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# TRAINING, RECRUITING AND RETAINING SOCIAL WORKERS IN IRELAND: A SCOPING EXERCISE TO ASSESS AND RESPOND TO SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES



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## 1.0 Introduction

In November 2021 consultants Kelleher O'Meara were commissioned by the Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW), to carry out an initial scoping exercise, to establish as much of 'what we know' or 'what can be known' as well as 'what we do not know' in relation to the training, recruiting and retaining of social workers in Ireland. As part of the process, the consultants were asked to point to areas for further, more detailed exploration and action-related follow up.

The funding provided by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), which enabled this project to be undertaken is acknowledged and appreciated. The timeline for the scoping exercise was a very short four-week period from mid-November to mid-December 2021. The methodology used is set out in Appendix 1 below. Having set the context for the exercise, this report then sets out its findings and makes a number of proposals for the IASW, as the body commissioning the project, to consider following up as next steps.

## 1.2. Context

The exercise took place against the background of clearly recognised issues regarding recruitment and retention of social workers in various agencies and organisations and a growing demand for social workers to take on new responsibilities, especially in the areas of child protection and adult safeguarding. The impact of the ongoing challenge facing Tusla around the recruitment and retention of social workers has been the subject of a number of HIQA reports<sup>1</sup>, parliamentary questions and Ministerial statements, which have been extensively reported in national and local media, both print and broadcast<sup>2</sup>.

The broader impact of the issue of the challenge of recruitment, training and retention of social workers has already been widely acknowledged, from its consideration by the members of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs in 2019, for example, and in 2021 by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

The findings and proposals arising from this study will, it is hoped, be of value to government as a whole, in its response to the issues involved, but they are also relevant to organisations employing social workers, as well as third level colleges charged with the education and training of social workers, and the IASW as the professional body representing social workers in Ireland.

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<sup>1</sup> [Inspection Reports | HIQA](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Watchdog Hiqa criticises lack of social workers for children in care - Independent.ie](#); [Shortage of social workers impacting Tusla services \(rte.ie\)](#); [Children in care left without dedicated social worker due to staff shortages \(irishtimes.com\)](#); [Social worker shortage leaves Tusla with 300 posts to fill | Ireland | The Times](#)

The findings can assist in generating appropriate responses to the challenges faced. The benefits of acting on the findings set out below will be clear to key stakeholders and can form the basis of actions to resolve the serious issues under consideration.

## **2.0: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND PROPOSALS**

### **Finding and Proposal 1:**

There is no national strategy for social work, including in relation to workforce planning. The IASW should consider the optimal approach to lobby government to develop a national strategy for social work, in alignment with and in support of government, population and policy requirements, to be led by the most appropriate Department. That Department would have overall responsibility for the implementation of the strategy, with adequate resources, and with responsibility for overseeing the recruitment, training and retention of social workers nationally.

### **Finding and Proposal 2:**

There is a lack of senior leadership in relation to social work at a national level in the Health and related services. The IASW should seek the appointment of a Social Work lead, located in the Health area (Tusla already has a post of Chief Social Worker [CSW]) to lead on the wide range of social work roles in the HSE and their funded services. The proposed role could co-ordinate work with the CSW in Tusla and with the Probation Service and Local Authorities, under their respective Departments.

### **Finding and Proposal 3:**

There is a lack of a central data base regarding social work employment. The IASW should consider engagement with CORU and others as appropriate to secure an agreement to establish and manage a central database, to gather ongoing, up to date, reliable and comprehensive data to gain a complete and evolving understanding of where social workers are practicing, across all public service employments and agencies, and which would track entry, exit, short-term absences, movement, turnover, mobility and capturing the lifetime careers of social workers. This database would provide the information for strategic workforce planning in social work nationally.

## Finding and Proposal 4:

Particularly challenging areas of social work practice have experienced serious retention issues. The IASW should engage with the relevant government departments and regulators to support all organisations employing social workers, who do not already have appropriate HR, management and professional supervision policies, to develop them; also to encourage and explore incentives and to adopt good employee practices that would in turn enhance retention of staff. The IASW should seek that such practices are included in HIQA standards across the health and social care areas.

