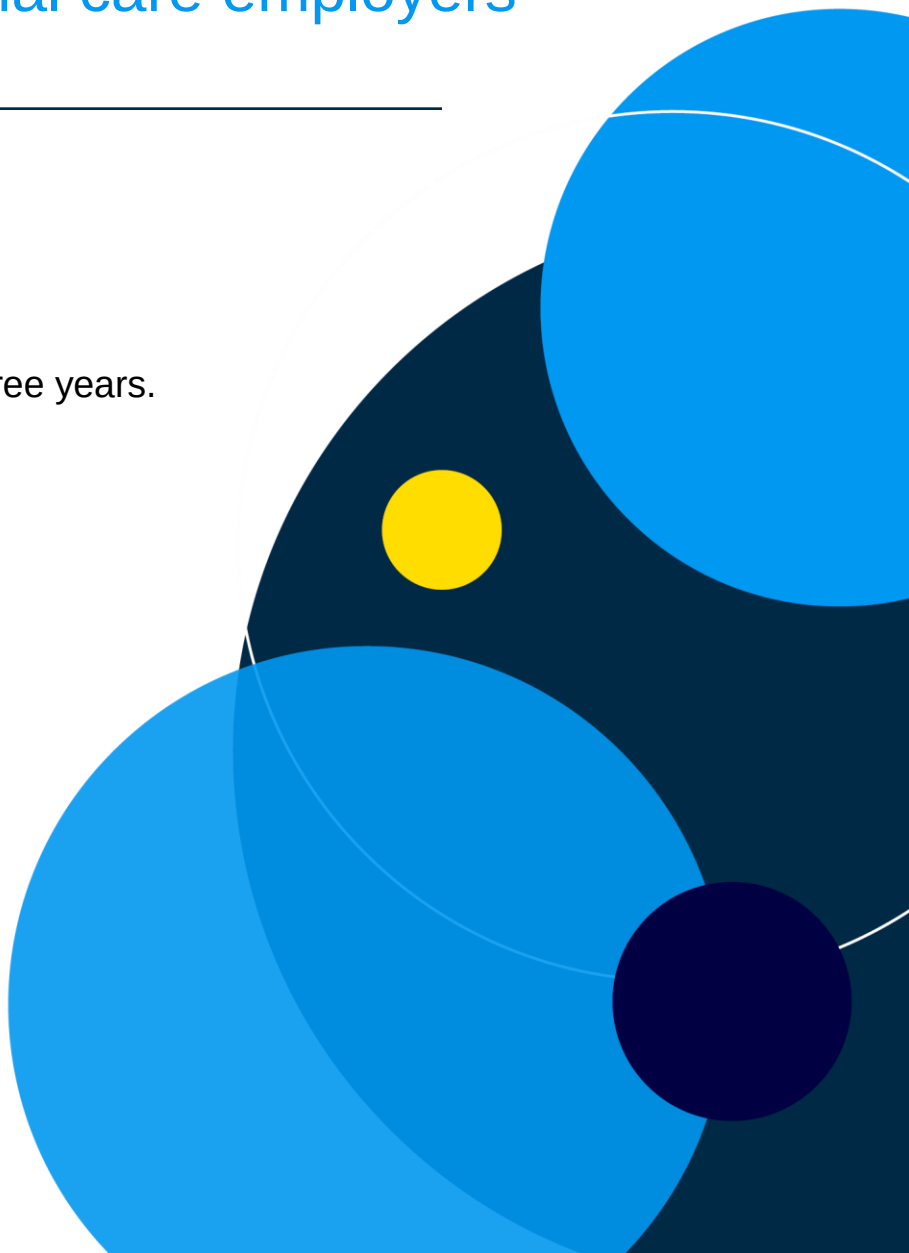
Safer recruitment and employment

Guidance for social care employers

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Introduction

The social care workforce represents the largest registered workforce in the health and social care system in Northern Ireland and provides care and support to some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Social care staff are the biggest asset to the sector and it is essential that only those individuals with the required knowledge, skills, values and attributes are recruited.

Recruitment requires significant resource investment on the part of employing organisations and it can be costly when it goes wrong – for the applicant, the wider team, the organisation and most importantly to those individuals the organisation supports. The aim of safe recruitment is to ensure that each employer effectively and efficiently recruits and retains the best people for the job.

Recruitment in the social care sector remains a challenge, however, it is important to strike the right balance between addressing any barriers to filling skills gaps and safeguarding of adults and children.

Safe recruitment is a critical element in protecting the health, safety and wellbeing of people who use services. Employers have a legal and professional responsibility to ensure that those they recruit are suitable to work in social care, are appropriately skilled and qualified, and demonstrate the values and behaviours expected of the social care workforce.

The joint Social Care Council and RQIA ***Standards for Employers of Social Workers and Social Care Workers*** place clear expectations on employers to operate effective and robust recruitment processes. These standards require employers to take all reasonable steps to ensure that workers are fit to practise, including carrying out appropriate pre-employment checks, confirming registration requirements where applicable, and promoting values-based recruitment that reflects the principles of safe, compassionate and ethical care.

Similarly, **RQIA** requires registered providers to have comprehensive recruitment and selection procedures in place as part of their registration and ongoing compliance. This includes meeting statutory requirements around vetting, references, fitness of staff and adult/child protection arrangements. Failure to recruit safely can place service users at risk and may result in regulatory action.

Safe recruitment is not a one-off activity but an ongoing process that supports safeguarding, workforce accountability and service quality. When recruitment practices are well-designed, consistently applied and regularly reviewed, they help to prevent unsuitable individuals from entering the workforce, support safer care environments, and provide assurance to service users, families and regulators.

Purpose and scope of this guide

This guide is designed to support social care employers to safely recruit suitable staff, understand their responsibilities under the joint **Standards for Employers** and **RQIA registration requirements**, and to promote good practice in safe recruitment. It highlights key principles and considerations to help ensure recruitment processes are fair, lawful and focused on safeguarding those who receive care and support as well as supporting a resilient and trusted workforce.

The guidance focuses on the safety aspects associated with recruitment rather than the recruitment process in its totality.

Whilst this guidance is targeted primarily at social care employers, the principles equally apply to social work recruitment.

Developing a safeguarding mindset

Skills for Care in their *Safe and Fair Recruitment Guide (2024)* stresses the importance of a 'safeguarding mindset' when it comes to safer recruitment which draws the distinction between **'compliance'** – just meeting minimum standards and ticking the right boxes, but not exploring or considering anything sitting outside of that process, and **'curiosity'** – which means going beyond minimum standards and being actively curious about information we do and don't have.

They have developed the *PRISM model of safer employment* which is a framework that encompasses a 360 degrees approach to safeguarding in employment which supports employers to embed a safeguarding mindset at every stage of the employment journey through to managing leavers.

