

Northern Ireland Social Care Council and Partner Organisations

13th Annual Social Work and Social Care Research Conference

Theme

'Innovating today – while preparing for tomorrow'

Connecting policy; practice, academia, learning and development, and
service users and carers



11 March, 2026

8:30am - 5:00pm

Riddel Hall, 185 Stranmillis Road,
Belfast BT9 5EE

#SWSCResearch2026

Keynote Speakers

The Soul in the Circuit: weaving humanity into tomorrow's care

Professor Donald Macaskill (Scottish Care)

This talk explores the integration of Artificial Intelligence and other innovative technologies in social care and social work, emphasising that technology must serve humanity, not replace it. It advocates for a human rights-based approach using the PANEL framework - Participation, Accountability, Non-discrimination, Empowerment, and Legality - to guide ethical AI adoption. Real-world scenarios highlight both the promise and risks of AI in care settings. It argues that the successful adoption of innovative technology in health and care should be measured by increased human connection and dignity, not efficiency alone. Ultimately, the talk calls for bold yet compassionate innovation, ensuring that care remains grounded in rights, dignity, and human presence.

Social media, digital, & online abuse and harassment: what is it and what can we do about it?

Dr Kenneth Burns, (University College Cork)

Social media, online and digital abuse and harassment is a growing issue for all areas of practice. Social media can be fun; it is a great way to keep up to date with family members and community activities. However, there is growing concern about the impact of social media on our lives, on professionals, and on children.

This presentation reports on a national study of social workers', probation officers', and students' experiences of the issue in the Republic of Ireland (Burns et al., 2024; Halvey et al., 2024; Burns et al., forthcoming). It presents a short summary of the key findings from this study and goes on to examine what we learned from this study about how you can take limited steps to prevent this issue from arising. It also examines what an effective agency response looks like to support staff.

The presentation concludes with a framework developed from this research study to help practitioners, carers, and service users think about where to draw the line between fair and abusive/harassing commentary and behaviours.

Virtual Intelligent and Adaptive Training and Learning

Professor Paul Best, Dr Gerry Marshall (Queen's University Belfast), Carole Kirk and Jonathan Dillon (Northern Health and Social Care Trust)

This presentation outlines recent work from the VITAL (Virtual Intelligent and Adaptive Training and Learning) programme, exploring the use of immersive technologies and conversational Artificial Intelligence (AI) as training and developmental tools for social work practice. Presenters will outline early work using 360-degree video with branching narratives to fully immersive Virtual Reality (VR) environments featuring conversational AI avatars capable of simulating complex practice scenarios. Case examples will include undergraduate and postgraduate social work teaching as well as international proof-of-concept studies across education, mental health and healthcare. The presentation will conclude with a current study evaluating VITAL with Newly Qualified Social Workers in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust focusing professional curiosity and confidence in early career practice.

Meet our Keynote Speakers



Professor Donald Macaskill

Professor Donald Macaskill has worked for many years in the health and social care sectors across the United Kingdom. A particular professional focus of his has been issues related to dementia, bereavement, palliative care and individual human rights. Most recently he has acted as a Commissioner on the UK Bereavement Commission.

Donald is the CEO of Scottish Care, the representative body for care providers in the independent sector, namely private, charitable, and employee-owned care organisations, including care home and home care organisations. Beyond Scottish Care, Macaskill serves on various Scottish, UK, and international boards and charities related to health and social care. He has also acted as a Commissioner on the UK Bereavement Commission and participates in global initiatives such as the Global Ageing Biennial Conference.



Dr Kenneth Burns

Kenneth Burns is a senior lecturer in social work and programme director of the Bachelor of Social Work degree at University College Cork. He was twice awarded the President's Award for Excellence in Teaching. Kenneth was the Principal Investigator of an interdisciplinary research team that won the UCC Research Team of the Year Award. He co-authored a paper that won the European Social Work Research Association's Outstanding Publication Award.

Kenneth sits on the board of of Barnardos Ireland and is chairperson of the Barnardos Services Committee. Kenneth is also an active coach in junior football teams.

To read more about his research and practice activities, scan the QR code.



Professor Paul Best

Professor Paul Best is the Director of the Centre for Technological Innovation in Mental Health and Education (TIME Centre) within the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast. This Centre is a trans-disciplinary partnership of academics, practitioners and technology companies focusing on therapeutic and pedagogical advances in mental health and social care through digital means.