- Induction: ensuring all new entrants have a comprehensive and meaningful induction programme
- Attention to newly qualified social workers, with consideration to be given to specific peer supports and a reduced caseload for a period of time
- Quality supervision to be protected and available on an ongoing basis from senior peers and managers
- Peer and professional support is important and needs to be available and encouraged
- Recognition should be given to the fact that this workforce is female-dominated and the issues that arise from this be managed accordingly
- Caseloads need to be manageable for all social workers, particularly those in the early years of their career
- Training and development opportunities need to be available and encouraged. The post of Senior Practitioner (Social Worker) is an important role to further develop
- Employers should consider practices which particularly support employees during the first five years
- Compile and act on outputs from exit interviews
- Explore initiatives such as premium payments and long service breaks in recognition of the demands of demanding front-line social work.
- Coordinate joint recruitment campaigns for social workers

## Finding and Proposal 5:

To address issues relating to the education and training of social workers and attracting new entrants to the profession, the IASW should work to ensure that the following are in place :

- Organisations employing social workers cooperate with the University College Cork (UCC) project on student practice placements, in conjunction with colleges, to increase the number of placements available.
- Undertake information campaigns aimed particularly at second-level students to attract candidates to social work careers
- Engage with the relevant authorities to increase availability of well-funded bursaries to support students and introduce flexible practices including part time and remote learning, to attract the widest possible pool of students

- Engage with the third-level education sector to develop access to part-time, modular and remote learning
- Increase diversity of social work students, to include mature students, international students, ex-offenders and have the application process reflect race, diversity, disability and mature student entry
- Engage with CORU, the accrediting body, to ensure social work course content reflects the spectrum of social work posts and roles.
- Consider the need for a wider range of post-qualifying courses reflecting relevant service needs

## 3.0 Key Findings, Proposals and Next Steps:

The report sets out a number of key findings, which then form the basis of a series of proposals for next steps.

### 3.1. No strategy or workforce plan for social work in Ireland

There is no overall whole of government cross-departmental strategy specifically for the training, recruitment and retention of the social workers required for Ireland now and in the future. This would both include and commence with attracting people to the profession and the education and training of social workers. Such a strategy for social work would need to be adequately resourced at all levels.

Without it, the serious challenges facing social work and social workers, and the state's ability to respond to them, will be short term, *ad hoc* and insufficient. Those impacted most by this lack of vision, strategy and action will continue to be people who find themselves vulnerable or at risk for various reasons, including many children and others, who rely on the skills, training and expertise of social workers to be fully supported by the state and be safe.

Social workers are key to the implementation of a range of key government policies including child welfare and protection, as well as in disability services, mental health, primary and secondary healthcare, social care, adult safeguarding, in the criminal justice system, in local authorities and the community and voluntary sector. In the absence of an overarching strategy or plan for social work and the appropriate deployment of social workers, the specific roles and the policy and other requirements of those roles are not always explicit or adequately planned for, which is likely to result in service failures.

Ireland has a lower number of social workers per head of population than other jurisdictions and Tusla, the child and family agency for example, is impacted in the execution of its functions by an inability to fill social worker vacancies, leading to non-compliance with statutory requirements<sup>3</sup> in child protection and welfare and with a significant impact on the lives of those requiring its service.

For example, a HIQA monitoring inspection report for child protection and welfare and foster care services in the Carlow, Kilkenny and South Tipperary area, published in October 2021<sup>4</sup> reported that despite improvements since the previous inspection, "a significant number (71 or 24%) of children continued to be unallocated a child and family social worker and children experienced frequent changes in social workers or keyworkers."

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<sup>3</sup> [Shortage of social workers impacting Tusla services \(rte.ie\) October 21.2021](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Child\\_CRC\\_Report\\_Template \(hiqa.ie\)](#)

The impact of the gaps in social work vacancies was described by foster carers in the same report: “Two of three foster carers noted that the children did not have good relationships with their social workers due to the turnover and actions did not materialise from care plans. Foster carers said [they] ...’have dealt with lots of social workers over the years, huge turnover’ and ‘had issues over the years, not being listened to and social workers moving’.”

According to those interviewed for the present study, there is a lack of a mechanism to generate the quantum of social workers needed to deliver on a range of government policies. Whilst there is a Chief Social Worker located in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, this does not constitute a resourced office or unit with the remit of ensuring that there is a strategic oversight of the development of the social work profession as a whole, in line with the full range of public policy requirements.

The HSE, despite the range of its policy and service delivery responsibilities requiring social workers, does not have a resourced office, unit, or person whose role is to be the lead on policy delivery involving social work and social workers.

Three government departments in the main are currently responsible for functions which include and need social workers to be delivered: Health, DCEDIY (which incorporates child protection and welfare and will include adult and child disability services), and Justice. This makes the location of a single co-ordinating body or office within one department challenging.

