

Northern Ireland

Social

Care

Council

Return to social work practice guidance: Consultation report



July 2026

The *Return to Social Work Practice Guidance* (the Guidance) applies to all social workers seeking to join or return to the Northern Ireland Social Care Council's (the Social Care Council's) Public Facing Register (the Register) after a period of three years or more away from social work practice. It is also applicable to social workers who have remained on the Register while taking time away from practice.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the people we consulted with to help inform our thinking and who contributed to shaping the *Return to Social Work Practice Guidance*; the social workers from across sectors who attended the Return to Practice Workshop, the social workers who spoke to us about their experience of returning to practice, the Return to Practice Reference Group members, the Social Care Council Participation Partnership and professional officers from other UK regulators.

The Social Care Council are grateful to Carolyn Ewart, Independent Social Worker, for her work on the guidance.

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Foreword from the Chief Executive



I am pleased to introduce the *Return to Social Work Practice Guidance*, developed by the Social Care Council to support social workers who are considering, or preparing for, a return to professional practice after a prolonged period away.

Social work is a demanding, values driven profession that plays a critical role in safeguarding individuals, families and communities across Northern Ireland. We recognise that many experienced practitioners step away from practice for a variety of reasons and later wish to return, bringing with them valuable skills, insight and commitment. It is vital that those returning

to practice are supported to do so safely, confidently and in a way that reflects current legislation, policy and professional expectations.

This Guidance has been developed primarily as a recommendation of the Department of Health's *Social Work Workforce Review* response to workforce pressures and the recognised need for a clear, consistent and proportionate approach to supporting returners. It fills an important policy gap and aligns with wider work to strengthen the social work workforce. There will be opportunities to target promotion of the Guidance to social workers who have left the Register to encourage them to consider a return to practice and to the social work workforce.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the social workers, employers, service users, partner organisations and other regulators who contributed their expertise and lived experience through consultation and co-design of this Guidance. Their input has been central to shaping guidance that is practical, evidence informed and reflective of the realities of contemporary social work practice.

The Guidance promotes a values based, quality focused approach to returning to practice. It draws on learning from other United Kingdom and international regulators, as well as Northern Ireland-specific policy, standards and practice frameworks. It sets out clear expectations and shared responsibilities for the Social Care Council, employers and returning social workers, while allowing flexibility to reflect individual circumstances, roles and learning needs. Importantly, it emphasises compassionate leadership, professional identity, wellbeing and supportive workplace cultures as key enablers of safe and effective practice. I commend this Guidance to social workers considering a return to practice and to employers supporting them. I am confident it will make a positive contribution to safe re-entry to the profession and to the delivery of high quality, compassionate social work services for the public.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tracy Reid'.

Tracy Reid, **Chief Executive, Social Care Council**

Part One



Developing guidance: Background, purpose and methodology



1. Purpose

This report sets out the background to the development of the *Return to Social Work Practice Guidance* for social workers in Northern Ireland.

It explains the policy and workforce context, outlines the consultation process undertaken with stakeholders, and summarises the intended outcome of the work.

The report is divided into three sections, the first sets out the background and context, the second section sets out the guidance in full, and the third section contains useful references.



2. Context

The Guidance has been developed in response to significant workforce pressures in Northern Ireland as outlined in the *Social Work Workforce Review (2022)*. Its purpose is to establish clear, consistent and evidence-informed expectations for supporting social workers who wish to return to practice safely and effectively.

Social workers who have taken a period of time away from practice and wish to return to or join the Register have a responsibility, supported by their employer, to ensure that their knowledge and understanding of any changes in legislation, policy, practice expectations and service contexts is refreshed. This shared responsibility between the social worker and the employer helps to ensure that practitioners are supported to practise safely and effectively and demonstrate professional competence.

Many health and social care workforce regulators set requirements that must be met prior to returning to practice to a regulated profession after a period of absence. The development of this Guidance fills an important policy gap and supports a more coherent approach to workforce supply and professional re-entry.

