

Safer and Effective Staffing in Social Work

(Guidance for Health & Social Care Trusts)



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Foreword

This guidance on Safer and Effective Staffing in Social Work (2025) applies to all Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs) in Northern Ireland. However other employers of social workers in Northern Ireland may find the recommendations helpful. The guidance aims to assist both service area and wider workforce planning and makes recommendations in relation to caseloads and workloads for the social work workforce.

The 2025 edition provides caseload range recommendations for Mental Health, Older People's, and Children's Social Work Services, and in 2026 caseload range recommendations will be established for further social work services.

Defining what safer staffing means within the social work profession is complex, as many interplaying factors affect staffing levels. So, for this reason, the Office of Social Services (OSS) within the Department of Health (DoH) initiated evidence-based research projects (detailed further in Section Two) to increase understanding of what safer and effective staffing means within the social work profession. The work of those research projects has informed the development of this guidance.

We could not have produced such a strong evidence base without the engagement of the steering groups that were established in mental health, older people and children's services. The engagement of these stakeholders was essential in order to draw on the knowledge and expertise of key personnel with relevant operational practice and knowledge of key issues and challenges. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who participated in and contributed to those discussions.

The recommendations aim to assist the social work profession take the steps required in order to ensure safer staffing. It is aspirational and there is recognition that it will require an implementation period, with some short-term and longer-term work required to embed the recommendations.

In December 2025 OSS issued Supporting Social Workers Guidance and in 2026/27 further guidance is planned in relation to:

- Social work career pathways.
- A ten-year plan to attract, recruit and retain social workers in N. Ireland.

Together it is hoped they will all contribute to establishing safer staffing in social work as well as supporting the stabilisation and well-being of the social work workforce in Northern Ireland.



**Aine Morrison,
Chief Social Work Officer.**

1. Introduction

This guidance is designed to advise and support employers to:

- make an appropriate assessment of their social work staffing needs and support effective workforce planning.
- work towards ensuring there is adequate provision of social work staff to meet service needs.
- work towards safe and manageable workloads and caseloads for social work staff.
- prepare for safer and effective staffing legislation within Northern Ireland.

It draws on strategies developed by other HSC disciplines¹; takes cognisance of local and wider research in relation to safer staffing in social work; and interweaves with existing HSC and social work workforce policies and strategies, such as the:

- Health & Social Care Workforce Strategy 2026 (2018),²
- Social Work Workforce Review (DoH, 2022),³
- Mental Health Strategy (2021-2031),⁴
- Review of NI Children's Social Care Services (DoH, 2023),⁵
- Social Work (NI) Supervision Policy (DoH, 2023),⁶
- Social Work and Social Care Learning and Improvement Strategy (2019-2027).⁷

The guidance supports the profession to prepare for proposed legislation in relation to safe and effective staffing in Northern Ireland, which will be applicable to all HSC employers and will be inclusive of the social work workforce. Key proposed requirements contained within the legislation are in relation to:

- Operational workforce planning
- Strategic workforce planning
- Operational workforce reviews
- Regional workforce reviews
- Commissioned training places
- Utilising a common staffing method
- Ensuring suitably qualified and competent staff
- Monitoring and reporting

1 Delivering Care: Nurse Staffing Levels in Northern Ireland 2014 Department of Health

2 Health and Social Care Workforce Strategy 2026 | Department of Health

3 Social Work Workforce Review Northern Ireland 2022 | Department of Health

4 Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 | Department of Health

5 Report of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland | CSCS NI Review

6 Social Work (NI) Supervision Policy 2024 <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/social-work-ni-supervision-policy-2024>

7 Social Work & Social Care Learning and Improvement Strategy 2019-2027 [oss-learning-strategy.pdf](https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/social-work-and-social-care-learning-and-improvement-strategy-2019-2027)

Principles underpinning the guidance.

- The guidance aims to support the social work profession by establishing a model and approach to safe social work workloads and caseloads.
- The guidance recognises that a supported social work workforce with manageable workloads and caseloads is critical to maintaining both staff well-being and the delivery of safe, effective and high-quality social work services.
- The guidance is predicated on the use of professional judgement. It is the intention that practitioners and managers will use their professional judgement to assess case complexity, levels of need, levels of risk and priorities. Line managers are ultimately responsible for making caseload and workload allocation decisions in discussion with social work practitioners.
- The guidance provides caseload ranges that are recommendations and not absolute limits. Flexibility is required from social work practitioners and their managers to operate the model effectively.
- The guidance does not support the use of a caseload weighting model. However, elements of caseload weighting have been used to calculate the recommended caseload ranges and the definition of case complexity. It is important that staff do not spend time on detailed assessments of individual case complexity or a calculation of social worker time on each case. The model in this guidance is intended to be a broad-brush approach.
- The guidance promotes a culture of collaboration and partnership working between social work practitioners and their managers in relation to workloads and caseloads.

2. Establishing a safer staffing evidence base for social work in Northern Ireland

Developing safer and effective social work staffing guidance across the profession has been a priority for the Office of Social Services (OSS) within the Department of Health (DoH) in recent years. In 2022, the OSS initiated a project with Queen's University, and a rapid review of literature was completed to inform the wider workforce planning process for mental health social work. A further rapid review in 2023 focused specifically on safer staffing in mental health social work. Interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders were completed and the findings from that process were published in 2023.

In 2023 the OSS initiated a safer staffing research project with Ulster University with a particular focus on Older People's and Children's Services. The project involved data collection from 270 social work teams on workloads, waiting lists and staffing; focus groups with teams and steering groups, plus interviews with front line social workers. In April 2024, Report One⁸ reported on the key findings of the project, and those findings have provided a safer staffing definition, framework and key principles (outlined in section 3), based on the voice of the workforce and relevant stakeholder perspectives.

In 2024 further consultations took place across Mental Health, Children's and Older People's services focussed on understanding the composition of caseloads and the average time spent on professional social work tasks. As a result of these discussions Report Two⁹ developed a metric in order to recommend social work caseload ranges.

These research projects across Mental Health, Children's and Older People's services have provided a strong evidence base from which to progress safer and effective staffing guidance.

The OSS plans to progress safer staffing conversations across other social work programmes of care in 2026 and update the guidance with further caseload range recommendations.

8 McFadden, P., McColgan, M., MacLochlainn, J., Davies, H., Kirby, K., Currie, D., ... & Mallett, J. (2024). Safer and Effective Staffing Research and Policy Development Older People's and Children's Social Work in Northern Ireland: Report 1-The Starting Point: Baseline Analysis.

9 McFadden, P., MacLochlainn, J., Ritchie, S., McColgan, M., McConville, P., Davidson, G., Johnston, L., Rowan, F., (2025). Safer and Effective Staffing Research and Policy Development: Older People's, Children's, and Mental Health Social Work in Northern Ireland – (Report 2), Social Work Caseload Capacity Analysis. (pp. 1-17).