However given its size and cross-cutting policy remit, the Department of Health is best placed to provide the strategic oversight and co-ordination of the range of social work issues involving TUSLA, HSE, the Probation Service and DCEDIY.

The absence of a central strategic oversight function for social work means that the government’s stated intentions, as set out in the Programme for Government, and public policy ambitions, which require the input and support of social workers, cannot be guaranteed to be supported, secured or achieved. An example of this is the rollout of the Sláintecare health policy and significant changes in the delivery of primary care in the community, requiring adequate social work resources.

Similarly the absence of a comprehensive workforce plan for social work means that social workers employed by the Probation Service, local authorities or by organisations in the community and voluntary sector, may not be included in the National Strategic Framework for Social Care Workforce Planning. This is another example of the lack of co-ordination and joined-up thinking which will only be met by a national strategy and plan led and coordinated by a designated lead department i.e. the Department of Health.

Some of those interviewed pointed to the achievements of the Northern Ireland Chief Social Worker in this type of role. It appears to many of those interviewed that no one is responsible, or accountable, for ensuring that the training, recruitment and retention of social workers is managed to meet statutory and operational requirements and needs, in the Republic.

## **Finding and Proposal 1:**

There is no national strategy for social work, including in relation to workforce planning. The IASW should consider the optimal approach to lobby government to develop a national strategy for social work, in alignment with and in support of government, population and policy requirements, to be led by the most appropriate Department. That Department would have overall responsibility for the implementation of the strategy, with adequate resources, and with responsibility for overseeing the recruitment, training and retention of social workers nationally.

## **Finding and Proposal 2:**

There is a lack of senior leadership in relation to social work at a national level in the Health and related services. The IASW should seek the appointment of a Social Work lead, located in the Health area (Tusla already has a post of Chief Social Worker [CSW]) to lead on the wide range of social work roles in the HSE and their funded services. The proposed role could co-ordinate work with the CSW in Tusla and with the Probation Service and Local Authorities, under their respective Departments.

## **3.2. A data deficit about social workers: what we do not know**

There is a data deficit about social workers across the profession as a whole on which to base a workforce plan in line with government, population and policy requirements. A key and over-arching finding is that whilst some valuable research has been conducted, it appears that only partial and limited evidence-based information is available to assess the full picture of the social work profession in Ireland. This partial information is an insufficient basis from which to draw firm conclusions, to build policy or direct interventions, and it points to the bigger and more fundamental issue, which is the absence of a government-led vision, policy and strategy for social work in Ireland.

“We know more about cattle in Ireland than we do about social workers,” according to one person who was interviewed in the present study. Even the rudimentary research on social work that was previously published by the National Social Work Qualifications Board has ceased since the creation of CORU. In the absence of full and reliable data on social work, there is a reliance on the ‘anecdotal’ rather than on trustworthy evidence.

One interviewee repeatedly responded to the questions posed with: “We don’t know.” According to that person: “There is a data deficit about the profession as a whole and no reliable workforce data for social work in Ireland.”

Some information is gathered by individual employers but this information has not been or is not being aggregated to create a full and detailed analysis of the state of social work as a profession as a whole in Ireland. Nor is there any duty to form a co-ordinated approach by employers of social workers to share such information.

There is no tracking of social workers across their lifetime careers which may include working for different employers of social workers. Even where information is gathered by employers there can be a confusion about 'turnover' and 'mobility' or movement; the first being an issue of people leaving the profession for good and the second being about people moving to another job in social work, to be promoted or to take a break such as maternity or other leave.<sup>5</sup>

No matter what the reason for moving, taking leave, or leaving the profession for good, such movement poses a real challenge for employers in finding either short term or longer term replacements, given the limited pool of available social workers and also impacts on efforts to anticipate future social work need.

### **Finding and Proposal 3:**

There is a lack of a central data base regarding social work employment. The IASW should consider engagement with CORU and others as appropriate to secure an agreement to establish and manage a central database, to gather ongoing, up to date, reliable and comprehensive data to gain a complete and evolving understanding of where social workers are practicing, across all public service employments and agencies, and which would track entry, exit, short-term absences, movement, turnover, mobility and capturing the lifetime careers of social workers. This database would provide the information for strategic workforce planning in social work nationally.

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<sup>5</sup> Burns, K., Christie, A. (2013) 'Employment mobility or turnover: An analysis of child welfare and protection employee retention'. *Children and Youth Services Review* 35( 2013) 340-346

### 3.3. What works in retaining social workers: what we know

From the research reviewed for the study and the input of the limited number of those interviewed, there is a wealth and consistency of both formal and tacit knowledge and good practice information available for employing organisations around the issue of retention of social workers. Guidance for employers is well summarised in the 2021 International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) Europe's Policy Paper<sup>6</sup> arising from its 'New Social Worker Project'. And whilst that advice is particularly focused on new recruits to the profession, there is much that would apply for employers as social workers continue and progress in their careers. One interviewee emphasised the importance of employers signalling that they 'value the profession.'