Paul has published several journal articles on digital mental health and serves on the editorial board of *Frontiers in Digital Health*. He is also Principal investigator on multiple digital mental health projects in Northern Ireland. In recognition of this work, Dr Best was appointed by the Department of Health for Northern Ireland (NI) as assignment co-lead for the Digital Mental Health Action Plan as part of the wider Mental Health Strategy (2021-31).



Dr Gerry Marshall

Dr Gerry Marshall is a lecturer in Social Work at Queen's University Belfast. He has over 25 years' experience as a practitioner, manager and inspector of children's residential care services in both in Northern Ireland, Dublin and Angola, Africa.

His PhD research explored issues around understanding quality care in children's homes, and the identity formation of young people who grow up in group care. Gerry is interested in the use of virtual reality immersive experiences as a teaching tool for social work training with both University and front line settings.



Carole Kirk

Carole Kirk is Head of Service for Social Work Governance, Workforce Development and Training in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. She has worked in health and social care for over three decades and qualified as a Social Worker in 2004.

Carole has worked across several areas of practice, with the majority of her frontline career spent within Older People's Services and Safeguarding. Having moved into social work learning and development in 2013, she was afforded the opportunity to complete the Research and Evidence Methods in Social Work Programme at Ulster University from 2015-2017 and has gone on to develop a keen interest in the meaningful application of evidence and research to practice. In more recent years she has supported a number of candidates on the Research Methods Programme as Practice Assessor.



Johnny Dillon

Johnny Dillon is the Head of Service in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, with responsibility for children in care aged 16 and over and for all care leavers across the Trust area. He previously served as the Children's Social Work Improvement Lead in the Northern Trust, driving quality improvement and strengthening practice standards across children's services.

Johnny has previously held an academic tutor position and currently acts as a Social Work Practice Teacher. He also has a particular interest in enhancing social work practice, building confident and capable teams, and designing initiatives that support workforce development and improve outcomes for children and young people.

Please note that will throughout the day photography and video will be taken. These will be used for Northern Ireland Social Care Council publicity such as social media and website pages. If you do not wish your photo to be used let the photographer or a member of the team know.

Programme

- 8:45am **Registration and poster viewing - tea and coffee**
- 9.15am **Introduction**
Anne McGlade, Research Lead, Northern Ireland Social Care Council
- 9.20am **Welcome and Opening remarks**
Tracy Reid, Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Social Care Council
- 9.30am **Keynote Presentation**
Chair: Declan McAllister, Director of Registration and Corporate Services, Northern Ireland Social Care Council
- Keynote Speaker**
Dr Donald Macaskill, Chief Executive, Scottish Care
- 10.00am **Parallel Oral Presentations - breakout sessions**
- 11.00am **Tea and Coffee - networking opportunity, stands and poster viewing**
- 11.45am **Keynote Presentation**
Chair: Helen McVicker, Co-Director of Regulation and Standards, Northern Ireland Social Care Council
- Keynote Speaker**
Dr Kenneth Burns, University College Cork
- 12.10pm **Lightning Presentations**
Chair: Professor Davy Hayes, Queen's University Belfast
- 12.40pm **Lunch and Networking - Poster viewing and voting**
- 1.30pm **Interlude: Unfolding Avenues to Equality - Breaking down barriers for the deaf community - with sign language interpretation**
- A panel discussion hosted by Social Care Council Board Member and registered social worker Roslyn Dougherty and introduced by Jane McMillan, Professional Social Work Officer of the Department of Health.
- The discussion will feature Brian Symington (MBE), deaf campaigner and social worker and John Carberry (MBE), Deaf Awareness and Training Officer of the Royal National Institute of Deaf People (RNID).

Programme

2.00pm **Parallel Oral Presentations - Breakout sessions**

3.00pm **Tea and coffee - Virtual Online Voting for Poster**

3.25pm **Keynote Presentation**

Chair: Carole Kirk, Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Keynote Speakers

Professor Paul Best, Dr Gerry Marshall, Queen's University Belfast
Jonathan Dillon and Carole Kirk, Northern Health and Social Care Trust

4.05pm **Research Methods Programme Ulster University Award Ceremony**

Awards presented by Professor Paula McFadden, Ulster University

Chair: Dr Campbell Killick, Ulster University

Awardees

1st Year

Carrie Armstrong
Brendan Connolly
Paul Devine
Ciara Duffin
Niall Ferguson
Victoria King
Teresa McCann
Antoinette Smyth

