the awarding body for the PiP Framework the Social Care Council has responsibility for the governance and quality assurance of all programmes approved within the Framework through an annual monitoring process; and for the processing and quality assurance of intakes and outcomes information for all social workers who participate in approved programmes. Each programme is allocated a Professional Adviser who attends Joint Management Board meetings to support development and ensure standards are maintained.

A total of seven programmes were subject to annual monitoring, six delivered at QUB and one delivered by the HSC Leadership Centre. Five programmes met the standards in full, one required the submission of additional information and one programme did not submit for annual monitoring. This has been escalated within the relevant provider organisation and they have been made aware that failure to provide relevant information puts the approval within the PiP Framework at risk.

One of the key functions of the PiP Team is the processing and quality assurance of intake and outcome data received from approved programme providers in relation to social workers participating in programmes. In this reporting period **1,028**

social work places on modules, across the suite of approved programmes, were processed and quality assured and of these **830** were assessed as competent with the remainder either deferrals, withdrawals or assessed as not yet competent. This represents a reduction in the number of places being taken up by social workers on programmes and this will require further monitoring and analysis in the next reporting year to determine trends, identify potential causes and monitor the impact on all of the routes within the Framework.

Individual Assessment Route (IAR)

IAR offers an accessible and flexible route 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:

- Written assignments.
- Direct observations.
- Verbal presentations.
- Accreditation for Prior Learning (ARL).
- In-Service training submissions.

In this business year a total of 72 submissions were made using the IAR, representing a 38% increase on the previous year. Almost 70% of these were for requirements within the Consolidation Award (49). This route tends to be used for the purpose of achieving mandatory registration requirements or the completion of an Award, however we do have a growing number of candidates who are using this route to achieve full Leadership and Strategic Awards.

The overall quality of IAR submissions is reflected in 83% being assessed as competent this year, an increase of over 1% from the previous year. The IAR assessment process is quality assured in the following ways:

- Training and standardisation of assessors, nominated by their employers.
- External assessor oversight.

There are currently 59 active IAR assessors trained and quality assured by the Social Care Council across all partner agencies. In this reporting period 11 new assessors were trained and 31 assessors attended standardisation training.



I reviewed a selection of recorded submissions and found them to be of a very high standard. It is important that candidates are permitted to submit their work in a medium that works best for them and I view this option of recorded statements as an example of best practice in terms of assessment.

IAR External Assessor comment on verbal presentations, 2024



Credit Accumulation Route (CAR)

Following a detailed review and redesign this route is now ready to be redeveloped on the IT system. In the interim a manual process is in place so that candidates are not disadvantaged and can continue to use their credits to achieve within the Framework. The Social Care Council, along with our partners engaged in an iterative process which involved making incremental changes to the route and then evaluating the impact.

Nine submissions we made via the CAR in this reporting period, six of which were assessed as competent, one was partially competent and one was referred.

Levels of engagement with CAR remain lower than expected, however integrating the assessment process with the IAR from 2024 will add quality assurance and increased opportunity for submissions.

Work Based Learning Route (WBLR)

The Work Based Learning Route (WBLR) has developed to provide a route that enabled employers to fully integrate a growing range of in-house training opportunities into the PiP Framework and to enable social workers to gain recognition for their training and meet their Post Registration Training and Learning (PRTL) requirements.

In 2023, governance arrangements relating to the WBLR were reviewed and associated guidance updated. Courses seeking approval as a WBLR are now considered for approved by the PiP Approval Panel.

Two courses successfully submitted for approval in November 2023:

- Leading Social Work – Stronger Together.
- Regional Quality Improvement – Social Work .

The ‘Leading Social Work – Stronger Together’ had been approved previously but the approval had lapsed, resulting in two cohorts of social workers completing the course without PiP approved status. Social workers completing the Stronger Together programme during this period had the option of submitting via the IAR route but few chose to do so.

A third course, the Therapeutic Crisis Intervention Course (TCI) was approved subject to conditions at the April 2024 Approval Panel and will return to a later panel seeking full approval.

Work based learning route outcomes:

- Signs of Safety – six social workers.
- Quality Improvement in Social Work – fifteen social workers.
- Leading Social Work – one social worker.

The PiP Framework provides a benchmark for safety, quality, improvement and continued fitness for practice for social workers. As we look to the future and seek to continuously improve we will continue to engage with employers, registrants and learning providers to improve participation and achievement within the PiP Framework.

Regulation of the social work workforce

Maintaining registration

All Social Care Council registrants are required 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 factors, this section of the report will focus on our regulatory activity connected to the Assessed Year in Employment (AYE), mandatory PiP requirements, Post Registration Training and Learning (PRTL) and Internationally Qualified Social Workers (IQSW).