Some of the key components of good practice that are relevant and important in retaining social workers, and which some organisations have made some efforts to implement, include the following:

#### 3.3.1 Induction:

Having a comprehensive, meaningful induction programme for entry level graduates is considered important as part of the supports required for the new social worker. Interviewees believed the quality of induction programmes can make a real difference in retaining graduate social workers and that social worker employers could follow the good induction practices which are generally common among private sector employers.

The IFSW (2021) advised employers of social workers to "provide an induction and time for new social workers to settle into the organization." In that same study, one of the participants from Ireland said: "No it's up to yourself: within a week I had my caseload, the only direction was 'keep a record of clients'. There is an open-door policy to come and ask questions but no formal guidance or supervision."

#### 3.3.2 Attention to newly qualified social workers:

A number of interviewees spoke of the need for and the value of a programme, for graduate social workers entering employment, during the first year in the workplace. This should include a smaller caseload, mentoring by a senior colleague, peer supports and team working. Redmond *et al* 2010 also supported the idea of a specific support system being put in place as an employment norm for newly qualified social workers.

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<sup>6</sup> IFSW Europe (2021) 'New Social Worker Project: Policy paper draft. For Discussion at the Delegates meeting 2021. IFSW

### 3.3.3 Recognition that social work is a predominantly female profession:

The Redmond<sup>7</sup> *et al* UCD study from 2010 stated that “the limited employment data showed them [social workers] to be a relatively young and predominantly female workforce”. There is no evidence to suggest that this phenomenon has changed in the years since. This has implications for the way that social work employment patterns are monitored and conclusions drawn if a ‘male norm’ is adopted. Such an approach will not distinguish life cycle issues including taking of maternity leave or taking leave for other care responsibilities, which is still predominantly undertaken by women.<sup>8</sup> As Burns and Christie (2013) advise: “A profession in which over 80% of the workers are women, it is predictable that there will be types of mobility, such as maternity leaves, that employers can plan for.”

Other issues arise from social work being a predominantly female profession, one of the most common being the demands of balancing out-of-hours and crisis working in child protection for example, with parenting. This was cited by a number of interviewees as a reason for leaving a role in child protection and welfare for a job with regular hours and a less demanding caseload. According to one interviewee ‘there is a lack of flexible working options, which particularly affects women.’ Family-friendly policies and the support provided by being a member of a multi-disciplinary team in a large organisation is considered to be a factor in retaining female social workers who are parenting school-age children, for example.

### 3.3.4 Supervision:

In the range of documentation reviewed and among those interviewed, there was significant consensus about the importance of access to regular supervision from a “trusted supervisor who cares about you as a professional as well as the work” (interviewee). It was consistently emphasised and described as being ‘fundamental’, not just for newly qualified social workers but over a social worker’s working life. Professional supervision by another social worker is considered “a critical requirement” by Norris *et al* 2020. One interviewee said that ‘having supervision and support’ retained her in frontline child protection and welfare social work for eighteen years. In Redmond *et al* (2010) 30% of experienced social workers said they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with supervision.

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<sup>7</sup> Redmond, B., Guerin, S., Nolan, B., Devitt, C., & Egan, A. (2010) *The Retention of Social Workers in the Health Services: An Evidence- Based Assessment*. Dublin: UCD/HSE

<sup>8</sup> Burns, K., Christie, A. (2013) ‘*Employment mobility or turnover: An analysis of child welfare and protection employee retention*’. Children and Youth Services Review 35( 2013) 340-346

Supervision enables social workers to process the situations and circumstances that arise in their work, including the 'vicarious trauma' and stress relating to court appearances, for example, which is often part of child protection and welfare work as well as the inherent 'risk' in the work. There is evidence of increasing levels of intimidation when a social worker is engaged with involuntary clients<sup>9</sup>. According to some interviewees this is contributing to some social workers who are engaged in child protection and welfare moving on from these roles. The use of social media as a channel for attacks on and intimidation of individual social workers has grown and is a serious concern to employers, as well as to staff.<sup>10</sup>

In Redmond *et al* (2010) there was a call for supervision policies to "recognise the value-driven nature of social workers within the organisational structures of the HSE" and for "a coherent social work supervisory provision to be developed to operate in tandem with the existing, more instrumental supervision and training policy."

