

The Moral and Fiscal Costs of Social Worker Turnover in Child Protection Social Work

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Three-dimensional study:

- 1. Economic Analysis of social worker turnover – Economic Policy Centre Ulster University, Gillian Martin**
- 2. Honest Broker Service – administrative data analysis on social worker turnover and outcomes for children including social worker turnover and areas of multiple deprivation analysis**
- 3. Assessing the impact of social worker instability in child protection social work from a service user perspective**

WE ARE UU



Assessing the impact of workforce instability in children's social work from a service user perspective



Introduction and Context

Why workforce stability matters in children's social work

Context

High turnover and vacancies in children's social work are endemic across jurisdictions, impacting the most vulnerable

Focus

This presentation centres the voices of service users - care leavers, parents, foster carers, and advocates on how instability affects them

Objective

To reframe turnover not just as a staffing issue, but as a critical factor in child protection outcomes

Section

Why Turnover Matters?

Relational loss, not just organisational churn

Loss of Relationship

Turnover severs critical attachments between social workers and families during periods of deep vulnerability

Impact on Children

Repeated changes destabilise children, disrupt placements, and delay permanency

A Deeper Cost

Relational loss compounds trauma and reduces engagement with the system

Evidence from the Literature (1/5)

What we already know from four decades of research on the impact of social worker turnover on children, families, and carers within child protection systems

Scoping review (MacLochlainn et al., 2025a)

Review of 11 studies from peer-reviewed journals, grey literature & commissioned reports

Findings

Subsequently, the literature was organised into four domains of interest:

1. Relationship disruption and trust erosion
2. Permanency and placement instability
3. Emotional and psychological impacts
4. Organisational and structural mediators (workload, supervision, teams)

Evidence from the Literature (2/5)

What we already know from four decades of research on the impact of social worker turnover on children, families, and carers within child protection systems

Findings

Domain 1

- *Relationship disruption and trust erosion*

Frequent changes in social workers undermine the development of consistent, trusting relationships between children, families, and professionals

Turnover fundamentally disrupts relational continuity

These findings underscore the importance of recognising turnover not just as an operational issue, but as a disruption with profound emotional and developmental consequences for children in care

Evidence from the Literature (3/5)

What we already know from four decades of research on the impact of social worker turnover on children, families, and carers within child protection systems

Findings

Domain 2

- *Permanency and placement instability*

Turnover contributes to delays in achieving stable care arrangements for children and adolescents and increases the likelihood of multiple placements

The findings shows that many children in the care system continue to experience unacceptable levels of disruption and instability in their lives

Instability not only delays permanency planning but can also have lasting consequences on trust, attachment, and educational attainment

Evidence from the Literature (4/5)

What we already know from four decades of research on the impact of social worker turnover on children, families, and carers within child protection systems

Findings

Domain 3

- *Emotional and psychological impacts*

Examine the distress, confusion, and sense of loss experienced by children and carers due to workforce instability

Care-experienced young people frequently reported feelings of abandonment, grief, and frustration, especially when forced to repeatedly build and then lose relationships with professionals

Evidence from the Literature (5/5)

What we already know from four decades of research on the impact of social worker turnover on children, families, and carers within child protection systems

Findings

Domain 4

- *Organisational and structural mediators*

Explored how systemic factors such as caseload pressures, supportive supervision, and team composition influence the effects of turnover on service delivery

Findings reinforce the importance of addressing not only workforce stability, but also, the broader organisational context in which social workers operate

Collectively, these studies suggest that turnover cannot be understood in isolation from wider organisational and systemic conditions

How does social worker turnover effect the quality of service received by children and families in the child protection system?

Section

Policy

- The Department of Health's (DoH) 'Social Work Workforce Review (2022) in Northern Ireland (NI)' proposed strategies to improve the supply, recruitment, and retention of social workers
- The aim is to address workforce needs and ensure a stable workforce capable of providing safe, high-quality social work services (DoH-NI, 2022)
- The review identified 'retention' as one of their six 'Strategic Themes' to ensure the social work workforce's ability to meet future challenges (DoH-NI, 2022)
- Recommendation 2b, of the Workforce Review set out the requirement for safe staffing workloads, as a means of workforce wellbeing, retention and service continuity.
- Safer and Effective Staffing Research and Policy Development in Social Work was commissioned by DoHNI (2023-2025) which assessed workload regionally for children's services and estimated 'safer and effective' workloads prior to upcoming policy and legislation in this domain (2026-2028) (McFadden et al 2024; 2025)

Current Study

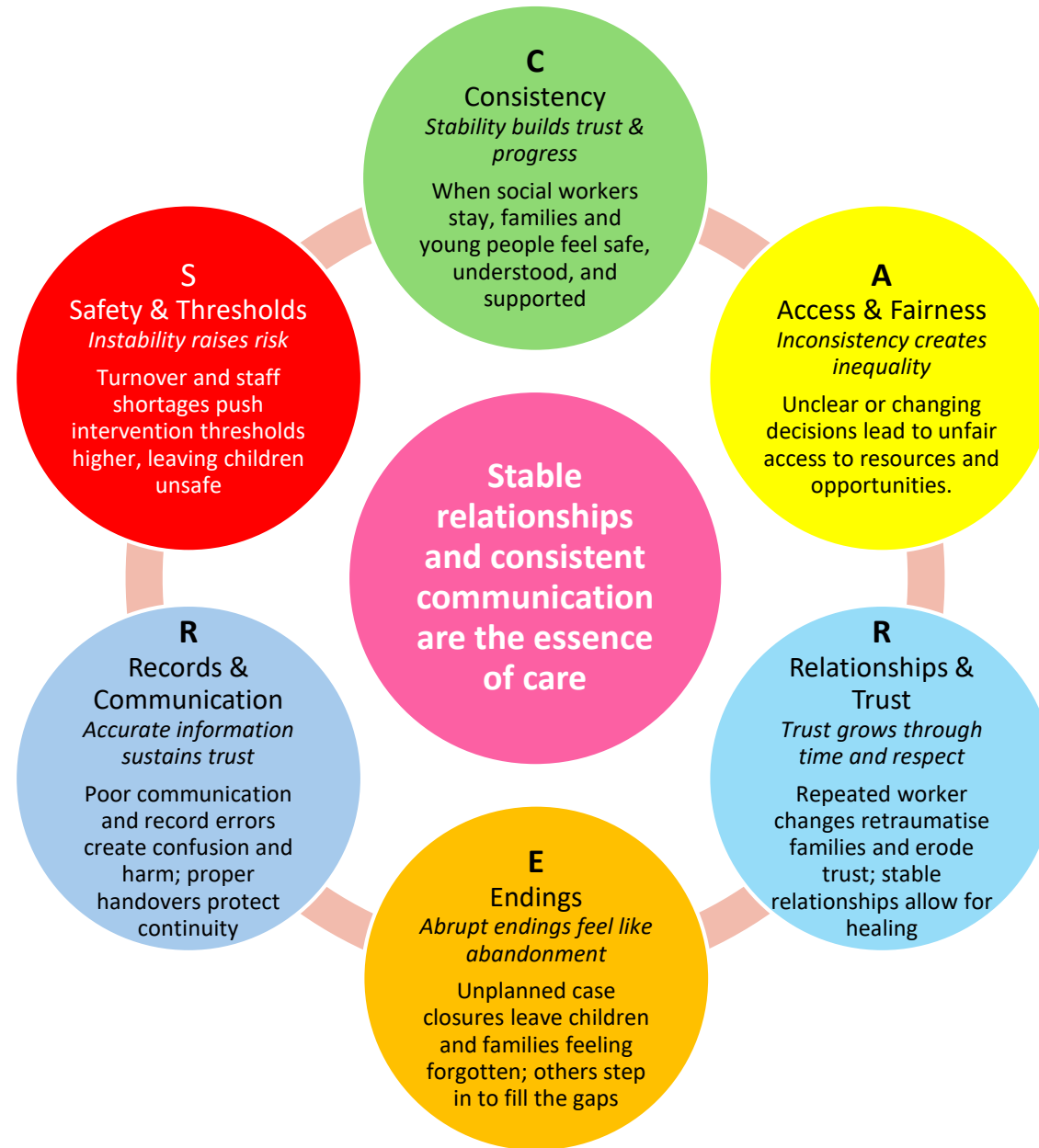
Why is this study important?