2nd Year

Evelyn Curran
Kitty Downey
Rachel Graham
Lauren McBride

3rd Year

Andrea Hegarty
Diane McGarvey
Lisa Morrison

4.35pm

Poster Winners

Presented by Gerry Guckian, Acting Chair of the Social Care Council Board

Reflections on the day

Presented by Gerry Guckian, Acting Chair of the Social Care Council Board

4.50pm

Close and Evaluation

Anne McGlade, Northern Ireland Social Care Council

Chair Professor Davy Hayes Queen's University Belfast and Chair of the Research and Evidence Partnership

Five minute lightning presentations

These presentations will take place in the Isdell Courtyard Hall

| TITLE | PRESENTER |
|---|--|
| Digital skills for social workers - building digital capability to support social work practice | Mairead Harkin Social Care Council |
| Closing the 'research into practice' gap in social care: connecting research to implementation and service improvement | Paul Webb Praxis Care |
| From referral to impact: nature-based interventions shaping the future of social care and social work | Aisling Clarke Atlantic Technology University Sligo Campus |
| Developing and implementing domestic violence informed practice guidance in a child protection and welfare agency | Marie MacSweeney Child and Family Agency (TUSLA) |
| ADHD – understanding my condition – a joint initiative between multi-disciplinary teams in primary care (Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and West Belfast GP Federation) and a safe space to be me | Fiona Trainor West Belfast GP Federation introducing Carolyn Tailford, Person with lived experience |

Posters

| NO | TITLE | PRESENTER |
|----|---|---|
| 1 | Mental Capacity Act and Mental Health Order - Bridging Legal Frameworks | Steph Kerr Belfast Health and Social Care Trust |
| 2 | Leading Social Work 2025 and Beyond | Nadia Millar and Christine McGrath Belfast Health and Social Care Trust |
| 3 | <i>'I am more alive'</i> : Social work practice development following foundation-level systemic training | Jennifer McKinney Queen's University Belfast |
| 4 | Exploring the role of artificial intelligence within administrative functions in social care: a rapid review | Gavin Davidson, Paul Webb Queen's University Belfast Praxis Care |
| 5 | Co-designing an intervention to promote shared decision-making with older people, with frailty, in planning discharge from hospital | Kerrie McLarnon Queen's University Belfast |
| 6 | Care in Practice – Driving Innovation in Social Care | Sharon Foster, Alison Shaw Social Care Council |
| 7 | A Thematic Review of Staff Assaults Arising from Challenging Behaviour in Social Care Services (2024–2025): Strengthening Learning Loops, Environments and Workforce Practice | Helen Bunting and Linda Lyons Praxis Care |
| 8 | Enablers of family recovery in mental health services - a scoping review | Kerry Cuskelly Maynooth University |
| 9 | What organisational factors influence the sustainability of QI in Social Work and Social Care? | Niall Ferguson South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust |
| 10 | What impacts professional responses to older women experiencing domestic abuse? | Ciara Duffin Northern Health and Social Care Trust |

Display Stands

Please scan the QR code to vote for your favourite poster - You can vote during the conference until 4pm.



Display Stands

1. **Safeguarding Board NI**
2. **Social Care Council - Digital Resources**
3. **Centre of Effective Services**
4. **Office of Research Ethics Committee (ORECNI)**
5. **Child Care in Practice**
6. **Healthcare Library of Northern Ireland**
7. **Northern Ireland Social Care Council**
8. **Chris Propeer Ltd in association with QUB Immersive Virtual Reality Demonstrations**
9. **Praxis Care**
10. **Public Health Agency - Research and Development Division**
11. **Centre for Independent Living NI (CILNI)**
12. **Self Directed Support Network Northern Ireland**

***Note that keynote presentations, lightning presentations and interlude will take place in the Isdell Courtyard Hall. Coffee/tea breaks and lunch and display stands in conference rooms 1 and 2, posters will be presented in Lecture Room 3.**

For the break out rooms check the colour that you have been allocated.