However one interviewee said that supervision was "undervalued, that time for supervision is not always protected" and that "sometimes supervision is not supportive."<sup>11</sup> Another said that lack of quality, responsive supervision to help people make sense of what they encounter in work, linking private difficulties with public matters, may be a factor in driving social workers away from the profession. This interviewee went on to add that supervisors need "skills and competence to be good supervisors."

### 3.3.5. Peer support and professional support:

Flanagan *et al* (2021) cite the importance of supervision and peer support in 'bridging the gap between theory and practice' for newly qualified social workers. This is echoed in Burns and Christie's (2020) longitudinal study of 'stayers' in child welfare and protection work where 'being a member of a professional social work community/team helped to ameliorate the strains of the job.' IFSW (2021) references the usefulness of *intervision*, a reflective practice space for social workers to make mistakes and learn with their peers and colleagues and also where practice-based research can be shared. One interviewee spoke of the value of recognising 'good practice' in a team setting and how motivational that can be.

### 3.3.6. A manageable caseload:

High and complex caseloads was mentioned by many of those interviewed as a reason why social workers may leave the profession, particularly when combined with an apparent lack of support

<sup>9</sup> [Threats and intimidation of Tusla staff a 'matter of concern' \(irishtimes.com\)](https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-work/threats-and-intimidation-of-tusla-staff-a-matter-of-concern-1.4544442) July 26, 2021

<sup>10</sup> [www.irishtimes.com/news/social-work/threats-and-intimidation-of-tusla-staff-a-matter-of-concern-1.4544442](https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-work/threats-and-intimidation-of-tusla-staff-a-matter-of-concern-1.4544442) December 2021

<sup>11</sup> Flanagan, N. et al. (2021) 'The push and pull factors of a career in Social Work: what drives recruitment and sustains retention. *NUI Maynooth*

from the employer. This can be particularly detrimental to the retention of newly qualified social workers. Having fewer cases at the beginning of one's career is advised in the IFSW (2021) Policy Paper.

High caseloads can arise when employers leave vacancies unfilled or do not replace social workers on maternity or other long-term leave. One interviewee linked excessive caseloads with lack of supervision. Exit interviews (explored further below) may shine some light on the impact of high caseloads, as well as ever increasing regulatory demands, on staff retention.

### **3.3.7. Training and development opportunities:**

Standardised and equitable access to financial and other supports from the employer to take up training and continuous professional development opportunities has been referenced as important for retention, particularly for 'mid career social workers' (Redmond *et al* 2010). In that same study 30% of experienced social workers said that they had "no opportunity for training." Further training was also highlighted and seen as helpful by new social workers in the IFSW 'New Social Worker Project' (2021).

One interviewee spoke about the importance of social workers being able to develop themselves and having a 'clear pathway to career development.' It was said by some interviewees that whilst people want to progress in their career, not every social worker will want to go into management. One interviewee spoke about the current Grade structure in social work generally being outmoded and that work was underway to modernise it in consultation with the trade unions.

The need for wider availability of 'Senior Practitioner' posts (*advanced practitioners*, without line/team management responsibilities) was referenced by a number of interviewees, as a key way of retaining social workers with experience as well as the knowledge they have built up. This is linked with the issue of the lack of opportunities for promotion noted in the 2020<sup>12</sup> Review of Local Authority Social Work, and is considered to be an adverse contributory factor in retaining social workers.

### **3.3.8. 5-year milestone:**

According to Burns, Christie and O' Sullivan's (2020) longitudinal study of 'stayers' in child protection and welfare social work: "The main findings are that if you can retain social workers beyond the 5-year point, their retention narrative intensifies, their embeddedness in the organisation and community strengthens and they have a stronger sense of professional confidence as they move out of the early professional stage." The research paper went on to note that "the stability that occurs once the 5-year mark is reached was significant for many of the participants" in the study.

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<sup>12</sup> Norris et al (2020). 'Review of Local Authority Social Workers and Personnel Employed to Assist Travellers with their Accommodation Needs'. Housing Agency

Therefore, as well as paying attention to newly qualified social workers, it is very much in the employers' interest in terms of retention to consider its employment practices and supports, in particular for the first five years of social workers' experience, and beyond.

### 3.3.9. Exit interviews and acting on information gathered:

Many of those interviewed referenced the value of using information from 'exit interviews' systematically and acting upon the issues arising. One interviewee questioned whether exit interviews were taking place in organisations that employ social workers and whether the findings from these interviews were recorded and considered and if the CEO or most senior person in the organisation was reviewing them and responding to the issues surfaced by them.