3. Definition and guiding principles of safer staffing in social work

This guidance defines safer staffing as:

“Safer and effective staffing in social work requires having enough staff with the right knowledge, experience and skills, workload capacity, and flexibility, to respond to service user needs in an efficient, effective, and timely manner. Safer staffing requires regular supportive, reflective supervision and sufficient time to deliver the highest standards of care. This includes having effective and compassionate line management and a supportive team with adequate skill mix and knowledge to support the wellbeing of all team members, in particular, early career social workers.”¹⁰

Ten guiding principles underpin safer staffing in social work in Northern Ireland:



Figure 1: The ten principles of safer and effective staffing in social work

The framework for safer and effective staffing in social work, sits under the three C's of:

Capacity - that social workers must have time to complete all aspects of their job within the parameters of working time available to them. Capacity centres on having sufficient staffing resources through competent workforce planning.

Communication – that there should be open and transparent communication with social workers about workload allocation, ensuring that the principles of equity, fairness, and trust underpin workplace culture.

Connection – there must be recognition within organisations that social workers need positive connection through relationships with individuals and teams, so that they feel connected to each other, management, and the wider organisation.

10 McFadden, P., McColgan, M., MacLochlainn, J., Davies, H., Kirby, K., Currie, D., ... & Mallett, J. (2024). Safer and Effective Staffing Research and Policy Development Older People's and Children's Social Work in Northern Ireland: Report 1-The Starting Point: Baseline Analysis.

4. Workforce planning in social work services

What is workforce planning?

'Effective workforce planning ensures that you have a workforce of the right size with the right attitudes, values, behaviours, and skills doing the right thing, in the right places within the available budget. This underpins the delivery of quality, personalised and safe services meeting the wishes, needs, and aspirations of the people you support'¹¹.

Some of the following factors will indicate the need to improve workforce planning and safer staffing requirements within a service area:

- A high turnover of social work staff
- Challenges recruiting social workers
- New social work staff leaving within a short time of joining or on completion of their Assessed Year in Employment (AYE)
- Caseloads and workloads that are unmanageable within contracted hours
- High sickness rates that are particularly stress related
- Social workers only having time to perform duties and tasks with no time to engage in relationship-based practice
- Social workers not having time to communicate with people they support, families and other professionals
- An over-reliance on temporary/bank staff
- Limited staff induction
- The learning and development of social work staff is restricted and primarily focussed on mandatory training
- Limited supervision - not meeting standards and a focus on accountability rather than a balanced approach to all functions of supervision.¹²

Workforce planning within social work services is complex, and gauging the number of individuals required with the right level of competence to meet service needs, that includes responding to emergency situations, can be a challenge to those tasked with accurately defining workforce requirements. The Six Step Model to Integrated Workforce Planning¹³ provides a useful framework to assist employers to workforce plan.

A number of related factors impact on workforce planning that will influence the numbers of social workers a service may need such as:

- What a safe workload and caseload size/range is for a social worker in that service,
- Activities required to meet statutory functions requirements,
- Level of crisis response required in a service,
- Rates of referrals/any history of unallocated cases,
- History of staffing levels – taking account of prior rates of vacancies/staff absences,
- Ensuring experienced social workers are available to support newly qualified social workers,
- Use of skills mix within the service.

¹¹ Skills for Care December 2021 Practical approaches to operational workforce planning (skillsforcare.org.uk)

¹² Skills for Care 2018 Guide-to-safe-staffing Skills for Care.pdf

¹³ Department of Health, Social services and Public Safety (2015) Regional HSC Workforce Planning Framework (DH1/15/12487) Regional-Workforce-Planning-Framework-March-2015.pdf (health-ni.gov.uk)



Recommendations in relation to workforce planning in social work

The following recommendations are designed to support and facilitate good practice and assist organisations to workforce plan effectively.

4.0. Employers should have a systematic approach to determine the number of social work staff and the range of skills required in each service area and in each team in order to meet the needs of people using the service.

- Employers should use effective workforce planning systems, processes, or tools to make sure that the right number of social workers, with the right level of skills and experience are available to meet current and future service demands.
- Assessing required staffing levels must ensure that:
 - ✓ the right amount of people, with the right skills, are in the right place at the right time.
 - ✓ safe, effective, person-centred care is being delivered.
 - ✓ an appropriate number of suitably qualified, competent, skilled, and experienced social workers are employed to deliver a safe and high-quality service.
 - ✓ a record of the assessment that identifies the minimum staffing levels required to deliver a safe and effective service for all is annually reviewed.
- When assessing the full staffing complement required, recommended caseload ranges contained within this guidance should be taken into account to calculate the number of social workers required in that service.
- Workforce planning systems should consider both immediate staffing requirements and also plan for incoming increase in need, changing demographics, and responding to unforeseeable service pressure.
- A service should ensure they have sufficient staff to follow arrangements, policies or procedures relating to health and safety, such as ensuring adequate staff to provide co-working when required.
- Where a service relies on temporary or bank staff in order to function, consideration needs to be given to the potential impact this has on team morale and cohesion, as well as consistency for service users, and a move should be made to securing those posts where possible.

4.1: Workforce planning should consider and make allowances for social worker planned and unplanned absences that will impact on service delivery.

- To ensure safe staffing levels are maintained, the calculation of the number of social work staff in a team/service should make allowances for the planned absence of staff members that can be anticipated and will remove them from caseload/workload professional tasks.
- The time outlined in Table 1 should be factored into workforce planning (page 11).

Note: Continual Professional Development (CPD) recommendation in Table 1

- ✓ In Table 1 the recommended CPD time should be considered an average figure to aim for across the year. It should not be interpreted as provision of a fixed day out of practice at training each month.
- ✓ CPD should be an activity that facilitates a social worker to maintain an up-to-date knowledge and evidence base. It can include:
 - Completion of training to develop skills and knowledge.
 - Reading or completing research to inform decision making and practice - then having reflective discussions in team meetings and supervision.
 - E-learning, webinars, conferences.
 - Peer discussions.
 - Reading reviews, serious adverse incidences and reflecting on learning/changes to practice.
 - Professional forum learning events.
 - Leading or supporting quality improvement projects.
 - Completing an accredited NISCC Professional in Practice (PIP) programme.

Table 1: Planned Absence *All calculations are based on a full time 37.5 hours post.