Figure 1: PRISM model



Meeting your responsibilities under the *Standards for Employers*

All registered social care practitioners are required to meet the Social Care Council's *Standards of Conduct and Practice* as a requirement of their ongoing registration. The *Standards for Employers* describe the responsibilities of employers in supporting and enabling their registered workforce to meet their standards. These mirror the provisions in the registrant standards and are intended to reflect good practice. They are designed to complement rather than replace or duplicate existing employers' policies and form part of the wider package of legislation, requirements and guidance that relate to the employment of staff.

Employers are responsible for making sure that they meet the standards, provide high quality services and promote public trust and confidence in social work and social care services.

The Social Care Council has responsibility within the legislation to publish the *Standards for Employers* and keeping them under review. RQIA has responsibility for the enforcement of Department of Health (DoH) standards and will consider compliance with the employer standards as part of their registration and inspection processes. The Social Care Council and RQIA collaborate to effectively ensure adherence to the *Standards for Employers* and to share information on adherence to the Standards within social care services.

Employers are encouraged to review and audit their own policies and practice against the provisions within the employer Standards.

Standard Two of the *Standards for Employers* requires employers to **make sure people are suitable to enter the social care workforce.** This overarching Standard is broken down in to the following elements:

> **2.1** Using rigorous and thorough recruitment and selection processes focused on making sure that only people who have the appropriate knowledge, skills and values and are suitable to provide social work or social care services, enter your workforce.
>
> **2.2** Checking criminal records and relevant registers to ensure people are safe to practise.
>
> **2.3** Undertaking any required pre-employment health checks.
>
> **2.4** Seeking and providing reliable references.
>
> **2.5** Ensuring that workers who are required to be registered with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council are registered and are clear about the consequences of failing to register or maintain their registration.
>
> **2.6** Ensuring clear lines of responsibility and accountability are established between recruitment/employment agencies and employing organisations in relation to agency workers.

Applying RQIA's Regulations and Standards

RQIA derives its statutory authority from the *Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003*. The Order established RQIA as the independent regulator for health and social care services in Northern Ireland and gives it powers to register, inspect, regulate and, where necessary, take enforcement action where providers fail to comply with statutory regulations, conditions of registration, or the minimum standards required for a specific type of service.

The *Regulation and Improvement Authority (Registration) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005* set out the overarching legal requirements for registered providers. These are further operationalised through service specific regulations and minimum standards, which provide more detailed legal and quality expectations according to the type of service delivered, such as children's homes, nursing homes and domiciliary care agencies.

This regulatory framework places a legal duty on registered providers and registered managers to implement robust and safe recruitment processes to ensure staff are fit, competent and suitable for their roles. Compliance with these duties is assessed by RQIA through registration, inspection and enforcement processes, against both overarching registration requirements and the specific regulations and minimum standards applicable to each service type.

In Northern Ireland, there are ten registered service types, known as 'establishments and agencies', which are governed by the service specific regulations listed below. Those relevant to social care include:

- *The Children's Homes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005.*
- *The Nursing Homes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005.*
- *The Residential Care Homes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005.*
- *The Day Care Setting Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007.*
- *The Residential Family Centres Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007.*
- *The Adult Placement Agencies Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007.*
- *The Domiciliary Care Agencies Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007.*

Although the wording may vary depending on the type of service and the specific regulations and standards, there are common recruitment and selection provisions. Collectively this creates a safeguarding framework designed to minimise risk and protect the safety of individuals who use and are supported by the service, by ensuring that only suitable, competent and safe staff are recruited and/or appointed.

In addition to reviewing individual recruitment, RQIA may also assess the provider's systems and governance arrangements and recruitment policy and procedures to gain assurance that safer recruitment practices are understood, effectively implemented and applied. Evidence is also required that the registered manager maintains effective oversight, scrutiny and sign-off of recruitment decisions to ensure compliance with the regulatory requirements and minimum standards.

Recruitment and selection

In addition to regulatory requirements, safer recruitment is underpinned by a set of overarching principles designed to promote consistent and robust decision-making. These include values-based recruitment approaches, which focus on aligning applicant's attitudes and behaviours with the ethos of care provision, alongside systems of governance that ensure accountability for recruitment decisions.

Values-based recruitment

Values-based recruitment in social care is about selecting staff not only for their skills and qualifications, but for attitudes, behaviours, and values that align with person centred care, dignity and respect.

Providers can achieve this by building values-based recruitment in to the selection process, and not treating it as a separate process. This may include:

1. Values-based job descriptions and person specifications.
2. Behavioural and scenario- based interview questions, e.g. asked how they would handle dignity issues, conflict, safeguarding concerns, complaints.
3. Assessment of interpersonal skills during selection process.
4. Structured interviews with scoring frameworks against agreed values and/or behaviours; this reduces subjective decision-making.
5. Involvement of service users or carers as appropriate.
6. Clear organisational values embedded in induction and culture.

More information on values- based recruitment can be found on the Social Care Council Learning Zone, see: www.learningzone.niscc.info/learning-resources/values-based-recruitment.

Maintaining records

Effective, safer recruitment also requires comprehensive record-keeping to ensure transparency, accountability and evidence of decision making. Where any risks or discrepancies are identified with regard to the pre-employment checks, these must be recorded alongside any mitigating actions or decision-making rationale.

Where elements of recruitment records are held externally or centrally (for example by a human resources department), the registered manager must have assurance that all required recruitment checks have been fully completed and appropriately evidenced. The registered manager retains overall responsibility for confirming that the recruitment process is complaint with regulatory requirement and that appropriate sign-off has been completed prior to appointment, with records available for inspection where required.

Essential background checks

Robust vetting provides organisations with the first opportunity to deter and prevent those who may be unsuitable for work with vulnerable people from securing a role with them.