The work aligns with the Department of Health's *Social Work Workforce Review*, initiated in 2018 and reported in 2022. That review identified 53 recommendations across seven strategic themes. Under the theme of supply, the review specifically highlighted the need to develop pathways and supports for those leaving social work to return, including consideration of a return to social work programme. The Social Work Workforce Implementation Board (SWWIB) agreed with a Social care Council proposal to develop guidance rather than requirements at this stage to ensure there was support for returning to practise social workers.

The Social Care Council are aware that while some social workers leave the Register for a period of time, others remain registered while taking time away from practice. This Guidance has relevance to both and can support return to social work practice and / or the social work Register.

Social workers returning to the Register with an Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) condition of registration are outside the scope of this guidance and will be required to complete AYE in accordance with the relevant process. Social workers returning to the Register with the mandatory Professional in Practice (PiP) Two Requirements condition of registration are subject to the guidance and should be supported to complete their PiP Requirements as soon as possible as part of updating their knowledge, skills and practice.



3. Policy basis

The Social Care Council has been tasked with developing best practice guidance which will help social workers who are returning to the workforce to understand what is necessary for them to re-enter the workforce with up-to-date knowledge and understanding of contemporary practice.

This is important because the regulator must be assured that applicants meet registration requirements, employers must have confidence in the suitability of returning staff, and service users must be assured of receiving safe and effective support from competent practitioners.

The Guidance draws on a number of key Northern Ireland policy documents and codes of practice, including the Social Care Council *Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Workers (2015)* and *Standards for Employers (2017)*, the *Social Work Leadership Framework (2022)*, the *Social Work (NI) Supervision Policy (2024)*, *Supporting Social Workers Guidance (2025)* and *Safer and Effective Staffing in Social Work (2026)*.



4. Regulatory landscape

Regulatory landscape, nationally and internationally, was reviewed in the development of this guidance. This enabled comparison of different regulatory approaches and consideration of whether models were proportionate, practical and supportive of safe return to practice in Northern Ireland. Across the UK and the Republic of Ireland the processes described are mandatory and Social Work England (SWE), Social Care Wales (SCW) and CORU require these to be met and evidenced before applying for registration.

Regulators, nationally and internationally utilise different periods of absence from practice and the register before requirements are applied. Wales and New Zealand use a three year period, while England, Scotland, and the Republic of Ireland use two years.

Return to Social Work Practice Across the UK, Ireland and New Zealand.

The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) introduced return to practice requirements in 2024 following consultation. Social workers who have been out of practice for more than two years are subject to a six-month condition and must complete a combination of supervised practice, formal learning and informal learning once they are in employment before the condition is removed.

Social Work England (SWE) restoration policy requires social workers who have been away from registration for more than two years to show how they have kept their skills and knowledge up to date before they can apply to re-join the Register. This can be done through supervised practice, formal study or private study, with the amount of updating time depending on the length of absence.

Social Care Wales (SCW) currently uses a portfolio-based model. A social worker away from practice for less than three years generally only needs to apply to return, while longer absences require evidence of updating knowledge and understanding, with 180 hours of private study, practice and learning required for a break of three to six years increasing to 360 hours, for a break of six years or longer. Social Care Wales are currently reviewing their process for returning to the register.

CORU, in the Republic of Ireland, requires an updating period which must be conducted within the two years prior to returning, for social workers who have been out of practice for more than two years. The number of hours required increases with the length of absence from zero to 420 hours and applicants must also take account of their intended area of practice, previous experience and relevant developments during their time away. A period of social work supervised practice is required.

The New Zealand regulator, the Social Workers' Registration Board (SWRB), requires additional assessment after more than three years away from practice. Applicants must provide supporting evidence such as a cover letter, updated CV, professional development evidence and references, and may be subject to conditions including supervision and continuous professional development requirements. These decisions will be made by the Social Work Registration Board and are applied to ensure that the social worker is safe to practice.