Planned Absence	Recommendation	Monthly time	Annual time
Annual leave	In keeping with other professional HSC staff calculations ¹⁴ , annual leave is calculated at the midpoint of the Agenda for Change leave allocation ¹⁵ 29 days + 10 days public holidays = 39 days a year.	24.38 hours per month or 3.25 days	39 days annually for a full time/37.5hr social worker. (292.5 hours)
Supervision	This should be calculated in line with regional supervision policy standards ¹⁶ 1.5 hours formal supervision per month x 12 months. It also includes 1.5 hours per month for informal supervision.	3 hours per month	4.8 days or 36 hours annually
Continual Professional Development (CPD)	An average of 1 day per month is recommended to allow for both: Regulatory requirements - NISCC minimum 90 hours CPD in 3 years = 30 hours per year = 2.5 hours per month plus Time allowed for mandatory and role essential training. Extra time should be agreed in supervision where a social worker is participating in a significant course/Professional in Practice programme ¹⁷ .	7.5 hours monthly or 1 day per month (See note page 10)	12 days or 90 hours annually
Team meetings/ professional social work forums	Recognise organisational requirements to attend non casework related meetings/forums.	3 hours per month	4.8 days annually or 36 hours annually
Total		37.88 hours or 5.05 days monthly.	454.5 hours or 60.6 days annually

14 Delivering Care: Nurse Staffing Levels in Northern Ireland 2014 Department of Health

15 Department of Health. (2004). Agenda for Change - Final Agreement. http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh_4099423.pdf

16 Social Work (NI) Supervision Policy 2024 <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/social-work-ni-supervision-policy-2024>

17 Professional in Practice (PIP) - NISCC Learning Zone

- The calculation of the number of social work staff in a team/service should also make allowances for the unplanned absence of staff members that will remove them from caseload/workload related activities. Therefore, employers should factor into workforce planning allowance for the following contained in Table 2:

Table 2: Unplanned absences

Unplanned absence	Recommendation
Sickness absence	<p>There should be an allowance factored into workforce planning that recognises organisational short and long-term sickness rates.</p> <p>While no regional standardised calculation is available to calculate average sickness absence it is important to take account of organisational averages.</p>
Special leave	<p>While it is challenging to estimate the number of staff who will require special leave such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • paternity/maternity leave • carers leave etc. <p>an allowance for such occurrences could be considered when workforce planning.</p> <p>While no regional standardised calculation is available to calculate special leave it is important to take account of organisational averages.</p>
Staff turnover rates	<p>Workforce planning should be realistic about the rate and potential impact of staff turnover.</p> <p>Staffing levels need to be based on real recent data rather than overly optimistic targets.</p> <p>While no regional standardised calculation is available to calculate turnover rates, it is important to take account of organisational rates.</p>

4.2: Within each social work team, there should be every attempt made to ensure newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) who are in their Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) are supported by experienced social workers.

- Employers should practice the responsible recruitment of NQSWs by scoping teams that NQSWs are being placed in to ensure:
 - there are experienced social workers in the team who can support the NQSW,
 - there is a team leader in place,
 - supervision will be provided,
 - the team can provide support, mentoring and shadowing,
 - a complement of staff is in place to assure a safe and protected caseload and workload,
 - the numbers of AYEs placed in that team are such that the line manager can manage all supervision and support requirements,
 - the team leader has a good understanding of NISCC AYE requirements and line manager responsibilities.¹⁸
- Where any of these are not in place, alternative arrangements should be put in place to support NQSWs, and they should be informed of these arrangements.
- Where a significant number of NQSWs commence in a team due to staff vacancy levels, additional support needs for both the team leader and the NQSWs should be considered.

4.3: Workforce planning should consider building skills-mix across services.

Skills-mix refers to the range of staff roles within a setting.

The NHS Long Term Workforce Plan¹⁹ and subsequent workforce reviews have recognised a need to:

- develop new roles as part of skills-mix teams so that staff can spend more time in practice,
- build broader teams to have flexible skills,
- deliver more staff in roles and services where they are needed most,
- plan across services and create targets for those skills mix teams to be in place,
- develop support worker roles with specialist knowledge and skills that will enable them to develop in their careers and support the social work role and service challenges.

The level of skill mix required for settings will vary:

- There will be teams and services that will comprise of either all or mostly social workers due to the complexity or nature of the role, to facilitate statutory functions requirements and to ensure a safe and effective service.
- Conversely, there will be teams or services where skills mix, comprising of other social care roles may be very appropriate. Managers should start by considering if the most efficient use of skills is being made within the team and wider service. Are social workers undertaking professional tasks for which their skills are primarily required, or could they be done effectively by someone with different skills?

Where the decision is made to use skills mix in a service:

- There should be a clear delineation of roles and tasks:
 - ✓ Appendix 1 provides a list of core professional social work tasks that can be applied across settings.
 - ✓ There should be tasks identified that do not require a professional social worker.
- In determining the number of staff and range of skills required to meet people's needs, employers should consider the different levels of skills and competence required to meet those needs, i.e.:
 - ✓ The number of registered professional social workers needed in order to meet statutory functions and associated regulatory and guidance requirements,
 - and
 - ✓ The number of support workers needed and their anticipated:
 - banding, role, and function,
 - skills level,
 - support needs,
 - learning and development needs,
 - capacity /workload.
- Where skills mix is used, the ratio of social workers to other staff should be considered:
 - ✓ provision of support and supervision needs of those other staff should be considered,
 - ✓ the need for suitably trained supervisors should also be factored in,
 - ✓ there must always be an appropriate number of Agenda for Change Bands 6 – 7 social workers to ensure availability of a senior decision maker(s).

¹⁹ NHS Long Term Workforce Plan 2023 (england.nhs.uk)

4.4: When planning team sizes, a staffing range approach to numbers of staff in a team could be considered in some social work settings.

This approach facilitates a safe staffing level range rather than an absolute number or ratio. It provides a starting point for discussions about the appropriate staffing in a particular service based on a safe workload and caseload size.

It does not prescribe the staff numbers that should be in every service and at every point in time, as this must be developed in discussion with staff, managers and commissioners and is dependent on a range of factors which influence planning processes, such as changing demographics.

Commissioners will be able to use the staffing range to agree and set consistent ranges for workforce requirements for providers of health and social care in Northern Ireland.

4.5: Staffing levels should be reviewed continuously, and contingency arrangements should be in place for when they fall below the agreed safe staffing range/level.

- Contingency planning is essential to safer staffing planning and should always consider the impact reduced staffing may be having on practitioner health and wellbeing.
- Contingency plans should be made for when staffing levels may negatively impact on the outcomes and wellbeing of service users.
- Contingency arrangements should consider the temporary or longer-term merging of teams in order to respond to service demands when required.
- Service managers are responsible for raising concerns where there are staffing issues. Senior management is responsible for action planning to address the issues.
- Where a staffing situation warrants it being placed on the corporate risk register, the plan to mitigate the risks, including the governance and monitoring arrangements will be included in the description of the risk and will be subject to ongoing review. These arrangements mean that the risk is owned corporately by HSCTs and HSCT Boards. It is the Executive Director of Social Work in each HSCT who is responsible for reporting, reviewing, and managing the risk. No individual social worker is personally responsible for risk associated with capacity and demand pressures.

4.6: When contingency arrangements are actioned:

- Contingency arrangements could include the use of the following:
 - ✓ waiting lists to manage demand,
 - ✓ extending timeframes for certain tasks,
 - ✓ changes to processes,
 - ✓ identifying tasks where staff other than social workers could support the management of workloads.
- Where waiting lists are put in place consideration should be given as to how those cases are risk assessed, managed, and reviewed in keeping with any operational policies. It is important to identify who holds this responsibility and that the role is factored into their workload.
- Those unallocated cases sitting on a waiting list should only be allocated to a social worker where:
 - ✓ the social worker has capacity, or
 - ✓ where a clear priority issue has emerged – a social worker’s caseload may then be reprioritised to allow a response.