This will include the following checks:

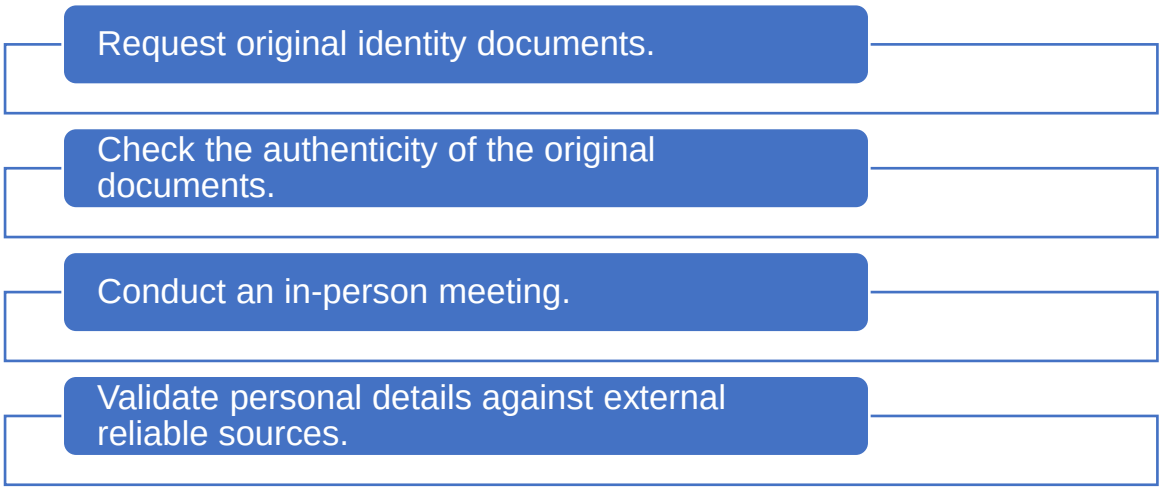
a) Identity checks

Identity checks are the first checks that should be carried out as all other checks are deemed invalid if a person's identity cannot be proved. Completing identity checks minimises the risk of employing or engaging an individual who:

- is impersonating another individual
- is avoiding the detection of a criminal offence, and
- has used illegal means to obtain genuine documents to gain employment.

Identity must be carried out on all candidates whether they are UK resident or an overseas candidate seeking work in the UK. This is to confirm that the candidate is who they claim to be and are not impersonating another individual or forging an identity. This has become even more critical as advances in artificial intelligence have made it significantly easier to create highly convincing forged identity documents that can bypass superficial checks.

NHS Employers have produced an *Identity checks standard* which outlines four steps to validate an applicant's identity.



The range of documentary evidence gathered should aim to verify the individuals:

- ✓ Appearance (i.e. photo ID).
- ✓ Full name (including forename, last name and any other name they legally wish to be known by).
- ✓ Signature.
- ✓ Date and place of birth.
- ✓ Current residing address.
- ✓ Other biographical and social history information which may be cross-referenced.

It is best practice to be in physical possession of the original documents and carry out this examination in person. Other alternative methods include remotely through

a live video call, for example, Ms Teams, Zoom and FaceTime. Any risks identified when using live video must be assessed and mitigated by employers when choosing to implement this practice. Employers should not rely on the inspection of the documents using a live video link, or by checking a faxed or scanned copy of the document without seeking original documentation as soon as practical, e.g. when the individual first takes up the position and/or need to complete induction or other type of training.

All documentary evidence should:

- be issued by a trustworthy and reliable source
- ideally, be difficult to forge
- if dated, be valid and current contain the individual's full name, photograph, and signature, and
- have required some form of identity check before being issued to the individual.

Employers should take a photocopy or a scanned copy of each of the original documents presented to them and retain these on file in line with current data protection law. All photocopies or scanned copies should be signed, dated, and certified by the person taking the copy (either by hand or digitally).

The following guidance produced by *NHS Employers* (see: www.nhsemployers.org/publications/identity-checks-standard) provides further helpful guidance on the types of identity documents that should be requested; dealing with documents produced in different names; obtaining proof of identity for asylum seekers and refugees and for young people who have just left full-time education.

b) Right to work

In Northern Ireland, employers are legally required to conduct right to work checks on individuals before employing them. This includes verifying the identity and nationality of the applicant and ensuring they have the necessary immigration permission or visa. Employers must not discriminate against applicants based on their nationality or other protected social identity grounds. The process involves checking the applicant's identity and nationality, and ensuring they have the relevant immigration permission or visa in place.

There are two types of right to work checks:

a) a manual check, and
b) an online check.

There are three basic steps to conducting a manual right to work check:

- obtain original versions of one or more acceptable documents
- check the validity of the documents in the presence of the holder, and
- make and retain a clear copy, and record the date the check was made.

Employers should retain the right to work evidence for the duration of employment plus two years after the worker leaves.

Guidance on checking right to work status can be found on at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/right-to-work-checks-employers-guide and the Home Office's *Right to work checklist*, see: www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68b6b7e7536d629f9c82a9a1/RTW+Checklist__final_.pdf.

c) Access NI

In NI, criminal records checks and barred list checks are managed through AccessNI. There are three levels of checks – basic, standard and enhanced. Employers must ensure that the level of AccessNI criminal record check requested is appropriate to the duties of the role. Where staff are working in regulated activity with children or adults – such as providing personal care, social work, healthcare, or having unsupervised and regular contact – an Enhanced AccessNI check with a check of the relevant barred list(s) is required before employment is confirmed.

For roles that involve working with vulnerable people but do not meet the definition of regulated activity, an Enhanced check without barred list information may be appropriate. A Standard or Basic check should only be used where the role does not involve regulated activity or close care responsibilities. Employers are responsible for assessing the role accurately, obtaining the correct level of check, and ensuring that checks are kept under review in line with safeguarding and recruitment obligations.

Further information is available at: www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2026-02/AccessNI Frequently Asked Questions FAQs - Updated 12 February 2026.pdf.

RQIA inspection processes will typically expect to see evidence of AccessNI disclosure certificate reference numbers, the date of issue and confirmation of any disclosed information, alongside documented decision-making where disclosures are identified.

Where an umbrella body is used, there should be clear evidence that appropriate identity verification is completed before submission, supported by a formal agreement outlining roles and responsibilities for processing disclosures.

In addition to checks on directly employed staff, recruitment and safeguarding requirements extend to any individual who may have unsupervised access to individuals who use the service. This includes volunteers, bus drivers, hairdressers, administrative staff etc, and external contractors providing services, such as maintenance staff. Where such roles are utilised, services should have clear policies and procedures outlining checks which are required, as well as induction and training appropriate to the level of contact with the individuals receiving care and support.

Effective governance systems should also include systems to manage and monitor external service provision, including contractor/visitor sign in and sign out procedures. Collectively, these measures ensure that safeguarding risks are

managed consistently across both employed staff and third-party providers and visitors to an establishment.

d) Disclosure and Barring Service

The Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) helps employers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland make safer recruitment decisions and prevent unsuitable people from working with vulnerable groups, including children. The DBS decides whether it is suitable for a person to be placed on or removed from a barred list.

It is a criminal offence for an individual to be employed or to seek employment within regulated services if they are on either the adults or children's barred lists.

If the DBS receives information that indicates that a person may pose a risk of harm to vulnerable groups, including children, they will look into this and may decide to include this person on a barred list.

If as an employer you have removed one of your staff, or you would have done so had the person not left your employ, and you believe that they have harmed or may harm a child or vulnerable adult, you are required by law to refer the matter to the DBS.