5. Consultation process

A consultation process was completed to ensure the development of guidance that reflected regulatory expectations and the experience and expectations of practitioners, employers and service users. A Reference Group was established to contribute to the development of the guidance document.

Consultations were held with a range of social work and service user stakeholders, including the Social Care Council's Participation Partnership, social work managers and social workers from across the Health and Social Care Trusts, voluntary and community sector and the Education Authority. We spoke to two social workers about their experience of leaving and returning to, and joining, the Register after absence from practice of more than three years. The draft guidance was circulated to the Social Care Council Social Work Registrants' Engagement Group for feedback.

Online meetings were held with the Scottish Social Services Council, Social Care Wales and Social Work England to understand how return to practice is managed across the UK and share their experience and insights about implementing a policy. International models were also explored to identify useful approaches and learning.



6. Consultation themes

A clear theme emerging from consultation with social workers was concern about a mandatory requirement for supervised practice to be completed prior to registration with the Social Care Council, particularly where this must be supervised by a social worker.

Consultees felt this approach may be difficult to provide and manage given current workforce and team pressures, and likely to create unnecessary barriers for people seeking to return to the Register.

As social workers work across the life course and in a wide variety of contexts the challenge of accessing learning opportunities relevant to the returning area of practice was acknowledged and considered to be a barrier to the implementation of learning requirements to be met before registration.

There was strong consensus in favour of a quality-based approach focused on relevant, targeted learning and demonstrated professional competence achieved in the early stages of a return to practice, in partnership with an employer, rather than set hours-based requirements completed prior to registration.

Consultees expressed a high degree of support for the development of a return to practice information webpage for social workers considering joining or returning to the Register after prolonged absence from practice.

This Guidance may be of value to social workers returning to practice and / or joining the Register after a period of three years or more absence from social work practice. This fits with the Social Care Council cycle of registration and renewal.

Social workers with an AYE or Two PiP requirements condition of registration must prioritise meeting these conditions.



7. Outcome

The outcome of the work is a proposal for practical and proportionate Guidance designed to support returning social workers, employers and the regulator. The Guidance sets out clear expectations and responsibilities while remaining flexible enough to support individual circumstances and learning needs.

The Social Care Council, as the first point of contact for social workers applying to join or return to the Register, will note length of time away from social work practice and include additional information about the Guidance with confirmation of registration notification emails. Employers should support induction, supervision and the identification of learning and development plans, and social workers will take responsibility for reflecting on their experience, identifying gaps and engaging in ongoing professional development.



8. Principles underpinning the guidance

The Guidance promotes a values-based approach that emphasises professional standards and identity and a shared responsibility for safe re-entry to practice. It also supports compassionate leadership, a wellbeing and learning focussed workplace culture and proportionate support from employers.





9. Implementation and review

- The Guidance will be published and promoted on the Social Care Council website and communication channels, and implemented from the date of approval.
- The Guidance is subject to Equality Screening.
- The Social Care Council will develop internal systems to collect data to be able to report on the number of returning social workers.
- The Guidance, once implemented, should be piloted and reviewed over a two-year period; this will allow the impact to be assessed, learning to be captured and any necessary changes to be made including whether mandatory requirements for returning to practice are needed.



10. Conclusion

Having consulted broadly with social workers, employers, other regulators and people with lived experience, the return to practice policy outlined in the next section of this paper and formalised as the *Return to Social Work Practice Guidance* will be implemented.

Part Two



Return to Social Work Practice Guidance

1. Introduction

The *Return to Social Work Practice Guidance* (the Guidance) sets out best practice expectations for social workers seeking to join or return to the Social Care Council's Public Facing Register (the Register), after an absence of three years or more from social work practice. It is also applicable to social workers who have remained on the Register while taking time away from practice.

It explains the importance of continuous professional development, clarifies the responsibilities of the Social Care Council, employers and returning registrants, and outlines a recommended pathway for re-entry to professional practice.

This Guidance was co-designed with service users, social workers and employers to ensure it reflects the realities of practice and supports safe, effective and person-centred social work.