Exit interviews, if carried out in a organisation that is open and willing to learn, including about negative experiences, could be an invaluable source of information and help in the development of retention strategies and tools for employers.

### 3.3.10. Suggested initiatives for recruitment and retention:

During the course of the interviews, a number of practical suggestions were made which might contribute to the more effective recruitment and retention of social workers. These are set out below:

One interviewee suggested that social work employers could consider paying **premiums** to social workers working in challenging areas, and that resource allocation models should allow additional funding to be directed to teams working in high pressure contexts or communities, as a way of securing greater retention.

Another suggestion was the introduction of automatic **Long Service Breaks** for people after a number of years in service, a measure introduced in some Australian states, for example, and which allows people to take a break from the rigours of the frontline without leaving employment. Another interviewee said that pay could be structured to cover taking a break like this.

There is a certain level of competition between agencies recruiting social workers, but it was also suggested that employers should and could cooperate more with each other around the recruitment of graduates. One suggestion was to have **a high-level joint recruitment campaign** across a range of employers of social workers. This would need to take account that some organisations, such as Tusla, recruits recent graduates, while others may require those recruited to have a certain amount, and type, of experience.

## Finding and Proposal 4:

Particularly challenging areas of social work practice have experienced serious retention issues. The IASW should engage with the relevant government departments and regulators to support all organisations employing social workers, who do not already have appropriate HR, management and professional supervision policies, to develop them; also to encourage and explore incentives and to adopt good employee practices that would in turn enhance retention of staff. The IASW should seek that such practices are included in HIQA standards across the health and social care areas.

- Induction: ensuring all new entrants have a comprehensive and meaningful induction programme
- Attention to newly qualified social workers, with consideration to be given to specific peer supports and a reduced caseload for a period of time
- Quality supervision to be protected and available on an ongoing basis from senior peers and managers
- Peer and professional support is important and needs to be available and encouraged
- Recognition should be given to the fact that this workforce is female-dominated and the issues that arise from this be managed accordingly
- Caseloads need to be manageable for all social workers, particularly those in the early years of their career
- Training and development opportunities need to be available and encouraged. The post of Senior Practitioner (Social Worker) is an important role to further develop
- Employers should consider practices which particularly support employees during the first five years
- Compile and act on outputs from exit interviews
- Explore initiatives such as premium payments and long service breaks in recognition of the demands of demanding front-line social work
- Coordinate joint recruitment campaigns for social workers

## **3.4. Issues relating to the education and training of social workers and attracting people into the profession**

From both the interviews carried out, although limited in number, and other research conducted for this study, the tentative and probably non-exhaustive issues regarding education and training, which emerged, include the following:

### **3.4.1. Placements:**

The shortage of practice placements nationally was frequently highlighted and well-rehearsed by many interviewees and was examined in some detail at the Joint Oireachtas Committee in April 2019. Workplace placements are a critical part of training people who can go on to work safely and successfully as social workers. The lack of placements is creating a bottleneck in the 'supply chain' of newly qualified social workers, where one of the arguments against increasing the number of college places is the lack of sufficient placement options each year. In the context of a competitive recruitment environment, and to fill vacancies and new posts arising, it is ultimately in the interests of employers to work with the universities around placements, to ensure adequate numbers of students can be accommodated on courses. Some work is underway to address the current issues including the (UCC) National Practice Teaching in Social Work Initiative. A person involved in that project was interviewed as part of this scoping exercise.

Interviewees spoke of the need for the universities to work closely with their practice partners to prepare students for the world of social work practice. Employers need to make more placements available and it is a source of puzzlement to some interviewees why this is not happening, considering the value and necessity of placements in identifying those unsuitable for careers in social work as well as preparing students for employment and creating a supply of potential employees. In addition, a number spoke of the need for universities to work more closely with each other and to coordinate student placements. There is some evidence that some steps have begun to be taken in this regard but more needs to be done.

### **3.4.2. Graduate numbers:**

On the issue of the aggregate number of places available nationally for social work students, there was a range of opinion, varying from a belief that more graduates are certainly needed, and urgently, to a statement that the issue is not numbers of graduates, but about the number and quality of applicants for college programmes. One interviewee stated that more understanding is needed to establish how both second-level students, mature students and graduates of other courses see social work as a career and why they do or do not choose it. There are a number of potential influences on this perspective on social work, including the possibility that media representations of social work

(as being stressful and ‘unappreciated’) may be a factor, especially in the relative absence of more favourable portrayals of social work and its positive impact on society. This issue would require further exploration. In the meantime, information campaigns to promote social work as a career should be considered. This again points to the absence of relevant data and the need for better workforce planning.