- This study addresses a critical and underexplored dimension of workforce instability in children's social work, i.e. its impact on service users, including young people, families, and carers
- This research seeks to fill that gap by exploring the moral and relational costs associated with turnover, particularly in terms of disrupted relationships, loss of trust, and reduced continuity of care

Methodology

Thematic Analysis

- A total of eighteen (n=18) interviews comprising of eight (n=8) care leavers, six (n=6) foster carers and four (n=4) parents
- A total of three (n=3) focus groups, with advocacy group representatives of care experienced children (VOYPIC, Praxis Care, and PASNet), who have experience of child protection social work services



The CARERS Framework

Findings (1/7)

The CARERS framework: Six domains were turnover impacts children and families

Consistency

Stable relationships build trust and improve outcomes

Access & Fairness

Workforce instability leads to unpredictable access to support, resources, and opportunities

Relationships & Trust

Frequent change erodes engagement, retraumatizes families

Endings & Abandonment

When social workers left without warning, participants were left with confusion, uncertainty, and emotional pain

Records & Communication

Participants described missing files, inaccurate information, and confusing or inconsistent communication

Safety & Thresholds

Turnover and chronic staff shortages were affecting safety and risk management within children's services

Findings (2/7)

CARERS Theme 1: **C**onsistency - The foundation of trust, safety, and planning

The Revolving Door

- Families forced to repeat stories; children feel abandoned
- The frequency of changes left participants feeling invisible, destabilised, and mistrustful

Transformative Stability

- Participants linked stable relationships with better communication, smoother planning, and a stronger sense of being supported

Team-Level Consistency

- Shared practice values can buffer against individual turnover

Findings (3/7)

CARERS Theme 2: **A**ccess & Fairness - The 'entitlement lottery' and rising thresholds

Inconsistent Decisions

- Support varies based on who answers the phone

Missed Reviews

- Unallocated cases stall progress and access to rights

Staff Filling Gaps

- Advocates take on roles meant for statutory teams

Findings (4/7)

CARERS Theme 3: Relationships & Trust - Building – or breaking – the foundation of support

Retelling Stories

- Each new worker forces families to relive difficult histories

Judged or Heard

- Turnover shifts perception from support to scrutiny

Transformational Bonds

- Long-term workers often credited with life-changing outcomes

Findings (5/7)

CARERS Theme 4: Endings & Abandonment

Abrupt Exits

- Support ends without warning, eroding trust

Falling Through Cracks

- Unallocated periods mean missed care and oversight

Learned Hopelessness

- Young people stop asking for help, expecting rejection

Findings (6/7)

CARERS Theme 5: **R**ecords & Communication – Poor handovers multiply harm

Misinformation

- Inaccurate files lead to damaging court or care decisions

Communication Blackouts

- Young people unaware of changes, feel abandoned

Fixable Failures

- Simple steps like joint handovers could prevent harm

Findings (7/7)

CARERS Theme 6: **S**afety & Thresholds – When help comes too late

Rising Thresholds

- Fewer workers means delayed or denied intervention

Displaced Risk

- Carers and advocates asked to manage risk beyond their role

Crisis Response Culture

- Support often triggered only after harm occurs

Life Story Work

- Children's narratives (life-story) were often left incomplete as workers changed, files were misplaced, or processes stalled

Estimating the Fiscal Cost of Social Worker Turnover in Northern Ireland

Gillian Martin, Senior Economist, EPC Ulster University



Calculating the cost of staff turnover

Turnover costs (£) = Lost employees x Costs (£, per employee)

Lost employees = Headcount x turnover (%)

Costs (£, per employee) = Cost of hiring (Advertising, HR staff time) + Training and onboarding (e.g induction training) + Learning and development (ongoing training) + Opportunity cost of unfilled role (productivity)