More information which includes how to make a referral can be found at: www.gov.uk/guidance/making-barring-referrals-to-the-dbs.

The DBS also provides an *Update Service* which is an online subscription service for individuals who hold Standard or Enhanced DBS checks that lets organisations and employers carry out a free, instant online check to view the status of an existing Standard or Enhanced DBS certificate. The *DBS Update Service* forms an important part of safer recruitment and safer employment practices. It enables organisations, with the individual's consent, to carry out online status checks on eligible DBS certificates, helping organisations maintain confidence that safeguarding information remains current throughout employment.

Organisations should consider incorporating *DBS Update Service* status checks into their safer employment practices. While there is no prescribed frequency for carrying out status checks, regular checks can support ongoing workforce assurance by identifying whether new information has been added to an individual's DBS record since their certificate was issued.

More information is available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/dbs-update-service-employer-guide/dbs-update-service-employer-guide.

e) Relevant declarations

In addition to formal checks, providers should also require applicants to complete relevant pre-employment declarations to support assessment of their suitability for their role.

This should include:

- criminal records self-declaration, requiring disclosure of any convictions, cautions or pending prosecutions that may not be captured through disclosure systems at the point of application, allowing potential risks to be identified and assessed in relation to the role, and
- previous or current registration with a professional or regulatory body self-declaration including disclosure of any investigations, sanctions, conditions, suspension or removal from a register.

Under the *Rehabilitation of Offenders legislation*[1], some minor and old offences may be filtered from an Enhanced Disclosure check and an individual does not need to tell a prospective employer/organisation about these convictions and/or cautions because they are 'protected'. Employers therefore should ask applicants if they have any convictions that are not protected.

Serious crimes currently known as specified offences will always appear on a certificate. Some types of offences will always be disclosed including those which are serious, relate to sexual or violent offending or are relevant in the context of safeguarding. Convictions which have resulted in a custodial or suspended sentence will also always be disclosed.

A published list of specified offences is available through the AccessNI *List of Specified Offences*, see: www.nidirect.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2026-03/List-of-Specified-Offences- March-2026 - Current %281%29.PDF.

f) Qualifications, skills, experience and competency assessment

Applicants are expected to possess relevant qualifications, skills and experience appropriate to the role being applied for within social care. These requirements form part of the initial suitability assessment and should be subsequently verified through appropriate documentation and evidence.

Where an applicant does not fully meet all competency requirements at the point of appointment, there may be an expectation that they will achieve the required level of competence within a specified timeframe. This is supported through structured induction, mandatory training and ongoing development opportunities.

Progression to full competency should be monitored and clearly recorded through supervision, assessment and review processes to ensure that individuals are able to perform their role safely and effectively.

g) Full employment history

Applicants are required to provide a full and continuous employment history from leaving secondary education onwards. This must include details of any post-secondary education or training, full-time and part-time employment, volunteer roles and any other relevant activity. A complete record of employment must include accurate start and end dates for each role, along with a clear explanation of any gaps in employment, education and training. Where the person has previously

[1] **Rehabilitation of Offenders (Exceptions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1979, as amended in 2014.**

worked with children or vulnerable adults, so far as reasonably practicable, verification of the reason why the employment or position ended is required, to support assessment of suitability, consistency and reliability.

Providers must ensure that application forms are designed to actively request this information, and that embedded recruitment systems are in place to identify, clarify and record any omissions or inconsistencies where full details are not initially provided. Any such gaps or missing information must be followed up and appropriately documented as part of the recruitment decision-making process.

h) Pre-employment health checks

There is a regulatory expectation that pre-employment health checks are completed as part of the recruitment and selection process. Providers must be able to evidence that staff are physically fit and mentally capable of carrying out the role safely, by not presenting a risk to themselves, service users, or colleagues and able to meet the requirements of the role. This is part of the wider requirement for employer duties under health and safety legislation.

Pre-employment physical and mental health checks typically include a pre-employment health questionnaire completed by the applicant and covering:

- physical health conditions relevant to care duties
- mental health history where it may impact role safety
- medication that could affect alertness, and
- driving or manual handling and fitness for shift work and/or night work.

The provider must review the health declaration against the job description and person specification and determine whether the applicant is fit, fit with adjustments, or requires an Occupational Health referral.

There should be a process for review and reasonable adjustments under equality legislation, and information should be handled in line with *General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)* legislation (only necessary if health data retained).

RQIA inspectors do not review the content of physical and mental health checks but seek evidence that it has been completed before commencement of work (or unsupervised practice) and decisions are documented and risk-based.

i) Age requirements

It is legal to employ a school leaver from age 16 once they have reached the minimum school leaver age. A young person can leave school on 30 June if they are 16 on or before 1 July that year. If they turn 16 on or after 2 July, they must remain in school until the end of the following academic year.

For a social care post however, the legal minimum age for employment is only part of the issue:

- A 16 or 17-year-old can be employed as young worker (lra.org.uk); (nidirect.gov.uk).
- Employers must carry out a specific young person's risk assessment and comply with working time restrictions for under 18's.
- Employers should assess their competency and confidence to carry out all of the tasks required of them including personal care and should consider putting additional support measures in place in the initial stages of their employment particularly so they can shadow experienced staff.
- Employers must ensure they have appropriate insurance in place
- Young workers should not be left in charge of a care setting or to work on their own.

References

References are a key component of safer recruitment. The *Standards for Employers* require employers to **both seek and provide reliable references**. The expectation is that providers do not simply obtain references, rather they should critically evaluate them before confirming employment.

Providers are required to obtain at least two satisfactory references. One reference should be from the applicant's current or most recent employer, particularly where they have worked in health or social care. Factual references which confirm only a timeline of employment are **not** considered sufficient for the purposes of obtaining work in social care where an individual has access to children and/or vulnerable adults.

References should comment on the applicant's suitability to work with vulnerable adults or children (where relevant), conduct, reliability, attendance, and performance.

References should be verified to ensure they are genuine; due diligence is required by the provider in cross referencing email addresses with referee email addresses provided on the application form, and that the referee email address for the most recent employer is the business/work email address.

In regulated health and social care services, the expectation is that references should contribute to a judgement on character, competence, and fitness to work with vulnerable people and not just a confirmation of employment history.

Any gaps, inconsistencies, vague responses, or adverse comments should be explored, documented and risk assessed before a recruitment decision is made. When a reference is limited to dates only, the provider should not rely on it as a stand-alone satisfactory reference.

Additional action is required and this may include:

- Make a follow-up telephone call to the previous employer and specifically request verbal confirmation of the applicant's (i) suitability to work in a care setting, and (ii) any known concerns or disciplinary history. The outcome of the call should be recorded in the applicant's recruitment file.