The Social Care Council recognises that how and where social workers learn and develop has evolved over time. It is essential that the way in which we support professional development reflects this context and that social workers have access to flexible learning resources that have standards and values at their core and promote opportunities for reflective learning. In 2024 two learning resources for social workers were launched. The Human Rights for Social Workers¹⁶ resource, was developed to support social workers and social work students to understand human rights, the legal framework and application in practice.



This resource puts services users at the centre of decision making processes and offers useful frameworks, looking at the different situations that social workers are likely to work in and how human rights might be applied.

Dr Nazia Latif, Human Rights Consultant at Right Practice and content author



In November 2024 the Minister of Health launched, Understanding Children and Young People's Digital Learning Series. Four resources were developed in partnership with Ulster University, Queens University and the DoH to support understanding of developmental norms and factors associated with childhood adversity for children and young people aged 0-18 years.

- Understanding Child development 0-6 years¹⁷
- Understanding Children and Young People 7-12 years¹⁸
- Understanding Adolescent Development and issues 13-18 years¹⁹
- Understanding Child and Young People's development – Policy and Legislation²⁰

¹⁶ [Human Rights for Social Workers - NISCC Learning Zone.](#)

¹⁷ [Understanding Child Development: 0-6 Years - NISCC Learning Zone.](#)

¹⁸ [Understanding Children and Young People: 7-12 Years - NISCC Learning Zone.](#)

¹⁹ [Understanding Adolescent Development and Issues: 13-18 Years - NISCC Learning Zone.](#)

²⁰ [Understanding Child and Young People's Development: Policy and Legislation - NISCC Learning Zone.](#)



Pictured: Health Minister Nesbit along with some of the project team launching the child development resources.

An increasing number of social workers are being employed in contexts that have not previously employed a social worker, including some schools and the private sector. In recognition of this and to ensure that employers understand standards and continuous professional development requirements guidance for new employers²¹ was developed in 2023 and launched this year.



School social workers work closely with the students, their family members/carers, as well as the school and statutory services to promote participation and achievement. This guidance helps to support the conditions for social workers to carry out this important work, while also allowing them to thrive professionally.

Aine Morrison, Chief Social Worker, DoH



21 NISCC (2024) *Employing a Social Worker, Guidance for new employers*, available at: [Employing-a-Social-Worker-Guidance-for-New-Employers.pdf](#).

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.

Northern Ireland

Social

Care

Council

The Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) for Newly Qualified Social Workers in Northern Ireland

Revised Guidance for AYE Registrants, Employers, and
Supervising Social Workers

March 2022

AYE audit

Reforms to social work education introduced in 2004 included a requirement for 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 itself 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 the circular noted above.

A 10% sample of those due to complete their AYE in June each year is selected at random. Twenty-two social workers due to complete their AYE in June 2023 were selected for audit. In addition, seven social workers who had been granted extensions in 2022 were included in the audit (N=29). The audit sample represented a range of employers across sectors with a majority of 83% (N=24) from Health and Social Care Trust and 17% (N=5) from third sector, Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) and Education Authority (EA) employers, reflecting the employment trends for newly qualified social workers (NQSWs). Five of the 29 were granted extensions to the next audit point and three social workers were ineligible for audit.

Of the 21 submissions audited 13.6% (n=2) of NQSWs had moved post during their AYE. This was a reduction from the previous audit in 2022 when 37.7% (n = 9) social workers had changed post, within and across sectors. Changes in recruitment practices and cessation social work employers using agency contracts in Health and Social Care Trusts from June 2023 may go some way to explaining this reduction in movement between posts in the AYE.

While the NI Review of Children's Social Care (the Review) exposed particular pressures in the children's social care workforce, with vacancy rates between 26% and 40%, provision across all sectors have experienced unprecedented pressures. A number of reflective statements reviewed as part of the audit acknowledged the experience and impact of working in teams with high vacancy rates and reduced resources. The AYE leadership network, co-chaired by Social Care Council executive staff, work together to ensure consistency, share learning and improve quality.



Research²² highlights the criticality of the first two years in practice as a period of consolidation for new social workers. The DoH published the *Social Work (NI) Supervision Policy*²³ in March 2024 which emphasizes the critical importance of professional supervision provided to the AYE standards and how the Social Care Council audits have provided evidence of how social workers value supervision;



NISCC Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) audits strongly indicate that NQSWs value individual supervision not just to review cases and discuss actions but as a supportive time with their line manager to discuss professional development, grow in confidence, share anxieties and build coping skills and resilience. High quality, regular supervision is strongly linked to a positive experience of the first year in employment and therefore to retention of staff.