4.7: The Department of Health should ensure that sufficient numbers of social workers are trained to meet future demand.

- These should be based on an understanding of the factors that influence need and demand, policy/legislative initiatives as well as the size and specific circumstances of the local population.



Workforce Planning – List of Recommendations

	Recommendation
4.0.	Employers should have a systematic approach to determine the number of social work staff and the range of skills required in a service area and each team in order to meet the needs of people using the service.
4.1.	Workforce planning should consider and make allowances for social worker planned and unplanned absences that will impact on service delivery.
4.2.	Within each social work team, there should be every attempt made to ensure newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) who are in their Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) are supported by experienced social workers.
4.3.	Workforce planning should consider building skills-mix across services.
4.4.	When planning team sizes, a staffing range approach to numbers of staff in a team could be considered in some social work settings.
4.5.	Staffing levels should be reviewed continuously, and contingency arrangements should be in place for when they fall below the agreed safe staffing range/level.
4.6.	Advice for contingency arrangements.
4.7	The Department of Health should ensure that sufficient numbers of social workers are trained to meet future demand.

5. Social work workloads

This guidance sets the standards for social work safe and manageable caseloads and workloads.

While section five of this guidance focuses on **workload** recommendations and section six focuses on **caseload** recommendations, it is important that employers and practitioners recognise that the two areas are interwoven, and they should not be considered in isolation of each other.

Workload refers to all areas of the role, including participating on a duty rota, mandatory or role specific training, team meetings, professional social work forums, and anything else required of the role that is in addition to caseload activity.

Caseload is all work related to service users, families, and carers, including all professional social work tasks undertaken as part of the social work process from assessment, planning, intervention, review, and evaluation, as well as all case related recording and report writing.

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

The line manager is key to good workload management. They should understand what a safe and manageable workload means within their service area and work collaboratively with practitioners they manage to regularly review and agree their workloads.



Recommendations in relation to social work workloads

The following recommendations are designed to support and facilitate good practice and assist organisations to manage workloads effectively.

5.0: A collaborative approach should be taken between social workers and their line managers to regularly review workloads in order to ensure they are at a safe and manageable level.

- Line managers and service managers must clearly understand what a safe, manageable, and acceptable workload looks like in their service area.
- Senior managers and line managers should discuss and agree parity of workloads across the same service areas.
- A flexible approach to workload management is essential to allow for responding to crisis and unexpected tasks.
- Workload discussion/reflection should form part of each monthly supervision session.
- A review of workload and hours worked should be on the supervision agenda at least every six months, which considers the following:
 - ✓ caseload size and complexity level.
 - ✓ individual worker capacity/level of experience.
 - ✓ contractual working time available.
 - ✓ duty systems workload – time required to cover a rota system, and the frequency of follow-up activity required.
 - ✓ the rate and frequency of dealing with urgent issues not on allocated caseload - when urgent/priority work arises and needs allocated, how are other areas of the social workers workload adjusted to allow that work to be undertaken?
 - ✓ any impact staff absence or vacancies may be having on workload.
 - ✓ supervision is being provided in line with regional policy requirements.
 - ✓ continuous professional development (CPD) - is the social worker able to participate in learning and development opportunities beyond mandatory training; how often are they having to cancel their attendance at training and re-arrange?
 - ✓ annual leave - is there a high level of annual leave that the social worker is struggling to take?
 - ✓ the average hours worked by the social worker on a weekly basis – what are the current levels of time in lieu accumulated, are they at a manageable level and are there opportunities to use that time accumulated?
 - ✓ additional responsibilities held e.g. acting as an on-site supervisor to a student on placement, acting as mentor to another team member, undertaking a significant training programme.
 - ✓ time needed for attendance at social work forums/team meetings.
- Where clear workload capacity issues emerge as a result of examining these indicators, a workload improvement plan should be jointly agreed and reviewed in supervision.
- Where it is evident that workload demand consistently exceeds staffing capacity in a service, the line manager should report this to senior leaders and contingency action planned for the service.

5.1: Employers should adhere to the NISCC Code of Standard and Practice for Employers (point 3.6) that requires them to have *'appropriate systems in place to enable social workers to raise concerns about inadequate resources or operational difficulties which might impact the delivery of care and taking appropriate action to address those issues'*.²⁰

- This is applicable where a social worker raises issues about being able to practice safely and effectively due to an excessive workload.
- There must be a mechanism for social workers to raise concerns about their workloads.
- This mechanism needs to include a guarantee that concerns raised about workload will be addressed and acted upon.
- The NISCC Professional Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Workers²¹ requires a social worker to inform their employer in a timely manner about any difficulties that might affect their ability to do their job competently and safely or feel their fitness to practise is affected.
- Therefore, employers should ensure that a social worker's professional judgment about workload capacity issues is heard and respected in line with the requirements of their professional registration.

5.2: Social work managers should assess a social worker's full workload and capacity if asking them to take on a priority piece of work in relation to either a case not on their caseload or a need within the service area.

- If taking on this piece of work results in an unsafe and unmanageable workload level, then the time needed to deal with the priority piece of work should be agreed in advance and steps to facilitate the social worker taking this work on, such as pausing another piece of work or case, should be agreed.

²⁰ <https://nisc.info/app/uploads/2023/08/Standards-of-Conduct-and-Practice-For-Employers-September-2017.pdf>

²¹ NISCC Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Workers Standards-for-Social-Workers.pdf (nisc.info)



Social work workloads summary of recommendations

	Recommendation
5.0	A collaborative approach should be taken between social workers and their line managers to regularly review workloads in order to ensure they are at a safe and manageable level.
5.1.	Employers should adhere to the NISCC Code of Standard and Practice for Employers that requires them to have <i>'appropriate systems in place to enable social workers to raise concerns about inadequate resources or operational difficulties which might impact the delivery of care and taking appropriate action to address those issues.'</i>
5.2.	Social work managers should assess a social worker's full workload and capacity if asking them to take on a priority piece of work in relation to either a case not on their caseload or a need within the service area.

6. Social work caseloads

Defining a caseload

A caseload refers to all work related to service users, families, and carers, including all professional social work tasks undertaken as part of the social work process from assessment, planning, intervention, review, evaluation, through to closure. It includes all case related recording and report writing.

Defining a case

Children's Services – in some Children's Services' teams each individual child that requires a social work intervention could be considered as a case on a social worker's caseload, this is particularly important where each individual child in a family requires a significant social work intervention.

However, a family can also be considered a case where the intervention is more holistic as opposed to individual.

Adult Services – in Adult Services teams a case should normally refer to the adult service user and the carer/family that support them.

However, there may be exceptions where the carer also presents with complex needs and requires their own significant social work intervention or support. In such an exception a decision could be made to consider them as an individual case.