- Request an additional reference from another previous employer.
- Conduct a structured discussion with the applicant to explore reasons for limited reference details, employment history gaps or changes, and document responses.
- Consideration of strength of other recruitment checks (AccessNI, interview, ID verification) and whether sufficient assurance has been achieved without a full and complete reference.

Any limitations in references should be explicitly recorded and mitigated.

Employers should ensure that references are always obtained directly from the referee and that reliance is not placed on references or testimonials provided by the applicant, or on open references and testimonials, i.e. ‘to whom it may concern’. References should always be scrutinised closely and verified by follow up contact with the referee.

It is best practice to obtain a written reference however where verbal references are taken, the person making the written record of the reference should verify the source of the reference and note the verification method used. The person taking the verbal reference must also sign and date the reference at the time of making the record.

Employers owe their employees and ex-employees a duty to take reasonable care to ensure the accuracy of a reference given about them. The use of reference templates and/or proformas which provides information against performance related criteria can ensure consistency of approach and greater objectivity.

Where it has genuinely proved impossible to obtain a reference, the employer should base the recruitment decision on what information can be reasonably be obtained as part of the interview and checking stages.

A pre-employment risk assessment should be completed detailing:

- the rationale for the recruitment decision
- all efforts made to obtain a reference
- the reasons why information could not be obtained, and
- and any additional measures put in place to ensure new staff are adequately supported and sufficiently supervised to carry out their role safely and effectively.

Compulsory registration with the Social Care Council

The following groups of workers are required under the legislation and associated regulations to be registered with the Social Care Council:

- All qualified social workers.
- All residential care staff.
- All day care, domiciliary care and supported living staff.
- All students on the Degree in Social Work course in N Ireland.

In relation to social care workers, it is an offence under The *Northern Ireland Social Care Council (Social Care Workers Prohibition) and Fitness of Workers Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013* for an employer to employ a person as a social care worker if they are prohibited or not appropriately registered or to continue to employ a worker knowing they are prohibited or unfit under the Regulations.

RQIA will inspect the arrangements employers have in place for ensuring compliance with registration regulations as part of their inspection processes. The Social Care Council will also report all serious breaches of registration regulations to RQIA as part of the joint Memorandum of Understanding.

The six-month grace period available within the legislation to obtain registration is only available to first time entrants to the social care workforce. It does not apply each time a social care worker moves to a new role or setting. Employers are strongly encouraged to ensure that all new entrants apply for registration with the Social Care Council on taking up post as any relevant declarations made by an applicant will necessitate a suitability assessment process to be undertaken and this can take more time. If the social care worker has not **obtained** registration within the six-month period, they will be unable to work in any role for which registration is required.

Employers can check if an individual is registered through the Public Facing Register on the Social Care Council website, see: www.portal.niscc.org/Public-Facing-Register.

The record will also identify if the individual is subject to any conditions. Employers should also regularly check the employer portal to see if there are any applications requiring endorsement or the registration status of a social care worker, for example, if an annual fee payment or renewal is due.

Verifying and endorsing an application for registration

Employer verification enables the Social Care Council to be certain of an applicant's identity. Employers are required to verify the identity (ID) documents that an applicant is submitting as part of their application process. ID documents should be signed and dated by an applicant's line manager and submitted to the Council together with the application to register.

Guidance on required ID documentation is available on the Social Care Council's website, see: www.niscc.info/identity-documentation-additional-information.

If a work permit or visa is required to work in the UK, an applicant must provide a copy of this to their employer who will confirm as part of the endorsement declaration, that they have satisfied themselves of this requirement.

Endorsement assures the Social Care Council that the applicant's social care employer is satisfied that there is no reason why the applicant should not be considered suitable for registration. It is normally completed by a nominated senior representative of the applicant's social care employer. Where an applicant has more than one employer, endorsement should be completed by the primary employer.

The endorser is required to:

- Confirm criminal record checks have been completed.
- Provide any information re current disciplinary record.
- Provide any further information about the applicant that might affect their suitability to be registered.
- Confirm right to work.

The verifier and endorser may be the same individual although this is generally not feasible in larger organisations where there will normally be a lead endorser and a number of nominated endorsers. Pending endorsements are accessible via the employer portal. Lead endorsers will be able to view all pending endorsements while nominated endorsers will only be able to view those endorsements they have been assigned, for example within their own service area.

Recruitment agencies

The *Standards for Employers* require employers to ensure that there are clear lines of responsibility and accountability established between recruitment and/or employment agencies and employing organisations in relation to agency workers. Nursing agencies are regulated by RQIA under the *Nursing Agencies Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005*, because they are considered health and social care services.

Non-nursing recruitment agencies and employment businesses are regulated by the Department for the Economy (DfE) through its Employment Agency Inspectorate (EAI)**.** The EAI oversees the private recruitment sector in Northern Ireland and enforces the relevant employment agency legislation. For more information see: www.economy-ni.gov.uk/topics/employment-agency-inspectorate and www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/employment-agency-inspectorate-compliance-and-enforcement.

Where an agency is appointed to an *HSC Northern Ireland Framework* established by Business Services Organisation (BSO) Procurement and Logistics Service (PaLS), there is an additional layer of contractual and governance oversight beyond the agency's own regulatory obligations.

Framework agencies are typically required to demonstrate and maintain:

- Appropriate registration and regulatory compliance (for example RQIA registration where required).
- Robust recruitment, vetting and pre-employment checking processes.
- Verification of professional registration and qualifications.
- Compliance with safeguarding requirements.
- Appropriate insurance cover.
- Workforce record keeping and auditability.
- Compliance with agreed framework rates and terms.

Employing organisations should satisfy themselves that robust recruitment, vetting and pre-employment checking processes have been carried out.
Employers must also ensure that they check the ID of all agency workers presenting for work. Only ID issued by the recruitment agency should be accepted. Employers should ensure that they comply with all organisational requirements in relation to verification of ID, recording and auditing of same.

Post appointment requirements

Employers are responsible for ensuring that any social care practitioner they employ meets their standards of conduct and practice, provides high quality services and promotes public trust and confidence in social care services. As an employer, you are expected to know what part you are expected to play in the regulation of the workforce and in the support of high-quality practice and care.

Key responsibilities are outlined below.

a) Ensuring that workers are registered with the Social Care Council

Once registered, social care workers must pay an annual fee to maintain their registration. They will receive timely reminders from the Social Care Council as to when their fee is due. It is important that registrants are encouraged to keep their contact details up to date to ensure that they receive these reminders. Social Care Managers are required to pay their annual fee and to renew their registration every five years.

Employers are able to check the registration status of their assigned social care workers via the employer portal. It is important that they check this regularly. Registrants can download a copy of their registration certificate in real-time. Further information on employer responsibilities relating to registration and associated guides can be found on the Social Care Council website, see: www.niscc.info/employers-responsibilities.