Morning Oral and Lightning Presentations

Chairs

- Purple Room:** Laura Thompson, Southern Health and Social Care Trust
Red Room: James Todd, Southern Health and Social Care Trust
Green Room: Suzie Hughes, Independent Social Work Consultant
Orange Room: Bronagh Hamill, Northern Health and Social Care Trust
Blue Room: Mary McColgan, Health and Social Care Leadership Centre

| GROUP | TITLE | PRESENTER |
|-------|---|---|
| 1 | The experience and impact of advocacy support for Looked After Children and Young People within child welfare services: A systematic review | James Lunn Queen's University Belfast Lightning presentation |
| 1 | Becoming The Leader I Needed | Marsha Bergley Southern Health and Social Care Trust Lightning presentation |
| 1 | How do migrant families of children with disabilities access and experience social support in Northern Ireland | Noah Agbo Queen's University Belfast |
| 2 | Factors that support social work retention - a systematic narrative review | Liz Tanner Southern Health and Social Care Trust Lightning presentation |
| 2 | The effectiveness of structured bereavement information events in compassionate communities | Eibhlín Mc Namara Queen's University Belfast Lightning presentation |
| 2 | 'You have to give him something': Domestic abuse victim/survivor experiences of engagement with family court professionals in private law cases | Suzanne Mooney Queen's University Belfast |

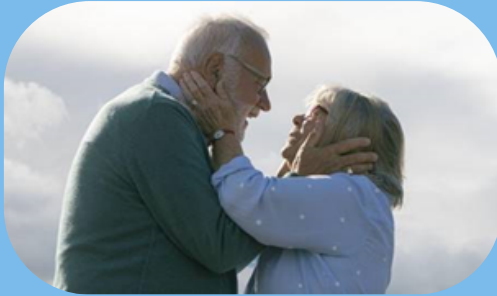
Morning Oral and Lightning Presentations

| GROU P | TITLE | PRESENTER |
|-------------------|--|--|
| 3 | "Are you ok?" - Developing short break overnight fostering options for children with a disability | Mark Irwin Southern Health and Social Care Trust |
| 3 | Policy Development and the Professionalisation of Social Care Supervision in a Skills Mix Environment | Neil O'Hagan Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Lightning presentation |
| 3 | What are the experiences of service users with a diagnosis of Emotionally Unstable Personality Disorder within Adult Community Mental Health Services? | Steph Craig South Eastern Health and Social Care Council Lightning presentation |
| 3 | Cultural Competence, Psychological Safety and Inclusion Among Migrant Care Assistants in Northern Ireland | Aderopo Egbeleke Independent Researcher |
| 4 | Exploring how school-based social work contributes to the wellbeing of post-primary school-aged young people at risk of statutory social work intervention in Northern Ireland | Dylan Sloan Ulster University |
| 4 | Understanding trauma and innovative partnership working: The Regional Trauma Network's approaches to supporting individuals with psychological trauma in safe community settings | Claire McCartan Northern Health and Social Care Trust Lightning presentation |
| 4 | Mothers, their lived experience and Closed Adoption - what lessons can be drawn from 60+ years of research? | Donna Shields University of Edinburg Lightning presentation |
| 4 | Turning the tables - creating space for lived experience leadership | Lisa Morrison, Carole Kirk and Ian Burnside Independent Consultant, Northern Health and Social Care Trust |
| 5 | Embedding a Trauma-Informed Approach within Organisations | Sheina Rigg Safeguarding Board NI |
| 5 | The impact of a comprehensive bereavement support model for families who experience the sudden/unexpected death of a child | Julie Hall NI Hospice Lightning presentation |
| 5 | "Staff Retention and Well-Being in Belfast Trust: Stay Interviews" | Mary Mullan Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Lightning presentation |
| 5 | Praxis Care Pathways to Independent Living: A Rights Based Stepped Approach to Social Housing for People with Intellectual Disabilities | Dymphna Doran, Gerry Cunningham, Tomás Tiernan and Stuart Walsh Co-production with Praxis Care |

Interlude

A Quiet Love: The six-decade romance that defied divisions

John and Agnes met at a school for deaf children more than 60 years ago



Scan to watch their story



Unfolding Avenues to Equality - Breaking down barriers for the deaf community

A chat with John Carberry and Brian Symington

Host: Roslyn Dougherty, Board member, Social Care Council

Chair: Jane McMillan, Office of Social Services, Department of Health

British Sign Language Interpreter: Karen Clements



John Carberry MBE

Deaf People (CACDP)/Deaf Awareness & Training Officer at RNID) - he did an exceptional job at CACDP in promoting and organising Sign Language classes, training Sign Language tutors, organising Deafblind classes etc. Chair of Disability Action and of course he is now a film star!