***The definition of what constitutes a case in both Adult and Children's Services is a matter for individual service areas and the professional judgement of staff involved.**

Line manager professional judgement

Professional judgement must be applied by line managers in relation to both caseload composition and caseload size that will be influenced by:

- service demand/service user needs – there are times when the levels of complexity will vary depending on need,
- the need to respond to unexpected emergencies – minor or moderate cases may need to be paused to respond to a crisis,
- practitioner experience and confidence in role,
- the composition of the team,
- policies and strategic drivers.

Composition of caseloads

Caseload composition refers to the range of casework complexity carried by an individual social worker.

Caseload composition should reflect an understanding that practitioner ability to carry an increased number of complex cases increases with knowledge and experience.

The following definitions of casework complexity apply:

- **Complex input** – cases requiring higher intensity work often including higher levels of risk management and time required on social work tasks.
- **Moderate input** – cases requiring moderate intensity work often including moderate risk management and time required on social work tasks.
- **Minor input** – cases requiring lower intensity work often including lower levels of assessed risk management and less time required on social work tasks.

Factors that define a complex, moderate and minor case are specific to a service area.

Professional judgement should be applied by line managers when deciding:

- where a case sits within these definitions on allocation, and
- where it sits within these definitions when complexity increases or decreases during social work intervention.

Line managers and service managers must clearly understand what a safe, manageable, and acceptable caseload looks like in their service area and should discuss and agree parity of caseload complexity across same service areas.



Recommendations in relation to caseload compositions in social work

The following recommendations do not seek to replace professional decision making by line managers. They are designed to facilitate good practice, assist organisations ensure safe caseload compositions and act as guidance to support social work practitioners and managers.

6.0: While this guidance is not recommending a caseload weighting approach, it would be helpful to have regular general discussions in supervision in relation to caseload composition.

- ✓ Line managers should ensure their social work staff feel they can manage the levels of case complexity they are carrying.
- ✓ Line managers and social workers should understand what constitutes a complex, moderate and minor case within their service.
- ✓ Decision making in relation to caseload composition should always consider practitioner strengths.
- ✓ Individual social work caseloads should normally be composed of a range of cases that sit across all three levels of complexity to varying degrees based on experience.

- ✓ An exception to this will be where:
 - a social worker is part of a service where all cases are deemed complex, or
 - is working as a specialist practitioner in a service and agreement is in place that their priority is to deal with complex cases, or
 - there are short periods of times when it is not possible to provide a more balanced caseload.

6.1: A team approach may be considered for allocation of new referrals and for the management of complex casework.

- ✓ This approach could allow social workers to express preference or interest in similar types of cases. It may also allow them to transfer skills already gained from working on a case with similar issues.
- ✓ A team approach to discussing and allocating new referrals could encourage collaborative working, communication and connection as well as a sense of team belonging and a shared responsibility.
- ✓ Managers could hold allocation discussions with the team. Ensuring tasks and deadlines are clear, they could consider:
 - where specialist knowledge is held, or where a social worker wishes to develop specialist knowledge and/or
 - identifying co-workers in order to make best use of sharing different skills and experiences or facilitate AYE shadowing.
- ✓ Managers would need to skillfully manage a team approach to allocation, mindful that in a group setting:
 - some may be more willing than others to volunteer to take a case,
 - some may be hesitant about expressing preferences or
 - some may be hesitant about expressing any pressures they are experiencing.
- ✓ Daily or weekly team huddles to discuss the management of complex high-risk cases or new referrals have been evidenced to support social work practitioners, providing them with a sense of shared risk.

6.2: Employers should make every effort to ensure that newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) in their Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) are allocated a 'protected' caseload composition.

- ✓ The recommended protected caseload composition for a NQSW in the table below is a general guide to aim for. It may be adapted and individualised to both acknowledge and work within NQSW strengths and developmental needs:

1- 6 months as a NQSW completing AYE	6-12 months as a NQSW completing AYE
10% of caseload shadow and co-work complex cases	10% of caseload moves to AYE individual responsibility for complex cases - but with close support and supervision
40% of caseload are moderate cases	50% of caseload are moderate cases
50% of caseload are minor cases	40% of caseload are minor cases

- ✓ When a NQSW commences in a team, there should be a discussion with their line manager in relation to how the protected caseload will be managed across their AYE and the timing of allocation of complex work. This should be consistent across a service area.
- ✓ A newly qualified social worker should not hold sole responsibility for what has been deemed a complex case for that service during the first 6 months of their AYE year. The first six months as a NQSW should normally be spent shadowing and learning from an experienced practitioner by co-working. This will facilitate the AYE to build confidence and competence in their role.
- ✓ In the second six months, they may move to holding individual responsibility for some complex work (not exceeding 10% of caseload), but with close support and supervision. This will further facilitate the AYE to build confidence and competence in role.
- ✓ An exception may be where a NQSW has successfully completed a student placement in the team or service area they are working in. This should normally mean they have a more developed confidence and understanding of the social work role and tasks required. In such circumstances there may be a joint decision between the AYE and line manager to take on complex work (not exceeding 10% of caseload) sooner than 6 months. Any decision to do so should consider:
 - The NQSW's expressed confidence in doing so,
 - The 'Summary of Learning' that must be provided by the AYE when they commence outlining their learning as a student.²²

²² 20220805_AYERevisedGuidanceVersion3_Document_Approved_MH.pdf)

- ✓ Close support and supervision arrangements must be in place to manage such exceptions. This discussion and decision should be recorded in supervision.
- ✓ Where a NQSW expresses concern or required learning needs in relation to managing complex work, their 'AYE Personal Development Plan' (PDP) should reflect arrangements to address those identified learning needs. NQSWs should know that it is safe to raise concerns in supervision and that support will be offered and agreed.
- ✓ Caseload composition should be regularly discussed in supervision and at the AYE midpoint meeting and final review. At these meetings, the NQSW should be encouraged to reflect on learning from both the shadowing and co-working role, as well as their readiness to take on more complex work as they move into year two.

6.3: For early career social workers (during years 2 and 3 post qualifying), there should be a graduated approach in relation to increasing complexity in caseload allocation as experience and knowledge further develop.

- ✓ The allocation of complex cases should increase gradually as a practitioner progresses through years 2 and 3 post qualifying, and moderate and minor case adjustments made to reflect this gradual change.

6.4: For more experienced social workers (post qualifying year 4 onwards), while complex cases in their service may constitute a higher percentage of their caseload, line managers should ensure that, where possible, this is balanced with moderate cases to avoid burnout.

Allocation

As line managers are directly responsible for making caseload and workload allocation decisions, it is essential that they have a system for assigning cases in a fair and equitable manner that considers:

- ✓ the anticipated demands/needs of the case being allocated,
- ✓ the social worker's career stage, experience, and capabilities,
- ✓ the social worker's current caseload,
- ✓ the social worker's wider workload commitments.

6.5: When allocating new cases, the line manager should consider the current caseload and workload of the practitioner who will be receiving a new case.