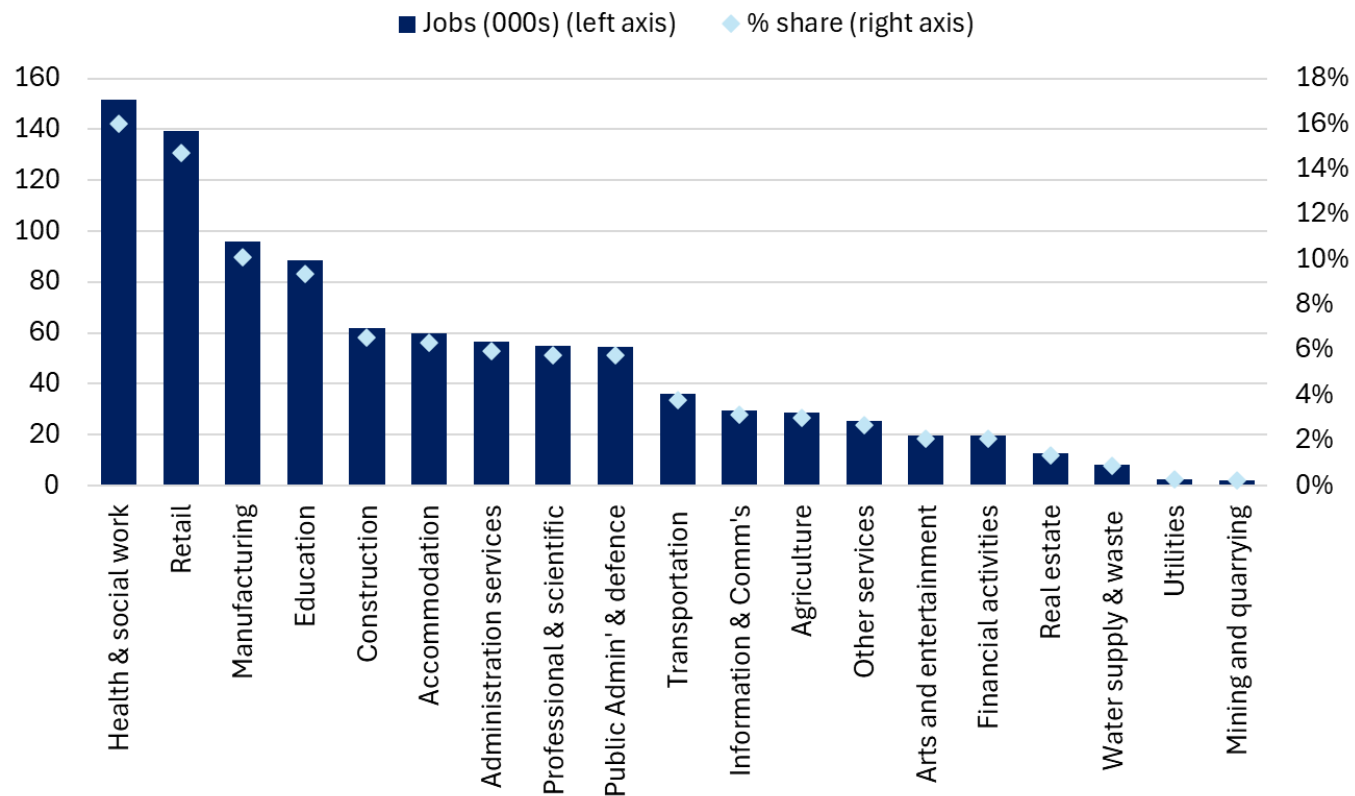
Collecting Data on Social Workers

Source	Information
Nomis- Workforce Jobs (WFJ)	Provides headline sectoral data across the UK, WFJ include employees, self-employed, HM Forces and government supported trainees.
NISRA- Quarterly Employment Survey	Quarterly estimates that feed into the WFJ for the UK, the survey measures the number of <u>employee jobs</u> including a breakdown at 2-digit SIC level. At a <u>2-digit level</u> , Human health activities, Residential care activities and Social work activities without accommodation make up the Health and Social care headline sector. The Survey measures the jobs not number of people with jobs, a person can have one more than one job and some jobs may be shared.
NISRA- Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES)	Collects information on the business structure and employee jobs across NI. The employee jobs are collected at a headline sectoral level i.e Health and Social Care and broken down at 2-5 Digit SIC levels.
NOMIS- Annual Population Survey	UK wide survey, breakdown by employee/self-employed, gender, full-time, part-time and occupation available.
NI HSC Workforce Census 2024 & HSC NI Quarterly Workforce Bulletin	Published by DOH and NISRA figures breakdown employment by staff group and headcount and wholetime equivalent.
NI Social Care Council	Collects data on social workers based on the number registered.

Health & Social Care Jobs in NI

Headline information

Total workforce jobs by sector, NI, 2024



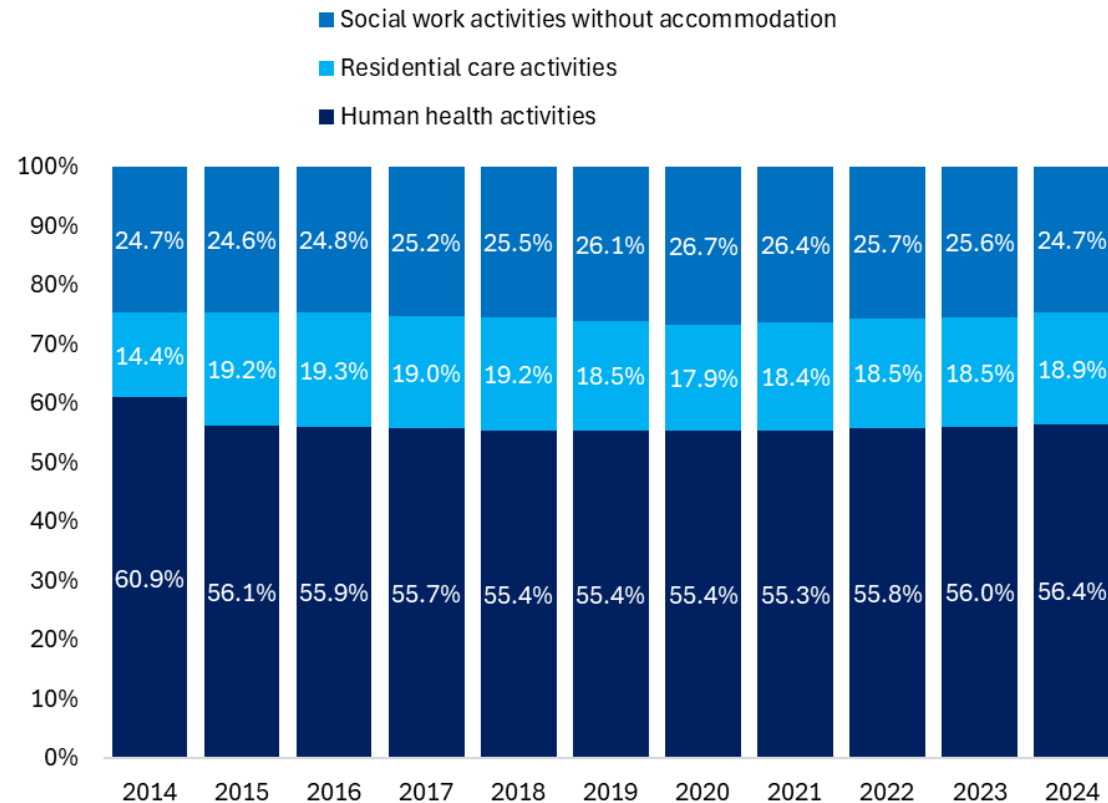
In 2024, the health & social work sector had nearly 152,600 workforce jobs representing 16.0% of total jobs, emphasising its importance to the NI economy.