Where the Social Care Council becomes aware of a social care practitioner who is working whilst unregistered, they will notify RQIA of the most serious breaches. They will also notify RQIA where they become aware that an employer is not meeting their responsibilities to ensure that their social care staff are registered.

b) Induction

A thorough induction is essential for new social care staff because it provides the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to deliver safe, effective and person-centred care from the outset. Induction helps employees understand their roles and responsibilities, organisational policies and procedures, professional standards, safeguarding requirements, and the values that underpin high-quality social care practice.

A well-structured induction enables new staff to feel welcomed, valued and supported, which can improve job satisfaction, performance and retention. Resources to support effective induction can be found on the Social Care Council

Learning Zone, see: www.learningzone.niscc.info/learning-resources/induction-programme-for-social-care-workers.

c) Supervision and ongoing learning and development

Employers have a responsibility under the Employer Standards to provide appropriate supervision and support to registrants, ensuring they provide safe, effective and values-led care and are enabled to develop and improve through reflective practice.

They should also provide 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.

It is good practice for employers to help registrants develop learning and development plans, see the *Care in Practice Framework*: www.careinpractice.niscc.info/resources/learning-and-development-plans. There are also available resources on the *Care in Practice Framework* – this is the Social Council's professional development pathway which supports continuous professional learning for social care practitioners and helps them build their skills, gain qualifications and progress in their careers.

Referrals to Fitness to Practise

Employers have a duty to inform the Social Care Council about any fitness to practise issues that would call into question a registrant's registration in line with the Council's *Standard of Acceptance* and informing the registrant involved that a referral has been made, see: www.niscc.info/app/uploads/2020/05/Guidance-Standard-of-Acceptance.pdf.

Employers should make a fitness to practise referral where they have dismissed a registrant or where the employer has resigned their post during an investigation and/or disciplinary process.

Referrals should also be made where an employer has suspended/redeployed a registrant in lieu of suspension **and** there is an ongoing safeguarding/Joint Protocol investigation underway.

In most other cases, employers should proceed with their own investigation in the first instance and only refer the matter to the Council if the standard for referral is subsequently met. Referrals should be made via the on-line referral portal, see: www.niscc.info/raising-a-concern/i-am-employer-or-manager.

If you are unsure whether a matter should be referred or when it should be referred, the Fitness to Practise Team at the Social Care Council can help you with your query.

Case examples

The following examples are drawn from suitably anonymised real case scenarios relating to recruitment of staff identified by both the Social Care Council and RQIA as part of their regulatory processes. Learning points relating to each scenario are identified.

Scenario one – Checking Social Care Council's Public Facing Register

A social care practitioner who had previously been removed by a Fitness to Practise Committee for a serious misconduct issue applied for a social care post and commenced work with a new employer. The employer failed to check the Public Facing Register which would have identified the practitioner as being subject to a Removal Order.

The employer assumed that the practitioner was eligible for the six month 'grace' period for new entrants to social care and by the stage that an application for registration was made to the Social Care Council, the practitioner had already been in post for three months. Vulnerable service users were potentially placed at risk during this time.

The practitioner stated that he had assumed that because five years had elapsed since the Removal Order had been imposed, he was eligible to seek employment. There is however no automatic return to the Social Care Council Register for such registrants; instead they have to make application for restoration to the Register and be considered by an independent Restoration Committee. Applications for restoration to the Register cannot be made until at least five years from the imposition of the *Removal Order*.

Learning points

1. It is always important to check the Social Care Council's Public Facing Register as part of any recruitment process.
2. It is important to ask applicants if they are subject to/have been subject to any regulatory investigation and/or sanction in the application form or interview.
3. It is important to check out any gaps in an applicant's work history.

Scenario two – Concerns during probationary period

A social care practitioner was able to obtain three different social care posts with three different employers in 10 months despite concerns about their ability to carry out their tasks in a safe and adequate manner. On two occasions, the practitioner left during their probationary period when concerns were first identified but before any disciplinary process could be initiated.

Neither employer raised these concerns with the Social Care Council as the practitioner was still on their probationary period and they considered that the individual was just not 'cut out' for social care work.

It was also subsequently discovered that the practitioner provided false references when applying for the second and third posts. On neither occasion, was the previous employer spoken to.

Learning points

1. Where concerns are identified about a practitioner during their probationary period and they resign or are dismissed, these should be reported to the Social Care Council to prevent the practitioner being able to move from job to job.
2. The authenticity of references should always be checked out with previous employers.

Scenario three – ID checks

An agency social care practitioner was found to be re-allocating her shifts in a nursing home to a friend who was not a registered practitioner. This friend turned up for shift posing as the registrant and wearing a uniform. It was subsequently discovered that the registrant had allowed this individual to work at least eight shifts on her behalf. The matter was reported to the Police.

Learning points

1. It is always important to fully check the identity of any agency staff who report for shift and to note and sign that checks have taken place. Checking processes should also be subject to regular audit.

Scenario four – Verification of references

A practitioner who had previously been refused registration by the Social Care Council and was subsequently barred by the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) from working with children and vulnerable adults, was able to obtain work as a home care worker due to a number of failings in the recruitment practice of the home care agency.

The practitioner applied for the post using her maiden name but signed the application form using her married name – this was not picked up. The applicant identified two individuals from her previous stated employment as referees. The references obtained looked like they had been written by the same hand however this was not picked up. Whilst the practitioner had named one of the referees as being her former manager, the other referee stated that she had been the manager.

No contact was made by the domiciliary care agency with the stated employer to authenticate the references at the time however the employer subsequently confirmed that neither the practitioner nor the two named referees had ever worked for them. As it is a criminal offence for someone to work whilst being subject to a Barring Order, the matter was referred to the Police.

Learning points

1. It is important that application forms are closely scrutinised so that any anomalies or gaps can be identified.
2. It is always important to ensure that any references obtained are verified with the previous employer.

Scenario five – AccessNI check disclosure

A social care practitioner applied for a post in a domiciliary care agency. The agency carried out an Enhanced AccessNI check, which revealed a disclosure. However, the agency failed to investigate further or fully assess the disclosure's relevance to the role.

The social care practitioner began providing care, but it later emerged that the disclosure was related to a safeguarding incident, which should have disqualified them from the position. This lapse resulted in potential risk to service users.

Learning points:

1. An Enhanced AccessNI check alone is not enough—employers must review the nature of any disclosure in detail.
2. Staff involved in recruitment and selection within regulated services must have the appropriate knowledge and training to interpret AccessNI certificates.
3. A thorough risk assessment and discussion with the applicant about the disclosure's context is essential before any offer of employment.
4. Any disclosure that may impact suitability for regulated activity must trigger a documented and risk based decision-making process to ensure fitness for the role.
5. Agencies should have clear procedures for escalating any concerning disclosures to senior management and safeguarding leads.