### **3.4.3. Cost:**

The cost of courses can be prohibitive with a Masters in Social Work costing a student between €16k and €20k in fees over two years, leaving many graduates with loans to be paid off. Some interviewees recommended that more bursaries be available, and with sufficient funding to encourage participation and to fully cover candidates’ costs. More flexible options for study could be considered, such as the use of remote learning to enhance accessibility and affordability, as well as part-time and modular study options.

### **3.4.4 Diversity:**

The application processes should encourage the widest possible diversity of social work students, reflecting a diverse Ireland, including the entry of mature students to reflect life experience, international students, plus the possibility of better access for those with criminal convictions, which would be particularly relevant to the Probation Service for example.

### **3.4.5. Course content:**

Some interviewees recommended that the focus of social work courses should not be primarily on child protection and welfare but should better reflect the fact that graduates will be entering employment in a range of areas including primary care, criminal justice, disability, adult safeguarding, mental health and medical settings. This is an issue that would benefit from further exploration, including whether the views expressed by respondents here reflect a more widely-held view or not.

## **Finding and Proposal 5:**

To address issues relating to the education and training of social workers and attracting new entrants to the profession, the IASW should work to ensure that the following are in place :

- Organisations employing social workers cooperate with the University College Cork (UCC) project on student practice placements, in conjunction with colleges, to increase the number of placements available.
- Undertake information campaigns aimed particularly at second-level students to attract candidates to social work careers
- Engage with the relevant authorities to increase availability of well-funded bursaries to support students and introduce flexible practices including part time and remote learning, to attract the widest possible pool of students
- Engage with the third-level education sector to develop access to part-time, modular and remote learning
- Increase diversity of social work students, to include mature students, international students, ex-offenders and have the application process reflect race, diversity, disability and mature student entry
- Engage with CORU, the accrediting body, to ensure social work course content reflects the spectrum of social work posts and roles.
- Consider the need for a wider range of post-qualifying courses reflecting relevant service needs

## 3.5. Some suggestions for Government and Departments

In addition to addressing the data deficit for the social work profession as a whole and putting in place a workforce plan and strategy, the following ideas and issues also emerged from the interviews and the review of documentation:

One idea put forward was to have a government sponsored public information campaign about social work, highlighting the importance of the positive impact the profession's work has on people's lives. This was previously also a key proposal by Halton, Gilligan and Norris<sup>13</sup> and would be an important measure to attract students to the profession and could counterbalance some of the more negative images of the profession relating to the work being perceived as challenging or arising when high-profile tragedies occur.

Another issue that emerged from the review of reports was in relation to the employment of social workers in local authorities. The 2020 report by Michelle Norris *et al* for the Housing Agency made a number of recommendations to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, as the Department responsible for local authorities, to:

- Have a vision for social work services in the local authority sector;
- Establish a generic service delivery model for local authority social work;
- Introduce a national framework for social work in the local authority sector;
- Introduce a Grade structure for local authority social workers;
- Introduce professional supervision of social workers;
- Introduce education, training and continuous professional development.

These recommendations have yet to be implemented.

## 3.6. The role IASW could play

A key role for the IASW will be reviewing the findings of the present report and mapping a way for taking forward the various issues identified in the report with the relevant Departments and agencies. Most interviewees in the present study believed that the IASW has a role to play in promoting social work as a career and also in countering the negative narrative that can surround the profession. One suggestion was to tell authentic stories from "the front line" of the difference social workers make in people's lives. Interviewees said that part of the role of IASW was to highlight

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<sup>13</sup> Halton, C., Gilligan, R., Norris, M. (2019). *Opening Statement: Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs*. UCC, UCD & TCD

the structural inequalities which lead to poverty as the context in which social work operates and to be a voice advocating for reform while also increasing the visibility of social work as a profession.

At a basic level, some interviewees said that IASW could explain what social work is, in particular the advocacy role of social work as a profession and in addressing inequality and poverty, at the level of policy formation by Government.

A number of interviewees said that it is important that IASW has a public voice on issues arising from different types of social work; not only to feed into the development of policy and legislation but also, by being public about its work, to build the esteem of the profession and the self-esteem of existing social workers. This increased positive profile could also act to attract more people into the profession.

IASW was encouraged to reach out and build common cause with other Health and Social Care Professional bodies and to be the lead voice on the issues, findings and proposals arising from this report.