- ✓ It is a line manager's responsibility to ensure that cases are allocated transparently, in discussion with the individual social worker.
- ✓ Line managers should be mindful of not always giving those higher-performing social workers higher caseloads or more complex cases, as this practice can result in overloading those social workers.

6.6: Line managers should assess the social worker's workload and capacity if asking them to take on a priority piece of work in relation to a case not on their caseload.

- ✓ The anticipated time needed to deal with the priority piece of work should be agreed in advance and steps to facilitate the social worker taking this work on, such as pausing another piece of work or case, should be agreed.

6.7: In situations where there are vacancy or staff absences in a team, each individual social worker's caseload and hours worked should be routinely reviewed.

- ✓ This should be done by the line manager on at least a monthly basis within supervision in order to prioritise individuals/families needing a service and to ensure each social worker's caseload is manageable.
- ✓ This review may require managers to reprioritise cases in highest and immediate need.
- ✓ By doing so, cases may have to either become or remain unallocated wherever it is safe to do so to ensure social workers maintain manageable caseloads.

6.8: Should vacancy or absence levels continue or increase to unsafe levels in a team, contingency plans should be implemented.

- ✓ Contingency plans should:
 - stipulate the arrangements for risk management relating to the reprioritisation of cases,
 - outline the response to unallocated cases in emergency situations and proposed mitigations.
- ✓ Contingency plans should include monthly oversight and where appropriate include escalation arrangements involving a Senior Manager (Agenda for Change 8B), an Assistant Director, Directors and Trust Boards.

Caseload ranges

A caseload range approach to assist workforce planning and ensure safe caseload sizes for social work practitioners is recommended.

Rather than recommending a specific caseload number, a caseload range facilitates professional decision making, and a movement and flexibility in caseload size that can consider the range of complexity a social worker is managing at any one time, as well as their level of experience.

Across Health and Social Care Trusts, there are structural and service variations as well as differences in systems and processes which will influence caseload sizes. Therefore, caseload range recommendations contained in this guidance may need local adjustments that fit with service structures.



Recommendations in relation to caseload ranges in social work

The caseload ranges recommendations 6.9 and 6.10 are designed to facilitate good practice and assist organisations ensure safe caseload sizes.

- The ranges refer to those cases where social workers are providing active intervention.
- Those teams and services that regularly have cases that require minimal input, for example, to complete a six month or annual review, need to consider and agree how they are applied within the caseload range when input is required.
- Senior managers and line managers should discuss and agree parity of caseload across the same service areas.

6.9 Children's Services.

Team	Caseload range recommended
Gateway	8-12

Family Support

Team	Caseload range recommended
FIT *For pure family support pathway roles/teams	17-20
FIT *For pure child protection roles/teams	13-15
Looked After Children (LAC) * Where there is no family support or child protection role	12-18

*Trust structures that combine these roles or cases should consider where they sit within the wider overall range of 12-20 for Family Support.

Fostering

Team	Caseload range recommended
Assessment teams	4
Support teams *Where there is no assessment	18-22
Combined assessment and support teams (usually carrying approx. 2 assessments)	15-18

Adoption

Team	Caseload range recommended
Assessment teams*	4
Support teams post adoption *Where there is no assessment role	13-17

*Adjustment may be required where Trust structures or cases combine these roles.

Team	Caseload range recommended
Children's Disability	26-32

Team	Caseload range recommended
14+ 16+ teams	12-16
Leaving and Aftercare teams	12-18 subject to where the young person is on their pathway in terms of activity

6.10 Adult Services.

Mental Health Services

Team	Caseload range recommended
Community Mental Health including Recovery and Primary Care Teams	30-39
Specialist Mental Health Teams such as: Forensic, Early Intervention, & Rehabilitation	15-20

Older Peoples Programme

Teams	Caseload range recommended
Older People's Programme social work teams (that include adult protection roles)	30-39

*In addition, the Approved Social Work (ASW) role and any other specialist functions should be factored into an individual social work caseload size.

Caseloads for active ASWs should allow for 10% of their time spent on ASW duties.²³ Should ASW activity significantly increase, then this percentage of time should increase to reflect that increase.

6.11 Newly qualified social worker (NQSW) caseload range size.

- ✓ Newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) within their Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) require increased time to undertake professional tasks, as well as time to develop confidence and competence in role.
- ✓ Allowing them time to develop and consolidate their practice can only be achieved by ensuring that they have a reduced and protected caseload size.
- ✓ When a NQSW commences in a team, caseloads should take into consideration their PLO experience. For example, if a NQSW has completed a student placement in a service area they will have a more advanced understanding of the social work role and tasks required than a NQSW coming into the service with no placement experience in that area.

Newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) in their Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) should carry the following protected caseload size that increases across the year:

Months 1-6	Months 6-12
<p>An AYE should normally carry 50-60% of the recommended caseload range for their service area.*</p> <p>*Where a NQSW has completed a placement in the team or service area they are working in, and are expressing clear understanding of role and tasks this could be increased to 75% in months 1-6 to reflect a different starting point.</p>	<p>An AYE should carry 80-90% of the recommended caseload range of their service area.</p>

- ✓ Some services such as specific safeguarding teams may require lower caseload numbers for AYE. Senior managers and line managers should discuss and agree parity of caseload size across same service areas, taking into consideration all the above.
- ✓ Line managers and NQSWs should discuss and agree the starting point for NQSW caseload size. The approach to doing so should be standardised and agreed across line managers in a service area.
- ✓ Where it is evident that a NQSW's workload and caseload are not meeting safer staffing recommendations, mechanisms should be in place that allow those responsible for the governance/quality assuring of AYE provision within the organisation, to formally address issues emerging.

6.12 Where a social worker raises issues in relation to an excessive caseload:

- ✓ The line manager should review their caseload.
- ✓ Where deemed necessary, a plan should be made to re-prioritise work or reduce specific extra duties.
- ✓ Where practitioners in a service are deemed to have excessive caseloads over a sustained period of time, then it is the line manager's responsibility to raise this critical issue with the respective Head of Service/Service Manager.

6.13 Heads of Service/those in a senior managerial role responsible for overseeing and managing a service, should review the average caseloads of social work practitioners in their service quarterly.

Heads of service should be satisfied:

- ✓ there is parity of approach to managing caseloads amongst line managers in their service area,
- ✓ that caseload sizes are adhering to recommended ranges where possible,
- ✓ contingency arrangements are in place where required.