While Leading [social work] practice is a challenging task in a complex, dynamic environment, nevertheless the profession is compelled to lead excellent practice, design systems to support excellent practice and develop excellent practitioners. This is achieved through fostering innovation, learning and evaluation, and supported by robust professional governance systems and processes.



Social Work Leadership Framework (2022), Page 12

2. Purpose and scope

This Guidance applies to all social workers returning to practice after a significant period away from social work employment, (three years or more). It is intended to support learning, reflection and appropriate professional preparation prior to and on return to practice. Although this guidance is not currently mandatory, it reflects the level of preparation expected of those resuming professional practice.

Social workers with an existing Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) condition of registration are outside the scope of this guidance and will be required to complete AYE in accordance with the AYE standards.

Social workers who have remained on the Register without employment must be able to prove that they have met the Social Care Council *Registration Rules, (2025) Schedule 3, Rule 9 (6) (c)* of 90 hours of learning and development within their three-year registration period. This Guidance provides a pathway to support development and ensure safe practice when resuming social work practice.

3. Importance of continuous professional development

Social work is a dynamic profession concerned with promoting and safeguarding the social wellbeing of people affected by disadvantage, discrimination, harm and abuse. Social workers must maintain up to date knowledge in relation to legislation, safeguarding policy and practice, research, digital systems and best practice.

Engagement in continuous professional development (CPD), as a requirement of registration, supports social workers to maintain the competence, knowledge and values required by the Social Care Council's *Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Workers*, (2015). It is critical to ensuring safe, ethical and effective practice.

Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Workers (2015)

Standard of Practice 6

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.

6.17 Undertaking relevant training and learning to maintain and improve your knowledge and skills and meeting the Social Care Council Post Registration Training and Learning Requirements in line with your job role.

Standard of Conduct 1

As a social worker, you must manage your role as a professional social worker.

1.1 Practising safely and effectively within the context of your organisation, requirements of legislation and scope of practice, being able to balance accountability and autonomy.

Standard of Conduct 2

Maintain an up-to-date knowledge and evidence base for social work.

2.1 Take responsibility for maintaining an up-to-date knowledge and evidence base for social work practice.

2.2 Working within legislative and policy context for social work, including professional codes, standards frameworks and guidance.

In practical terms, CPD enables social workers to:

- Update their understanding of legislation and policy.
- Strengthen professional judgement and decision-making.
- Maintain confidence in safeguarding practice.
- Contribute effectively to team and multi-agency working.
- Promote person-centred, rights-based practice.
- Improve outcomes for the people they support.
- Ensure practice is evidence informed.
- Strengthen professional identity and confidence.

4. Key responsibilities

Responsibilities of the Social Care Council

The Social Care Council should:

- Provide clear information to social workers seeking to return to the Register after three years or more.
- Support registrants to understand and meet the *Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Workers*.
- Support employers to understand and meet the *Employer Standards*.
- Maintain data on social workers re-entering practice.
- Encourage social workers to access existing resources available on the Social Care Council Learning Zone which will be helpful when returning to practice.
- Promote professional development and career-long learning opportunities.

Responsibilities of returning social workers

Returning social workers should:

- Reflect on any gaps in confidence, knowledge and skills before and after applying for registration and seek to update knowledge through appropriate learning activities and self directed professional development, including reviewing the Social Care Council website and associated resources.
- Notify employers of their returner status at the earliest opportunity.
- Participate fully in induction and supervision.
- Comply with the *Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Workers*.



Supervision strengthens the capacity and capability of the workforce, providing a formal and on-going process that is vital to quality practice, professional development, practitioner wellbeing and enhanced relationships with service users and colleagues.



DoH Supervision Policy (2024), Page 3

- Work with their line manager to agree development needs and actions appropriate to their role.
- Familiarise themselves with, and agree a plan to meet, any PiP condition attached to registration.
- Engage with appropriate learning opportunities, including those available through the PiP Framework.