NI's Health and Social Work sector has experienced growth in the longer term, expanding by 50,380 jobs since 2000.

Health & Social Care Sectoral Breakdown

2-digit information

Health and social care 2-digit breakdown of employee jobs per 10k people, NI, 2014-2024



The QES reports that there were just over 141,450 employee jobs in the Health and Social Care sector in 2024.

A further breakdown shows that Social Work Activities without accommodation accounts for 25% of the 2024 total.

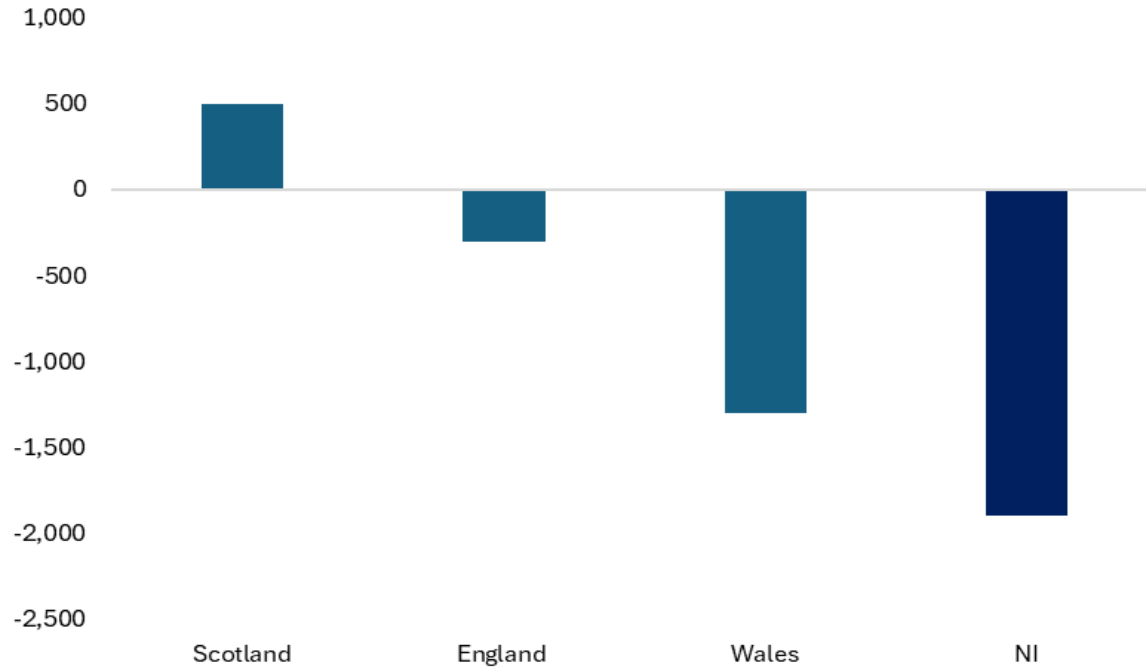
Social Work Activities has increased by over 4,700 employee jobs since 2014.

When looking at the number of employee jobs per 10k population in Social Work Activities, the figure has increased from 161 in 2014 to 178 in 2024.

Social Workers Occupation

Different picture emerging

Change in social workers across the UK, 2021-2024



The Annual Population Survey reported that there were 4,400 Social Workers in NI in 2024.

The 2024 figure is a reduction of 1,200 from 2023.

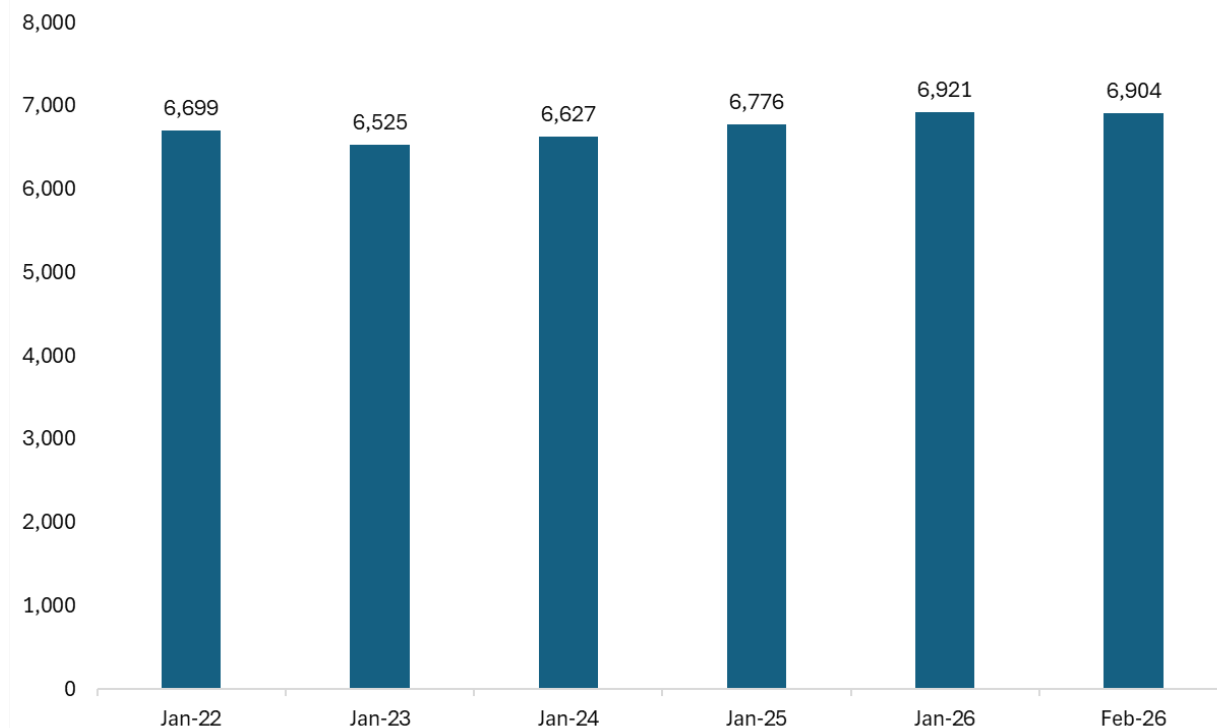
NI has had the largest reduction in social workers across the UK.