Brian Symington MBE

Assistant Principal Social Worker who established Beechbank House Rehab Centre for Deaf, Blind and Deafblind people. He is a former Director of the RNID in Northern Ireland, a member of the Northern Ireland Civic Forum and President of 6th World Congress on Mental Health and Deafness.

John and Brian both still members of the Board of Governors at Jordanstown School. They worked together in campaigning over many years, particularly in the recognition of British and Irish Sign Language. John was the first appointment that Brian made when he became Director of RNID. They have been friends and work colleagues for over 40 years.

Afternoon Oral and Lightning Presentations

Chairs

- Purple Room:** Robby Nelson, South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust
Red Room: Grace Reihill, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust
Green Room: Elaine Pollock, South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust
Orange Room: Tricia Devlin, Northern Ireland Social Care Council
Blue Room: Janet Diffin, Public Health Agency

| GROUP | TITLE | PRESENTER |
|-------|--|--|
| 1 | What are Children's Safeguarding Social Workers' experiences with available formal and informal wellbeing supports to help them cope with work demands? | Lauren McBride South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust |
| 1 | Harnessing Research and Digital Learning: Integrating Community Development into Social Work Preparation and Practice | Fergal O'Brien Southern Health and Social Care Trust Lightning Presentation |
| 1 | "What makes a High Performing Team" - A Qualitative Study" | Deidre Kerrin Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Lightning Presentation |
| 1 | Measuring what really matters – Developing an Adult Safeguarding File Audit Methodology to measure and improve the quality of adult safeguarding processes | Karen Harvey, Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority and Stephanie Patterson, Northern Health and Social Care Trust |
| 2 | Transforming Culture Through Open Disclosure and Policy Innovation | John Rafferty Praxis Care |
| 2 | Innovating Spiritual and Religious Care in Health and Social Work | Patricia Carlisle Queen's University Belfast Lightning Presentation |
| 2 | Exploring The Use Of Supervised AI-Supported Communication Tools To Enhance Inclusion And Reduce Distress For Non-Verbal Autistic Adults | Andrea Eder Queen's University Belfast Lightning Presentation |
| 2 | Supporting Choice, Control and Person-Centred Practice through Self Directed Support | Aiden McCullagh, Southern Health and Social Care Trust and Jillian Martin, Department of Health |

Afternoon Oral and Lightning Presentations

| GROUP | TITLE | PRESENTER |
|-------|---|---|
| 3 | Facilitators and Barriers to Effective Participation for Children in Family Court (Private Law) Processes where there is Domestic Abuse | Marie Louise Corr Queen's University Belfast |
| 3 | Leveraging Wearable Technology for Ethical Innovation in Overdose Prevention | Chris Rintoul Cranstoun Lightning Presentation |
| 3 | Developing Good Practice in working with Autism and Harmful Sexual Behaviours | Carol Carson Carol Carson Associates Lightning Presentation |
| 3 | Because we're human too: Why dementia training for social care workers matters, and how to deliver it | Aisling Playford Alzheimer's Society |
| 4 | Involvement Matters: Setting Priorities for Personal and Public Involvement in Health and Social Care Research in Northern Ireland | Alan McMichael Public Health Agency |
| 4 | Implementation of Positive Behaviour Support in routine service provision | MaryRose Martin Queen's University Belfast Lightning Presentation |
| 4 | Recognising and mitigating the impacts of grooming and manipulation of practitioners within the context of domestic abuse | Gloria McKenna Probation NI Lightning Presentation |
| 5 | Domestic Abuse - Are You Safe at Home - a Quality Improvement Initiative | AnneMarie Bradley and William Deery Western Health and Social Care Trust |
| 5 | Working with victims of modern slavery and trafficking in Northern Ireland | Dylan Sloan Ulster University Lightning Presentation |
| 5 | Working Together: Everyone Benefits | Niall Ferguson co-production with Judy Sinclair South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust Lightning Presentation |
| 5 | Elevating Standards in Social Care in Northern Ireland-The Care in Practice Framework | Mervyn Bothwell Social Care Council |

Your voice matters

Each year we aim improve the Research Conference and ensure that our delegates and presenters enjoy an amazing experience and networking opportunities. However, this would not be feasible if we didn't have your feedback, so please don't forget to let us know how your day was by completing the feedback survey.

Scan the QR code below to complete our short feedback survey.



Visit our website and find out more about research into social work and social care by scanning the the QR code below.



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Social

Care

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