Aine Morrison, Chief Social Worker, DoH



We are satisfied that the quality of evidence used by employers to verify registrant's suitability for registration met the Social Care Council's standards. The audit showed that standards were met consistently across all sectors in relation to:

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

22 SSSC (2022) *Newly qualified social workers in Scotland: a five-year longitudinal study*. Available at: [Newly qualified social workers in Scotland - a five-year longitudinal study \(8\).pdf](#).

23 DoH (2024) *Social Work (NI) Supervision Policy*. Available at: [doh-social-work-supervision-policy-2024.pdf](#).

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 2023, **232** social workers completed these requirements (this figure includes those previously granted extensions due to 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 Team and Workforce Development Team in the Social Care Council. Registrants who are granted extensions are tracked by Registration and Fitness to Practise staff to ensure they meet the registration condition.

Post Registration Training and Learning (PRTL)

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

In order to monitor compliance with the requirement the Social Care Council audit a sample of registrants due to renew at two points in the year, June and December. A 5% sample of those due to renew is selected at each point. Across the two audit points in 2023/2024 a total of 108 social workers were called for audit and 81 social workers submitted.

A total of 14 (14.3%) social workers requested deferrals due to exceptional circumstances. Registrants requesting a deferral must complete a deferral form, agreed and signed by an agency governance lead as part of the request. Those granted deferrals are required to submit at the next audit point or in exceptional circumstances a further audit point. A small number of registrants called for audit voluntarily removed or moved to Part 2 of the register.

Social workers audited worked in Health and Social Care Trusts, the justice, education and community and voluntary sectors. Assessors noted the breadth of learning being undertaken including specialist training that reflected practice settings. The PRTL audit process is managed by a lead professional adviser supported by a panel of advisers. A standardisation exercise and second reading of borderline and other submissions provides assurance that appraisal of evidence is fair and consistent. While the overall quality of submissions was high, 18 submissions were assessed as requiring further work and registrants were asked to resubmit within 14 days of receipt of feedback. All submissions were deemed to have met the required standard following these resubmissions.

Approximately 40% of the audit pool had 15 years' experience, or more, in social work practice. A number of those with long service reflected on the richness of their experience in different sectors and contexts, some of which was post retirement from a substantive post. A strong commitment to, and pride in, social work was evident in these submissions with many in senior positions working at strategic levels, developing training or helping to shape policy and practice. It may be timely to consider how we create opportunities for late career social workers to mentor and support earlier career social workers in a more structured way.

Internationally Qualified Social Workers (ISQW)

The Social Care Council welcomes applications from Internationally Qualified Social Workers (IQSWs) to join the register. There are currently 112 IQSWs registered with the Social Care Council. This figure includes those employed in the Republic of Ireland but required to hold dual registration to practice as a social worker in NI where families and service user location straddle both sides of the border.

Before 2021 applications from social workers who 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 the 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*²⁴ were amended to include a requirement that applicants for registration who undergo social work training outside the United Kingdom, must demonstrate that they have the necessary knowledge of English to practise social work.

During the reporting period 13 applications for registration were received, including four from India and three from North America. Six IQSW assessment panels were held, seven²⁵ applications approved and two compensation measures successfully completed.

Delays in processing applications are most commonly due to delays in information being provided by applicants or academic institutions overseas.



Internationally Qualified Social Worker

²⁴ NISCC (2022) Registration Rules. Available at: [20220119_Registration-Rules-2022_Final_Signed_CC.pdf](#).

²⁵ Applications may have been in process prior to reporting period.

Social work education and workforce regulation: Reflections and challenges

Supporting 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 our work as a regulator. Our model of regulation as outlined in the introduction of this report firmly positions partnership as a central pillar to the approach, and central to partnership is developing and maintaining relationships with key stakeholders. Working with others to maintain standards, in the context of fiscal, workforce and workload pressures reinforces the value of the strong and formalised partnership arrangements supporting social work education and training in NI. Through existing and emerging partnerships, we have listened to stakeholders and developed projects, resources and our services to support the delivery of safe, quality and effective care.

The Social Care Council's role as a systems leader connecting social work across sectors positions us to support the profession to meet current challenges and ensure that we have a skilled and agile workforce. Our responsibilities for the implementation of the *Social Work and Social Care Research and Evidence Strategy* and the *Social Work Leadership Framework* along with the DoH sponsored strategic reform boards, offer new opportunities 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 and safeguarding the social wellbeing of our population. Like others working within pressurised systems, we need to remain mindful of the tension between pace and capacity as we work together to move the strategic agenda forward.

The outcomes from our regulatory activity during 2023/2024 provides assurance that social work education and training in NI has maintained quality standards and can support the workforce to meet the challenges ahead. The commitment of student social workers and social workers, and those who support them, wherever they are in their journey is impressive. This commitment is also critical to the future position of the profession in leading and effecting system wide change. We are grateful to the many partners who have supported us in our delivery of our statutory functions.

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