Source: NOMIS- Annual Population Survey and UUEPC

Note: Population projections used 2023 and 2024 where latest data was not available

Registered Social Workers

Social workers registered with NISCC, January 2022- February 2026

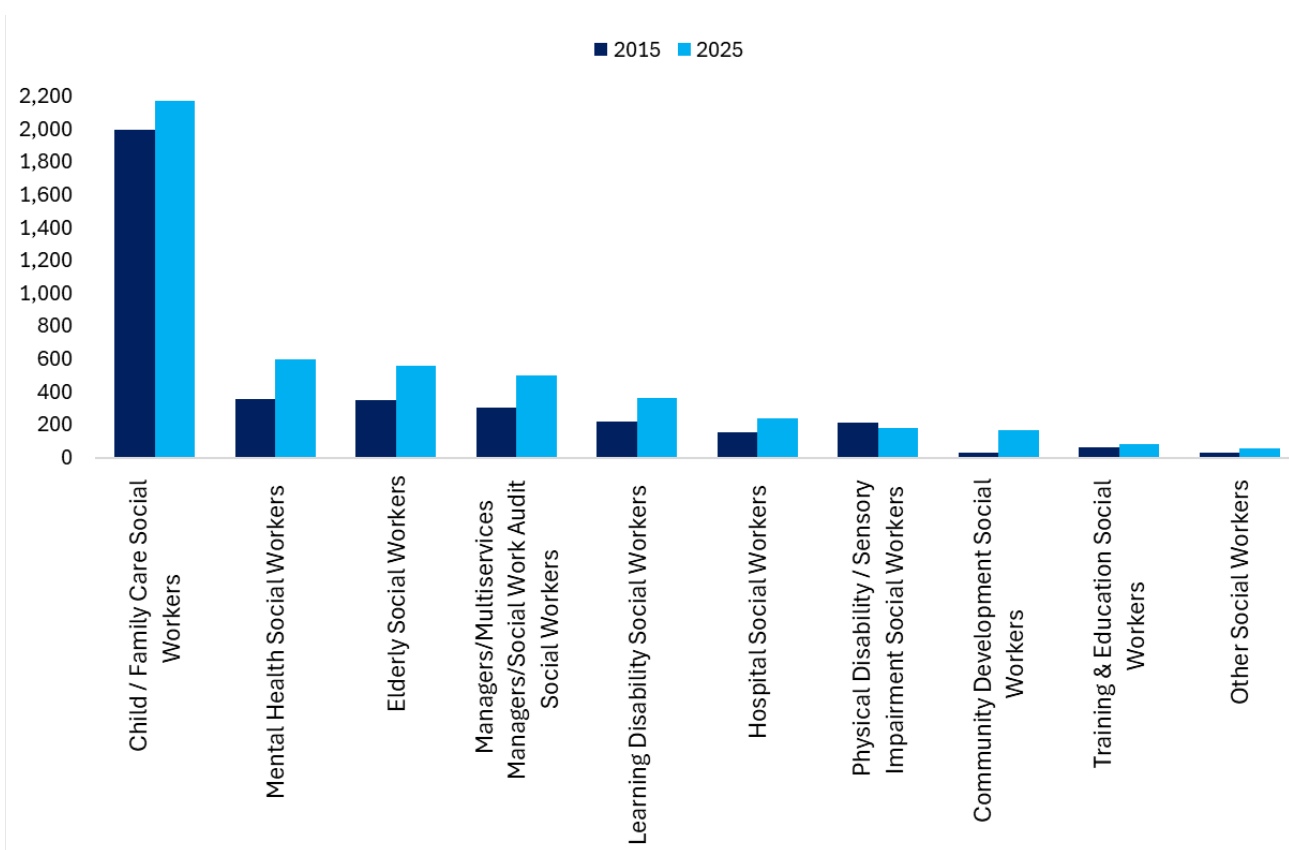


NISCC's Public Facing Register reports that there were over 49,550 social work registrants as of February 2026, of which over 6,900 were qualified Social Workers.

The February 2026 figure got Social Workers represents a 2.0% increase since February 2025.

NI HSC Workforce Census- Social Workers breakdown

Social workers headcount, NI, 2015- 2025



Source: Department of Health, NI HSC Workforce Census

Note: Within the Workforce Census 'Older people social workers' are referred to as 'Elderly Social Workers'

The HSC Workforce Census reports that there were over 75,000 health and social care workers across NI's Trusts in 2025.

The workforce includes 9,730 staff in Social Services, of which, 4,910 were Social Workers

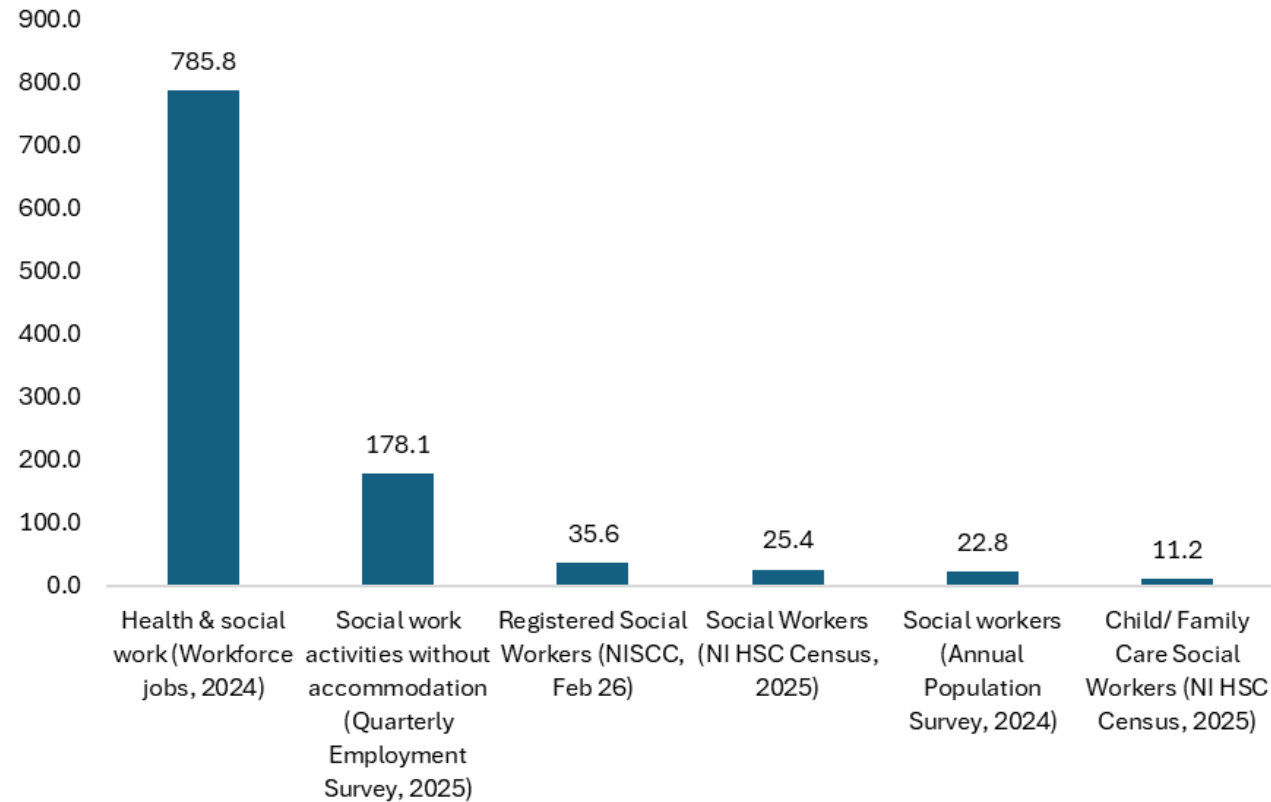
The 2025 figure for Social Workers is an increase of 85 since 2024.