Social work caseloads list of recommendations

	Recommendation
6.0	While the guidance is not recommending a caseload weighting approach, it would be helpful to have regular general discussions in supervision in relation to caseload composition.
6.1.	A team approach may be considered for allocation of new referrals and for the management of complex casework.
6.2.	Employers should make every effort to ensure that newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) in their Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) are allocated a 'protected' caseload composition.
6.3.	For early career social workers (during years 2 & 3 post qualifying), there should be a graduated approach in relation to increasing complexity in caseload allocation as experience and knowledge further develop.
6.4.	For more experienced social workers (post qualifying year 4 onwards), while complex cases in their service may constitute a higher percentage of their caseload, line managers should ensure that, where possible, this is balanced with moderate cases to avoid burnout.
6.5.	When allocating new cases, the line manager should consider the current caseload and workload of the practitioner who will be receiving a new case.
6.6.	Line managers should assess the social worker's workload and capacity if asking them to take on a priority piece of work in relation to a case not on their caseload.
6.7	In situations where there are vacancy or staff absences in a team, each individual social worker's caseload and hours worked should be routinely reviewed.
6.8	Should vacancy or absence levels continue or increase to unsafe levels in a team, contingency plans should be implemented.
6.9	Children's Services caseload range recommendations.
6.10	Adult Services caseload range recommendations.
6.11	Newly qualified social worker (NQSW) caseload range size.
6.12	Action where a social worker raises issues in relation to an excessive caseload.
6.13	Heads of Service should review the average caseloads of social work practitioners in their teams quarterly.

7. Other elements of safer staffing

As outlined, there are many elements to safer staffing, key elements include workforce planning, workload and caseload management /capacity, contingency planning, recruitment of social workers and use of skills mix.

However, in addition, there are other elements that will support safer staffing:

1. Retention and building supportive teams.
2. Staff training and development.
3. Support and supervision.

Retention and building supportive teams

Improving workforce retention is a crucial strategy many organisations should prioritise to contribute to maintaining healthy caseloads and workloads.

Manageable caseloads and workloads are dependent on the number of qualified social work staff available to allocate cases to. When a social worker leaves an organisation, they leave cases and other tasks unfinished, adding to the caseloads and workloads of remaining staff.

Therefore, where retention is prioritised, this will ultimately help social workers maintain manageable caseloads and workloads.

7.0 Each organisation should have a social work retention plan in place.

This could include:

- ✓ engagement initiatives to understand what matters to social work staff,
- ✓ employee recognition initiatives,
- ✓ providing mentoring, coaching and well-being initiatives,
- ✓ enhancing supervision and support,
- ✓ enabling job sharing or flexible working,
- ✓ offering opportunities for professional development,
- ✓ developing teams as a secure base,
- ✓ specifically targeted initiatives for service areas experiencing retention issues,
- ✓ specifically targeted initiatives for service areas experiencing high stress related absence rates,
- ✓ engaging in a range of evidence-led support and retention initiatives for social workers,
- ✓ providing creative ways to support teams in crisis such as co-working, floating support or supervision from external staff.

7.1 As part of the retention plan, there should be a suite of tailored support in place for all newly qualified social workers during their AYE.

- Employers have overall responsibility to ensure the support of NQSWs in their organisation. They should ensure they spend time investing in NQSWs and maximising their potential, being supportive, compassionate and encouraging.
- AYE support should include aspects of the following:
 - ✓ responsible recruitment (outlined in recommendation 4.2)
 - ✓ ensuring the team is prepared for any incoming NQSWs
 - ✓ a comprehensive service and team induction
 - ✓ shadowing opportunities as part of their orientation into the service
 - ✓ shadowing and then co-working complex casework in months 1-6
 - ✓ closely supporting them manage complex work in months 6-12
 - ✓ support to manage and prioritise a caseload
 - ✓ access to team colleagues who will offer peer support, mentoring, advice, guidance and a safe emotional space
 - ✓ regular reflective and directive supervision
 - ✓ ensuring teams are safe learning environments, where a NQSW's developing knowledge and skills are recognised and there is support to learn the nuances of professional practice
 - ✓ personal well-being and professional well-being support
 - ✓ clear role related learning and development pathways to develop core knowledge and skills, as well as opportunities to engage in wider learning.
- Time should be built into workloads to facilitate:
 - ✓ attendance at learning and development days/events
 - ✓ peer support opportunities
 - ✓ opportunities for critical reflection and sense-making
 - ✓ opportunities to reflect on complexity, conflict and exercising ethical judgement
 - ✓ pursuit of specialist knowledge and skills related to the area of practice
 - ✓ developing leadership skills in day-to-day practice
 - ✓ support/advice re completion of NISCC AYE requirements.
- Ensuring adequate support for an AYE is the responsibility of the line manager and should be reviewed in supervision.
- Where it is evident that an AYE is not being released to attend specific AYE learning and development or support activities, there should be mechanisms in place to facilitate those responsible for the governance/quality assurance of AYE provision to formally address.

7.2 Aspects of year one AYE support should continue to be available into years two and three post-qualifying.

✓ As they move into post-qualifying year 2, social workers benefit from added support such as:

- Co-working highly complex cases
- Coaching
- Mentoring or shadowing in relation to role
- Peer/team support
- Opportunities to explore practice/professional challenges
- Support to plan their CPD pathway
- Support to manage an increasingly complex caseload
- Ongoing team support and team connection time
- Wider SW peer support and connection opportunities
- Support to attend training and learning opportunities
- Support to complete two mandatory PIP requirements
- Engagement in both personal well-being and professional well-being initiatives
- Developing leadership skills

✓ As they move into post-qualifying Year 3, social workers benefit from added support such as:

- Provision of career pathway advice and support in relation to
 - how to engage in specialist learning pathways in their area of practice or
 - how to start preparing for a more senior role in social work
- Support to engage in a specialist PIP programmes
- Support to manage an increasingly complex case load
- Ongoing team support and planned team time
- Group/peer support and connection opportunities
- Support to attend training and learning opportunities
- Individual /group legacy mentoring
- Engagement in both personal well-being and professional well-being initiatives

7.3 Employers should conduct exit interviews to determine why social work staff leave and use those findings to continually inform retention initiatives.

- ✓ It is also recommended that line manager conversations take place with those contemplating leaving and that senior leaders understand influencing factors to help improve retention.
- ✓ Identify and respond to influencing factors in those services with retention issues.
- ✓ Learn from teams where there is a strong retention rate to understand what retains staff in those teams and model across the organisation.

7.4 Employers should engage with new or aspiring social work team leaders/line managers at an early stage to assist them understand their potential impact or influence on both team culture and retention within their teams.

- ✓ Team leaders are key to building team culture
- ✓ They can influence a practitioner's decision whether to stay or go

7.5 Building supportive social work teams is key to retention and team leaders/line managers should ensure that their teams have time to develop and maintain team cohesion, by encouraging:

- ✓ Shared team time – particularly where there is hybrid working
- ✓ Fostering a team approach
- ✓ Strengthening both team and professional identity
- ✓ Team time-out to focus on team building
- ✓ Developing mentors to support new staff

7.6 Where social workers are working in multi-disciplinary teams and possibly managed by another professional discipline – a sense of professional identity will be strengthened by:

- ✓ Social work forums
- ✓ Social work specific service events
- ✓ Social work learning events
- ✓ Social worker peer supervision/support opportunities
- ✓ Professional supervision by a social work manager



Staff training and development.

It is essential that learning and development time is built into workload management (Table 1 page 11) and that employers build a culture that values time out of practice to attend learning and development opportunities.

7.7: Employers should ensure they have a robust induction within each service area in order to adequately prepare new staff for their role.