Scenario six – References

A home care agency received an application from a potential social care practitioner. The applicant provided contact details for two referees, one of whom she claimed was her most recent line manager. The reference subsequently supplied to the agency from the individual claiming to be the applicant's most recent line manager was positive but was sent from a personal email account belonging to the referee.

The agency fails to scrutinise the source and did not contact the previous employer directly to verify. The practitioner was employed but later investigation revealed that the reference was falsified. This raised concerns about the honesty of the applicant and the agency's recruitment process.

Learning points:

1. Verify references by contacting the previous employer directly using official contact details, not just the email provided.

2. Be vigilant for subtle discrepancies in email domains or personal addresses, which may indicate a false reference.
3. Ensure all references are from official, verifiable sources – no personal emails alone should suffice for a regulated role.
4. If any reference seems unusual, cross-check the contact through official company channels before proceeding with any final recruitment and selection decision.

Scenario seven - Qualifications

An overseas national applied to work as a senior carer for a domiciliary care agency, providing qualifications and certifications in a foreign language. The agency accepted them at face value without obtaining certified translations or confirming equivalence to relevant Northern Ireland qualifications. The applicant commenced work, but later it became evident that the qualifications were not equivalent to the required level. As a result, the applicant did not align with the required knowledge and competency for safe practice in the role.

Learning points:

1. Always obtain certified translations for any non-English qualifications.
2. Use recognised equivalency frameworks or professional bodies to verify foreign qualifications against local requirements.
3. Ensure that qualifications align with the required knowledge and competency for the role before placement.
4. Document a formal process for assessing overseas applicants' credentials, involving senior staff or external verification where needed.

Scenario eight – Work history

An applicant for a day care worker role provided a vague work history with missing dates and unexplained gaps, stating they could not recall the details. The day care manager accepted this without further investigation. After employment commenced, it emerged that the applicant had been previously dismissed for misconduct, which would have raised concerns about their fitness for the role.

Learning points:

1. Unexplained gaps or incomplete work histories must be thoroughly probed – ask for specifics on dates, roles, and reasons for leaving.
2. Do not accept "I can't remember" as a sufficient answer – seek additional clarification from the applicant to explain any gaps and/or reasons for leaving
3. When gaps or unclear histories appear, consider follow up with previous employers to confirm employment dates and reasons for departure.

Scenario nine – Identification documents

An applicant for a home care worker role advised that they were unable to provide their birth certificate, as it had been lost and they had not been back to their country of birth for over 10 years. The agency accepted this verbal explanation and employed the applicant.

During an RQIA inspection, this employee's staff file is reviewed and the inspector raises concerns regarding the robustness of the agency's recruitment and selection processes due to the absence of documented due diligence and risk assessment approach to verification of identity.

Learning points:

1. A missing birth certificate does not prevent recruitment, but it does require alternative collaboration of identity and documented risk assessment before appointment.
2. Consider the explanation given as to why the applicant does not have the birth certificate, is what the applicant is saying a reasonable explanation? Can they provide evidence that they have tried to obtain a copy?
3. A combination of additional valid documents should be sought, consideration needs to be given to the reliability and authenticity of any additional documents. Examples of alternative documents – Passport (this is a preferred primary ID), Biometric residence permit/ immigration status document, National identity card (where applicable), Driving licence (UK/ROI or equivalent, but not sufficient alone).
4. Cross checking of multiple identifiers (DOB, place of birth consistency and employment history).
5. Face to Face interview with specific questions regarding ID.
6. Consider additional checks which could include requesting reference checks confirm identity details; immigration documentation confirm identity linkage and evidence of a consistent address history via utility bills/bank statements.
7. An RQIA inspector would expect to see escalated ID verification process, triangulation of identity evidence, identification of any unresolved issues that give cause for concern and how these are resolved including any mitigating actions taken. Assessment of level of assurance achieved with a clear record of decision making and rationale maintained.

Glossary of terms

AccessNI
The disclosure body in Northern Ireland that provides criminal record checks and access to barred list information where appropriate to support safer recruitment decisions.

Agency worker
An individual supplied by a recruitment or employment agency to work in a health or social care setting on a temporary or contracted basis.

Applicant
A person seeking employment within a social care or social work role.

Barred list
A list maintained by the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) of individuals who are legally prohibited from working with children and/or vulnerable adults.

Compulsory registration
The legal requirement for certain social care practitioners and all social workers to be registered with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (Social Care Council) before practising in specified roles.

DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service)
The organisation responsible for helping employers make safer recruitment decisions and for maintaining barred lists of individuals unsuitable to work with vulnerable groups.

Disclosure Certificate
The official record issued following a criminal record check, detailing information relevant to the level of check requested.

Due diligence
Reasonable steps taken by an employer to verify information provided by applicants, including references, qualifications, employment history and identity documentation

Enhanced AccessNI check
The highest level of criminal record check available through AccessNI, often including a check of relevant barred lists for those undertaking regulated activity.

Standards for Employers
The Social Care Council *Standards for Employers of Social Care Workers*, which describe employers' responsibilities for supporting safe, effective and accountable practice

Employment history
A full and continuous record of an applicant's education, training, employment and voluntary activity, including explanations for any gaps.

Endorsement
The process through which an employer confirms to Social Care Council that an applicant is employed in social care and that there are no known concerns affecting their suitability for registration.

Fitness to Practise
The suitability of a registrant to remain on the register, assessed against standards of conduct, competence, character and health.

Grace period
The six-month period available only to first-time entrants to the social care workforce, allowing time to obtain Social Care Council registration where required.

Identity verification
The process of confirming that an individual is who they claim to be by examining original identity documentation and validating personal information.

Induction
A structured process that supports new staff to understand their role, responsibilities, organisational policies and professional requirements.

Northern Ireland Social Care Council (Social Care Council)
Sometimes called 'NISCC', is the regulatory body for the social work and social care workforce in Northern Ireland. It maintains registers, sets standards and manages fitness to practise processes.

Occupational Health referral
A referral to a specialist occupational health service to assess whether an individual is fit to undertake a role and identify any required workplace adjustments.

Pre-employment health check
A health assessment completed before employment begins to determine whether an applicant can safely undertake the duties of a role.

PRISM Model
A safer employment framework promoted by Skills for Care that embeds safeguarding throughout the employment lifecycle, from recruitment through to managing leavers.

Probationary period
An initial period of employment during which performance, conduct and suitability for the role are assessed.

Public Facing Register
The online Register maintained by the Social Care Council that enables employers and the public to check a practitioner's registration status and any conditions that may apply.