Over the longer term, represents an additional 1,200 Social Workers since 2015.

The largest cohort of Social Workers remained in Child/ Family Care with nearly 2,170 Social Workers.

Social Workers per 10k

Social workers (headcount) per 10k, NI



This breakdown could be used to assist workforce planning and address whether there are enough Social Workers to meet the demands of an ageing and growing population.

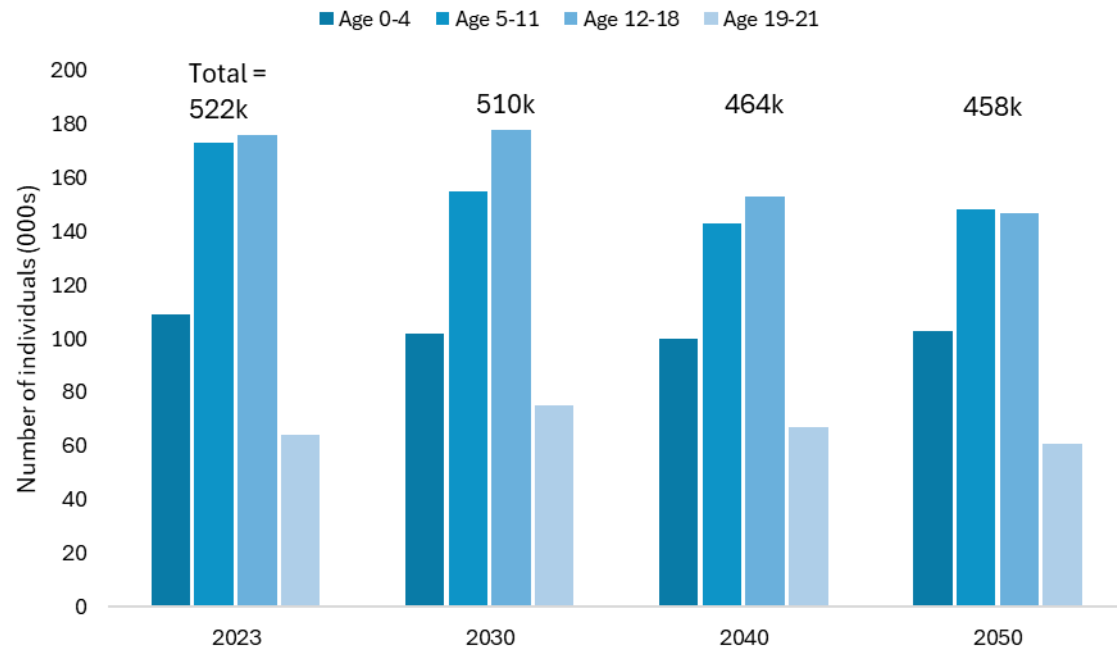
Source: Department of Health, NI HSC Workforce Census

Note: Headcount refers to the number of individuals in active posts. Where information is broken down by the various categories, individuals will be counted once in each category they hold an active post. The headcount has been used within this research as this was used by NI HSC to calculate leaving and joining rates. Whole Time Equivalent figures are also available.

Growing demand for social workers?

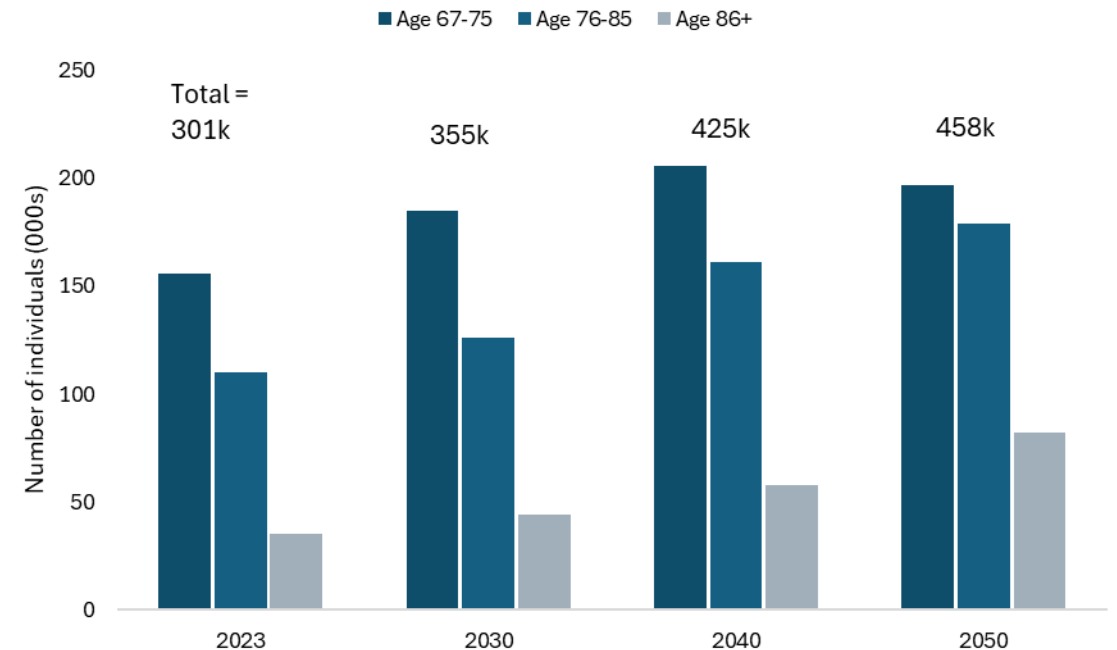
Is social work prepared for changing demographics?