Social workers who return to the Register but do not take up immediate employment must adhere to the Social Care Council CPD requirements for registration and renewal and engage with the Guidance at the point of seeking employment.

Returning social workers who intend to practise independently should identify and keep a record of their learning needs and activity, source appropriate supervision support and actively engage with the Guidance from the point at which they plan to seek registration.



Responsibilities of employers

Employers should:

- Comply with the Social Care Council's *Standards for Employers*.

Standards for Employers of Social Workers and Social Care Workers (2017)

Standard 4

As a social work and social care employer, you must provide learning and development opportunities to enable registrants to strengthen and develop their skills and knowledge.

4.1 Providing appropriate induction training and on-going learning and development opportunities to help registrants do their job effectively and prepare for any new and changing roles and responsibilities.

- Provide a comprehensive induction.
- Foster a supportive learning culture and positive working environment.
- Provide regular, reflective supervision to support practice development.

Standards for Employers of Social Workers and Social Care Workers (2017)

4.2 Providing effective, regular supervision to registrants to enable them to develop and improve through reflective practice.

- Agree learning objectives and monitor progress through existing processes such as induction, supervision, appraisal and probationary periods.
- Support social workers to meet the Two Requirements condition of registration.
- Provide and support access to appropriate learning opportunities including the PiP Framework.
- Provide opportunities for shadowing, co-working, protected learning time, mentoring and coaching.
- Apply gradual caseload building, where appropriate, based on managerial assessment and with due regard to safe practice.
- Implement capability processes where significant concerns arise.



Safe and manageable caseloads and workloads will improve a social worker's ability to engage effectively, deliver quality services, and ultimately achieve positive outcomes for service users. It will facilitate social work practitioners to have adequate time to carry out professional tasks, support people and enhance relationship-based practice.



Safer and Effective Staffing in Social Work (2026) , Page 18

5. Recommended pathway for returning to practice



6. Best practice learning areas

Preparation for returning to practice in Northern Ireland may include learning in the following areas:

- Northern Ireland legislation, policy and statutory guidance.
- Adult and child protection.
- Domestic and sexual violence.
- Risk assessment.
- Trauma-informed practice.
- Digital recording systems and data governance.
- Ethics, values and rights-based practice.
- Equality, diversity and cultural humility.

7. Conclusion

This Guidance supports a proportionate, values-based and quality-focused approach to returning to practice. Through shared commitment from the Social Care Council, employers and registrants, social workers can be supported to return to the profession with confidence and clarity about their responsibilities.

It is intended to support safe, effective and compassionate services for the public while promoting professional growth, accountability and ongoing learning.



The status of a profession is determined by the extent to which its members consistently demonstrate skills, knowledge and practices that instil trust and credibility within those who experience it. Leading the Profession is the contribution each social worker makes to the reputation and influence of social work as a discipline.



Social Work Leadership Framework (2022) , Page 12

Part Three



Useful references

-  [Department of Health \(2024\) – Social Work \(NI\) Supervision Policy.](#)
-  [Department of Health \(2025\) – Supporting Social Workers Guidance.](#)
-  [Department of Health \(2026\) – Safer and Effective Staffing in Social Work.](#)
-  [Social Care Council – Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Workers \(2015\).](#)
-  [Social Care Council – Standards for Employers of Social Workers and Social Care Workers \(2017\).](#)
-  [Social Care Council – Post Registration Training and Learning Guidance.](#)
-  [Social Care Council – Registration Rules \(2025\).](#)
-  [Department of Health \(2022\) – Social Work Leadership Framework \(2022\).](#)

Learning Zone resources

-  [Learning Zone.](#)
-  [Professional in Practice.](#)

Regulators

-  [Scottish Social Services Council – Return to practice \(RTP\) guidance for social workers.](#)
-  [Social Work England – Restoration guidance.](#)
-  [Social Work Wales – Returning to social work practice.](#)
-  [Social Workers’ Registration Board New Zealand – Return to Practice.](#)
-  [CORU – Return to Practice Requirements.](#)

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