Regulated activity
Work with children or vulnerable adults that meets legal definitions requiring enhanced safeguarding checks and consideration of barred list information.

Registered manager
The individual registered with RQIA who has responsibility for the management, governance and regulatory compliance of a service.

Registered provider
The organisation or individual legally registered with RQIA to deliver a regulated health or social care service.

Registration requirements
The conditions and obligations that social care practitioners and employers must satisfy in relation to Social Care Council registration.

Reference
A statement provided by a referee, usually a current or former employer, regarding an applicant's suitability, conduct, reliability and performance.

Relevant declaration
Information provided by an applicant regarding matters such as criminal convictions, regulatory investigations or professional sanctions that may affect suitability for employment.

Restoration
The formal process by which a person who has been removed from the Social Care Council Register, may apply to return to the Register.

Right to work check
The process of verifying that an individual is legally entitled to work in the United Kingdom.

RQIA (Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority)
The independent regulator of health and social care services in Northern Ireland responsible for registration, inspection and enforcement.

Safeguarding
The actions and measures taken to protect children, young people and adults at risk from harm, abuse, neglect or exploitation.

Safeguarding mindset
An approach to recruitment and employment that goes beyond compliance and encourages professional curiosity, vigilance and proactive risk assessment.

Social Care practitioner
Sometimes called social care worker, an individual employed in a social care role who provides care, support or assistance to people using services.

Standards of Conduct and Practice
The professional standards that social care workers and social workers must meet as a condition of registration with Social Care Council.

Values-based recruitment
A recruitment approach that assesses applicants' values, attitudes and behaviours alongside qualifications and experience to ensure alignment with person-centred care principles.

Vetting
The process of conducting background checks and assessments designed to establish an individual's suitability to work in a care environment.

Useful resources

The following resources provide further guidance on safer recruitment, professional regulation, safeguarding, workforce development and employment requirements for social care employers in Northern Ireland. Employers should ensure they are using the most recent versions of guidance and legislation available.

Northern Ireland Social Care Council (Social Care Council)

Standards for Employers of Social Care Workers
Provides guidance on employers' responsibilities in supporting safe, effective and accountable social care practice, see: www.niscc.info/standards-and-guidance.

Public Facing Register
Allows employers to verify an individual's registration status and identify any conditions on registration, see: www.portal.niscc.org/Public-Facing-Register.

Employer Responsibilities
Guidance for employers on registration requirements, endorsements and regulatory responsibilities, see: www.niscc.info/employers-responsibilities.

Fitness to Practise Referrals
Information on when and how employers should make a referral to the Social Care Council, see: www.niscc.info/raising-a-concern/i-am-employer-or-manager.

Standard of Acceptance Guidance
Guidance on reporting concerns regarding registered social care practitioners and social workers, see: www.niscc.info/app/uploads/2020/05/Guidance-Standard-of-Acceptance.pdf.

Social Care Council Learning Zone
Resources covering induction, values-based recruitment and workforce development, see: www.learningzone.niscc.info.

Values-Based Recruitment Toolkit
Practical guidance and tools to support recruitment based on values, behaviours and attitudes, see: www.learningzone.niscc.info/learning-resources/values-based-recruitment.

Induction Programme for Social Care Practitioners
Resources to support the induction of new social care staff, see: www.learningzone.niscc.info/learning-resources/induction-programme-for-social-care-workers.

Care in Practice (CiP) Framework
Learning and development resources and career pathways for social care practitioners, see: www.careinpractice.niscc.info.

Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA)

Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority
Information on registration, regulation, inspection and enforcement of health and social care services, see: www.rqia.org.uk.

Minimum Standards and Regulations
Service-specific regulations, standards and supporting guidance for registered providers, see: www.rqia.org.uk/standards-guidance.

AccessNI and criminal record checks

AccessNI
Information on Basic, Standard and Enhanced criminal record checks, eligibility criteria and application guidance, see: www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/accessni-criminal-record-checks

AccessNI Frequently Asked Questions
Guidance on disclosure checks and recruitment responsibilities, see: www.justice-ni.gov.uk

List of Specified Offences
Information on offences that will always be disclosed as part of criminal record checking arrangements, see: www.nidirect.gov.uk.

Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS)

Disclosure and Barring Service
Information on barred lists, safeguarding responsibilities and referrals, see: www.gov.uk/government/organisations/disclosure-and-barring-service.

Making Barring Referrals to DBS
Guidance on employers' legal duty to refer individuals who may pose a risk to children or vulnerable adults, see: www.gov.uk/guidance/making-barring-referrals-to-the-dbs.

DBS Update Service
Guidance for employers on checking the status of existing DBS certificates, see: www.gov.uk/government/publications/dbs-update-service-employer-guide.

Identity verification and right to work

NHS Employers Identity Checks Standard
Comprehensive guidance on undertaking robust identity verification checks, see: www.nhsemployers.org/publications/identity-checks-standard.

Right to Work Checks: Employer's Guide
Home Office guidance on conducting legally compliant right to work checks, see: www.gov.uk/government/publications/right-to-work-checks-employers-guide.

Home Office Right to Work Checklist
Practical checklist for employers undertaking right to work checks, see: www.gov.uk/government/publications/right-to-work-checklist.

Safer recruitment and safeguarding

Skills for Care: Safe and Fair Recruitment Guide
Guidance promoting safer recruitment and safeguarding-focused employment practices, including the PRISM model, see: www.skillsforcare.org.uk.

NSPCC Safer Recruitment Guidance
Advice and resources on safeguarding and safer recruitment practices, see: www.learning.nspcc.org.uk/safer-recruitment.

Employment and recruitment agencies

Employment Agency Inspectorate (Department for the Economy)
Information on regulation, compliance and enforcement relating to employment agencies in Northern Ireland, see: www.economy-ni.gov.uk/topics/employment-agency-inspectorate.

NI Business Info: Employment Agency Compliance
Guidance for recruitment agencies and employers using agency workers, see: www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk.

Employment, equality and workforce guidance

Labour Relations Agency (LRA)
Guidance on employment rights, young workers and workplace good practice, see: www.lra.org.uk.

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
Advice on fair recruitment, equality legislation and reasonable adjustments, see: www.equalityni.org.

Information Commissioner's Office (ICO)
Guidance on GDPR, recruitment records and retention of personal information, see: www.ico.org.uk.

Key legislation

Employers should also be familiar with relevant legislation including:

- *Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.*
- *The Regulation and Improvement Authority (Registration) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005.*
- *The Northern Ireland Social Care Council (Social Care Workers Prohibition) and Fitness of Workers Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013.*
- *Rehabilitation of Offenders (Exceptions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1979 (as amended).*
- *Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (Northern Ireland) Order 2007.*

Northern Ireland Social Care Council

The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority

niscc.info

rqia.org