Age profile of children/young people, NI, 2023-2050



Source: ONS & UUEPC

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

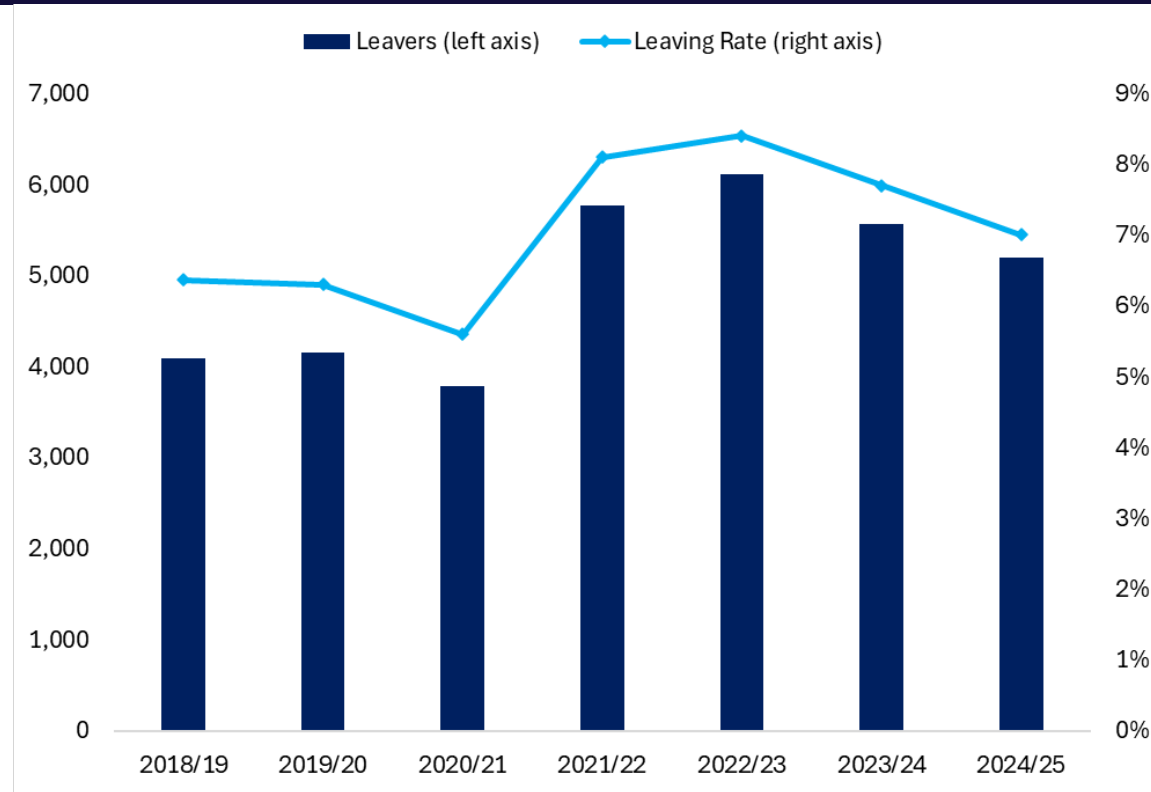


Source: ONS & UUEPC

It is also important to note that the workforce is also ageing.

Calculating turnover

Turnover (leavers and rate, headcount) within the HSC workforce, NI, 2018-2025



$$\text{Staff Turnover} = \frac{\text{Number of staff who left}}{\text{Headcount}}$$

$$7.70\% = \frac{5,202}{74,039}$$

Overall, there were 5,202 leavers in the NIHSC workforce in 2024/25, down from 5,567 in 2023/24.

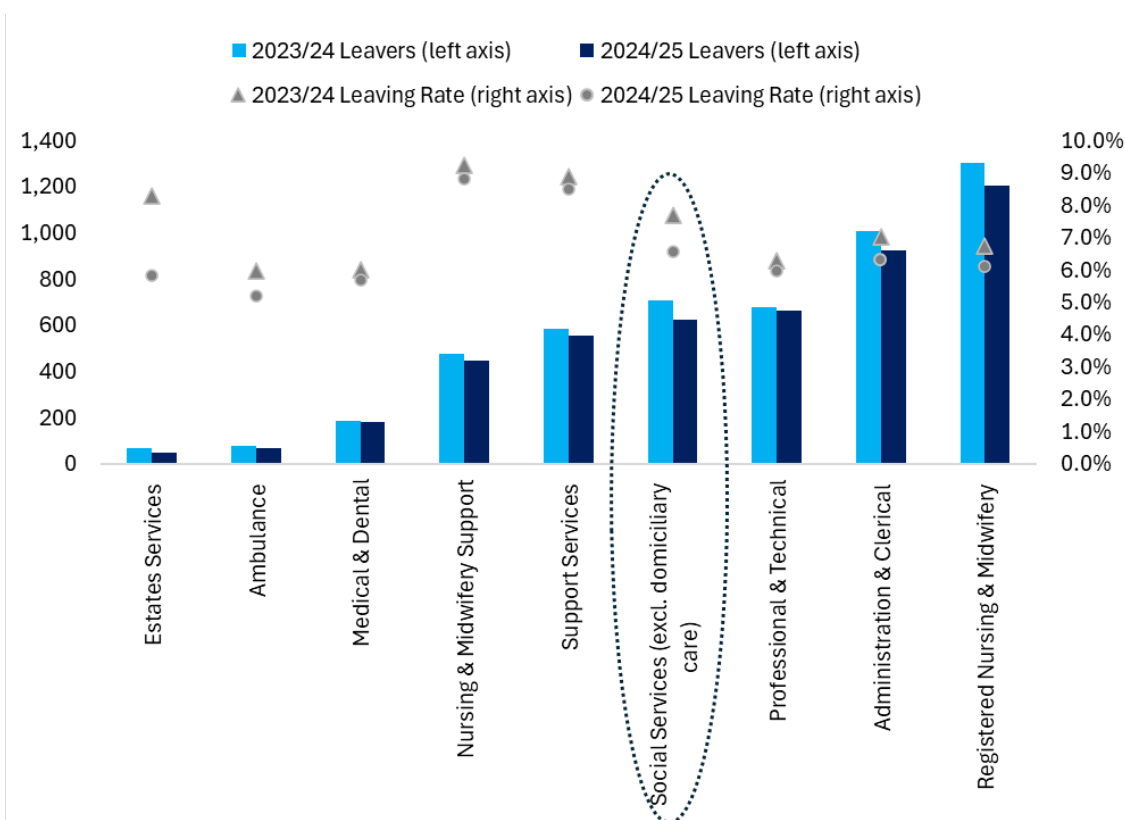
The 2024/25 turnover rate was 7.0%.

Source: Department of Health, NI HSC Workforce Census

Note: Relates to the staff in post position at the end of the previous financial year e.g. for 2023/24, staff in post headcount relates to the position at 31 March 2023.

Turnover by staff group

Turnover (leavers and rate, headcount) by staff group, NI, 2023/24 – 2024/25



Social services recorded just over 620 leavers in 2024/25, around 80 fewer than in the previous year.