The role of IASW in providing Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities is considered highly valuable to social workers. Among suggestions made were to maximise the opportunity of online offerings and remote learning by IASW, and to provide briefing materials on social work, the practice of it and the difference it makes, and to make this material available to schools.

### 3.7. General points relevant to the study

Some general issues which are nevertheless important to note and be included in any consideration of actions to be taken on the wider issue of recruitment, training and retention of social workers, include the following:

- Ensuring that there is no diminution in the quality of social work as delivered 'on the ground.' There is a concern among social workers that the deployment of other grades, instead of social workers, in certain roles, runs the risk of ignoring the complexity of the issues involved and leaves service users at risk of not receiving the appropriate service.
- A significant barrier impacting social workers who are coming to the Republic of Ireland from other countries is the requirement to engage in adaptation placements as part of the process of becoming recognised, registered and available for work; these placements are time-consuming and unpaid and delay employment into vacant posts. The process needs to be streamlined and made more accessible, without lowering qualification and registration standards.
- Another action which could be taken is to have a reciprocal arrangement for the recognition of already registered social workers moving to the Republic of Ireland from Northern Ireland, and *vice versa*. This would allow for greater ease of movement in the profession, by social

workers already registered in one or other of the two registration bodies, on the island as a whole.

- Social workers who wish to return to work after a period of time and whose registration has lapsed have to negotiate a process which can be time consuming and complex. It should be streamlined and simplified similar to processes in place for other health professionals such as nurses.

## 4.0 Conclusion

This scoping exercise, has identified a number of findings which, the authors believe, are significant in identifying key actions for the IASW and others to consider in addressing the deficits and challenges in the recruitment, training and retention of social workers in Ireland.

The absence of a national strategy, the considerable data deficit, the lack of a co-ordinating function to manage the range of issues which arise around the recruitment, training and retention of social workers, including workforce planning, are identified as core issues to be addressed.

Given the key role played by social workers in the implementation of a range of government policies, it is hoped that this report will contribute to the IASW and other stakeholders progressing the development of thinking, planning and action around the recruitment, training and retention of social workers in Ireland, in order to ensure that the ambitions of government policy are fully realised, on behalf of all citizens.

# Appendix 1

## 1. Methodology

The time frame for this exercise, including writing the report, was four weeks. This limited time available framed the approach Kelleher O'Meara undertook in the scoping exercise. The project, relating to the training, recruiting and retaining of social workers in Ireland used the following methodology:

- A series of semi-structured interviews was conducted in November and December 2021 with 10 stakeholders who were identified by IASW, and were chosen in order to represent a range of employers, as well as the education of social workers and social work practice.
- This group included senior managers from the biggest employing agencies for social workers in Ireland; senior staff from three different universities in Ireland; a newly qualified social worker; a middle manager in a social work agency and a lead on the National Practice Teaching in Social Work Initiative.
- The schedule of questions which was followed to explore a range of issues pertinent to the project is attached in Appendix 2.
- Kelleher O'Meara also reviewed some key documents identified by IASW to inform this report, including recent media reports on the issue of the challenges facing Tusla around the recruitment and retention of social workers, recent HIQA reports and presentations to Committees of the Oireachtas.

## Appendix 2

### Questions used in interviews

1. What do you think attracts people to Social Work in the first place in your experience?
2. In your experience what keeps people engaged in Social Work from university, into employment and on to long term commitment to profession & career? Does the age of entry make a difference? Does more life/work experience make a difference?
3. In your experience what's most rewarding aspect of being a Social Worker? What kind of rewards work for being a Social Worker?
4. From your perspective what drives people away from Social Work? - what is the biggest turn off? Why do people leave?
5. What can employers like Tusla, HSE, Probation Service, Local Authorities or others do to attract and retain motivated Social Workers? Can you suggest any specific measures or steps that have or could have an impact? Is the predominantly female workforce significant for any employer actions?
6. Do some types of employers have bigger challenges in attracting and retaining Social Workers than others and why? Any thoughts on what such employees could do?
7. What can universities do to attract high calibre students onto social work courses? What adaptation can they make to reduce drop out rates? What role can they play in ensuring students have a positive transition into employment?
8. What role can a body like IASW play to support and motivate Social Workers to stay in the profession for the long term? What should they be advising employers in terms of best employment practice?
9. Do others have a role to play? Media? Social media?
10. What should the Government or the Department of Health or Justice be doing?
11. If you had a magic wand to attract and retain brightest & best and most committed in Social work what would you change?
12. Any other comments

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