- ✓ As part of that induction, all new staff should be provided with clarity on how workloads and caseloads are managed safely within the service area.
- ✓ From point of entry into a service, social workers should have a role related learning and development pathway identified. This should provide both core learning required for the role, leading into a pathway to build specialist knowledge and skill in that service over time.
- ✓ NQSWs should bring a summary of learning following final placement that should also shape their learning and development pathway.

7.8: Social workers should be provided with dedicated time and opportunities to carry out continuous professional development (CPD), develop specialist knowledge and record their learning in line with NISCC requirements.

- ✓ An average of one day per month is recommended to allow for CPD (Table 1 page 11),
- ✓ Social work CPD must not be limited to completion of mandatory training only,
- ✓ Social workers should be facilitated to complete training that enables them to develop their professional skills and knowledge throughout their careers through:
 - formal and informal CPD that facilitates core knowledge and skill development,
 - learning events,
 - training programmes that sit within the Professional in Practice framework,²⁴
 - specialist knowledge and skill development as deemed appropriate to role.

7.9: Annual appraisals or other organisational equivalents should identify learning and development needs, and supervision should provide opportunities to reflect on the impact that learning has had on practice.



Support and supervision

Regular, good quality, supportive supervision, that balances supervision functions is associated with job satisfaction, commitment to the organisation and retention. The Social Work (NI) Supervision Policy (2024)²⁵ provides clear standards for social work supervision.

7.10 Supervision should support an open, just, and learning culture

- An Open Culture is one in which staff feel empowered and supported to speak openly about their work and the work of others in the context of service user safety, staff safety and the quality of care they provide.
- A Just Culture is about creating a culture of fairness, transparency, and learning. It recognises that success or mistakes happen and are the product of many factors. It is about ensuring everyone is confident that they will be treated fairly when something goes wrong. It is not about an absence of responsibility and accountability. Social workers remain professionally accountable for their practice within the scope of their contracts of employment, regulatory body, and the law.
- A Learning Culture is one in which there is support and freedom for staff and service users to speak openly about and reflect on what has worked well, and what could be improved in the provision of care.²⁶

7.11 The following are some suggested strategies supervisors could consider using in supervision to support social workers manage their caseloads and workloads:

- ✓ Provide clear direction about goals, priorities, and next steps in a case.
- ✓ Teach time-management strategies.
- ✓ Provide constructive feedback and acknowledge achievement and professional growth as well as their contribution to service priorities.
- ✓ Monitor working hours to ensure staff are not compensating for excessive workloads by working excessive hours.
- ✓ Advocate on behalf of social workers to influence systems and procedures that facilitate or impede workload management.
- ✓ Have regular 'stay' or 'itchy feet' conversations.
- ✓ Model positive work/life balance behaviour.
- ✓ Be available, understanding, and supportive.
- ✓ Model good social work leadership.

²⁵ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/social-work-ni-supervision-policy-2024>

²⁶ Draft Being Open Framework - <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-12/doh-being-open-framework.pdf>



Other elements of safer staffing list of recommendations

	Recommendation
7.0	Each organisation should have a social work retention plan in place.
7.1	As part of the retention plan there should be a suite of tailored support in place for all newly qualified social workers during their AYE.
7.2	Aspects of year one support should continue to be available into year two and three post-qualifying.
7.3	Employers should conduct exit interviews to determine why social work staff leave and use those findings to continually inform retention initiatives.
7.4	Employers should engage new or aspiring social work team leaders at an early stage to assist them understand their potential impact or influence on both team culture and retention within their teams.
7.5	Building supportive social work teams is key to retention and team leaders/line managers should ensure that their teams have time to develop and maintain team cohesion.
7.6	Outlines where social workers are working in multi-disciplinary teams and possibly managed by another professional discipline – how a sense of professional identity will be strengthened.
7.7	Employers should ensure they have a robust induction within each service area in order to adequately prepare new staff for their role.
7.8	Social workers should be provided with dedicated time and opportunities to carry out continuous professional development (CPD), develop specialist knowledge and record their learning in line with NISCC requirements.
7.9	Annual appraisals or organisational equivalents, should identify learning and development needs, and supervision should provide opportunities to reflect on the impact that learning has had on practice.
7.10	Supervision should support an open, just, and learning culture.
7.11	Suggested strategies supervisors could consider using in supervision to support social workers manage their caseloads and workloads.

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9. Appendices

Appendix 1 Professional social work tasks

Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engagement with service user/others• Case recording• Report writing• Professional/case related discussions
Risk Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engagement with service user/others• Case recording• Report writing• Professional/case related discussions
Planning
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engagement with service user/others• Case recording• Report writing• Professional/case related discussions
Intervention
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engagement with service user/others• Case recording• Report writing• Professional/case related discussions• Group interventions
Review
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engagement with service user/others• Case recording• Report writing• Professional/case related discussions
Evaluation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engagement with service user/others• Case recording• Report writing• Professional/case related discussions
Other administration
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• e.g. statistical returns
Duty



Safer and Effective Staffing in social work

Safer and Effective Staffing in social work requires having enough staff with the right knowledge, experience and skills, workload capacity and flexibility, to respond to service user needs in an efficient, effective and timely manner. Safer staffing requires regular supportive, reflective supervision and sufficient time to deliver the highest standards of care. This includes having effective and compassionate line management and a supportive team with adequate skill mix and knowledge to support the wellbeing of all team members, in particular, early career social workers. *(McFadden et al 2024)*

Principles

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Principle 1
Workforce Capacity
Funding adequate workforce capacity
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Principle 2
Workload within Capacity
Team and individual social worker workload within capacity ensuring trust, integrity, transparency, fairness and equity
- 

Principle 3
Skill-mix
Skill-mix, knowledge and experience
- 

Principle 4
Compassionate Leadership
Compassionate and effective leadership
- 

Principle 5
Wellbeing
Staff wellbeing and psychological safety
- 


Principle 6
Camaraderie
Team camaraderie and support
- 

Principle 7
Governance
Good governance including corporate governance, supervision and waiting list management
- 

Principle 8
Interventions
Timely flexible efficient and effective social work interventions in line with professional Codes of Conduct as set by Northern Ireland Social Care Council
- 

Principle 9
Regular Review
Regular review of workloads during supervision
- 

Principle 10
Closure
Closure of cases in a timely manner




Key Concept 1
Capacity
Principles 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10

This means time to complete all aspects of the job within the parameters of working time available and having enough staff to meet the demands of service user needs in line with professional Codes of Conduct as set by Northern Ireland Social Care Council.




Key Concept 2
Communication
Principles 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 (multi-directional from front line social workers to managers and the wider organisation)

This refers to open and transparent multi-directional communication between social workers and managers about workload allocation, ensuring that principles of equity, fairness and trust underpin the workplace culture.

Key Concept 3
Connection
Principles 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9

This conceptualises the need for positive connection through relationships with individuals and teams so that workers feel connected to each other, management, the wider organisation and the social work profession.



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