This corresponds to a leaving rate of 6.6%, making it the third-highest among staff groups.

Applying the 2024/25 social services leaving rate to the Child/Family Care Social Workers suggests that just over 140 staff left their roles during this period, down from an estimated 165 in 2023/24.

Source: Department of Health, NI HSC Workforce Census

Note: Relates to the staff in post position at the end of the previous financial year e.g. for 2023/24, staff in post headcount relates to the position at 31 March 2023.

Costs of turnover for Social Services Staff and Social Workers (PQ)

Cost of hiring

- £1,000 (median average cost per hire in public sector, rises to £2,500 for senior manager/director)
- Source: CIPD (2024), Resourcing and talent planning report 2024

Training and onboarding

- £2,229 (average cost of training through a values-based recruitment process)
- Source: Skills for Care (2021), Recruiting for values

Learning and development

- Band 5-6 Social Workers the cost for this training time is estimated at £1,295 (AYE 10 days/ 75 hours).
- Average cost of PiP - £3,773

Opportunity cost of unfilled role

- In this case the productivity for Health and Social Work has been used as a proxy for which the productivity was £41,539 for 2023.
- Source : ONS and UUEPC

$$\textit{Turnover costs (£)} = (2,168 \times 6.6\%) \times (\text{£}1,000 + \text{£}2,229 + (\text{£}1,295 + \text{£}3,773) + \text{£}41,539)$$

$$= 143.1 \times \text{£}49,836$$

$$= \text{£}7,130,934$$

Estimating the cost of child/family care social worker turnover

Cost of Employee Turnover Calculator		
Company		
Variables	Business Information	
Number of child/family care social workers (headcount)	2,168	
Annual turnover percentage	6.6%	
Lost employees	143.1	
Employee Expenses		
Variables	Cost Per Employees (£)	
Cost of hiring	1,000	
Training and onboarding	2,229	
Learning and development	5,068	
Opportunity cost of unfilled role	41,539	
Turnover Costs		
Cost of turnover	£	7,130,934
££ saved w/ 20% reduction	£	1,426,187

Using these figures, it could be estimated that the cost of child/family care social workers to be £7.1 million.

If this was reduced by 20% it could save £1.4million per year.

This could employ 42 Band 5/6 Social Workers

Calculator sourced from Altman, J. (2017). [How much does employee turnover really cost?](#)

Note: Costs are estimated and will change based on band level and experience of employee. Costs also do not include estate costs.

Estimating the cost of social worker turnover

Cost of Employee Turnover Calculator		
Company		
Variables	Business Information	
Number social workers (headcount)	4,909	
Annual turnover percentage	6.6%	
Lost employees	324.0	
Employee Expenses		
Variables	Cost Per Employees (£)	
Cost of hiring	1,000	
Training and onboarding	2,229	
Learning and development	518	
Opportunity cost of unfilled role	41,539	
Turnover Costs		
Cost of turnover	£	14,672,313
££ saved w/ 20% reduction	£	2,934,463

Using these figures, it could be estimated that the cost of turnover for all social workers is over £14.7million.

If this was reduced by 20% it could save £2.9million per year.

Calculator sourced from Altman, J. (2017). [How much does employee turnover really cost?](#)

Note: Costs are estimated and will change based on band level and experience of employee. Costs also do not include estate costs.

Estimating the cost of social worker turnover

Estimated costs of Social Worker Turnover in HSC Trusts based on 6.6% turnover rate, 2024/25

	Number of Social Workers (2024/25)	Estimated Turnover Cost (£m)
Child / Family Care Social Workers	2,168	£6.48
Mental Health Social Workers	598	£1.79
Elderly Social Workers	559	£1.67
Managers/Multiservices Managers/Social Work Audit Social Workers	497	£1.49
Learning Disability Social Workers	364	£1.09
Hospital Social Workers	241	£0.72
Physical Disability/Sensory Impairment Social Workers	179	£0.54
Community Development Social Workers	166	£0.50
Training & Education Social Workers	79	£0.24
Other Social Workers	58	£0.17
Total (Excluding Child/Family Care)	2,741	£8.19
Total (Including Child/Family Care Headcount)	4,909	£14.67

Summary

- This analysis demonstrates that staff turnover among Child/Family Care Social Workers represents a significant and measurable financial burden for NI's Health and Social Care Trusts.
- Using the 2024/25 NI HSC Census data and **conservative** cost assumptions, the estimated annual cost of turnover within this cohort is £7.13 million.
- When extended across all Social Workers employed within the Trusts, the estimated cost rises to £14.7 million. **These figures highlight that turnover is not solely a workforce issue, but a material fiscal pressure on the public sector.**



Summary

Section 4

Cumulative Impact of Turnover

Moral injury, system distrust, and avoidable harm

Moral Injury

- Service users and staff alike describe ethical harm from systemic failure

Disengagement

- Children and carers withdraw from systems they perceive as unsafe

Wider Consequences

Placement breakdowns, education disruption, and trauma recurrence

Policy Implications

From moral cost to system change

Retention is Protection

- Reducing turnover is a safeguarding imperative

Relationship-Based Practice

- Support models that prioritise continuity and trust

Organisational Reform

- Caseload caps, better supervision, and trauma-informed workplaces

Service User Recommendations

What care leavers, parents, foster carers, and advocates told us

Planned Endings

- Every ending should be communicated and supported

Stable Teams

- Team continuity can buffer individual turnover

Being Heard

- Service users want to shape reform, not just survive services

Why This Matters Now

The urgency of reform in children's social work

System at Breaking Point

- Rising caseloads, high vacancy rates, and staff burnout

Children's Voices

- Disruption is the norm, not the exception for too many children

Moral Imperative

- Service continuity is a right, not a privilege

Conclusions

Workforce instability is a child protection issue

Not Just Operational

- Turnover impacts trust, safety, rights, and outcomes

Not Inevitable

- Improved culture, caseloads, and support can reduce harm

Not Separate

- Service user and practitioner wellbeing are interconnected

Next Steps

From listening to leading change

Dissemination

- Sharing findings with policymakers, practitioners, regulator and service users

Co-Production

- Involve service user experience in shaping responses and training in research methods and lived experience involvement in research

Long-Term Vision

- Stability and trust embedded as core practice values
- Safer and effective staffing policy and legislation and workload standards (McFadden et al 2024, 2025)
- DOH Wellbeing Framework – Strengthening our Core – focus on staff wellbeing and retention as regional approach across Health and Social Care – Human Resources / Organization Development engagement (Currie et al 2024)

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Thank you for engaging with this presentation

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We now welcome your questions or reflections?



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