

Social Work Workforce Implementation Board

May 2026 Newsletter

Supporting the growth, retention and wellbeing of the social work workforce.

The Social Work Workforce Implementation Board (SWWIB) was established following the Social Work Workforce Review (2022). It is chaired by the Chief Social Worker, Aine Morrison and is comprised of Office of Social Services (OSS) representatives, HSC Trust Executive Directors of Social Work, Probation, Education, Voluntary sectors and staff representatives.

This newsletter is designed to keep social workers up to date with workforce related initiatives led by SWWIB and any other social work workforce related information we feel may be of interest to social workers in Northern Ireland.



Social Work Recruitment, Retention & Wellbeing Co-ordinators

In 2025 the Minister of Health announced funding to appoint a social work Recruitment, Retention and Wellbeing lead in each Trust. The SWWIB welcomes the five successful applicants into those posts and looks forward to supporting their innovative work within in their organisations.

The next few pages profile the social work Recruitment, Retention & Wellbeing Co-ordinators appointed across the five Trusts.

Western Trust – Caroline Morewood



Tell us briefly about your experience as a social worker and what stirred your interest in the Recruitment & Retention Coordinator role?

With 27 years of experience as a social worker and social work manager, I have had the privilege of working alongside dedicated colleagues who make a real difference every day. My career has been shaped by the people and teams I have worked alongside. Throughout my career, the importance of supporting both the people who use our services and the professionals who deliver them has been key. Supporting staff to grow, feel valued and deliver high-quality services has always been central to me.

What do you think are the key priorities for your new role?

Delivery of the WHSCT Social Work Retention Plan aligned to the regional DoH Supporting Social Workers Guidance. In the WHSCT we are focusing on a 'Culture of Care' for social workers, with the guiding ethos that when social workers are supported and cared for - individuals, families and communities across the Western Trust are cared for.

What are you most excited about?

I am most excited about the opportunity to contribute at a regional level and help shape a culture across Northern Ireland where social workers feel supported to grow and remain in the profession long term. Retaining staff means better outcomes for our communities.

Southern Trust – Jenny Magee



Tell us briefly about your experience as a social worker and what stirred your interest in the Recruitment, Retention and Well Being Coordinator role?

I've worked as a social worker for 15 years, most recently in Memory Services & Psychiatry of Old Age in SHSCT. For over 10 years I've also been a Social Work Ambassador with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC), visiting schools, regional colleges, universities and community settings to promote social work as a career. Being involved in this work from the early days of the ambassador programme gave me a real insight into the importance of inspiring the next generation of social workers.

My interest in this role comes from a career long commitment to supporting, developing and sustaining the workforce. Whether through student placements, AYE development, NISCC care to chat podcasts or promoting social work in the community, I've always been motivated by helping people see the value and impact of the profession. I am truly excited for this next chapter.

What do you think are the key priorities for your new role?

I believe the key priorities are attracting people into the profession, supporting them to stay and ensuring they feel valued throughout their careers. An important aspect of this, is promoting social work as a career at an early stage, particularly within schools and youth settings. Early engagement will help raise awareness of the profession, challenge misconceptions and inspire young people to consider social work as a meaningful and rewarding career.

In addition, listening to the experiences of the workforce and promoting initiatives that support wellbeing, professional identity and career progression will be key to strengthening retention across the profession.

What are you most excited about?

I am most excited about the opportunity to champion the profession and the people within it. Social workers make a profound difference to individuals, families and communities every day, yet the complexity and value of the role is not always widely understood. I look forward to helping highlight the impact of social work, encouraging more people to consider it as a career, and supporting those already in practice to thrive. It feels incredibly rewarding to now be in a position where I can contribute to this work on a broader scale across the Trust.

South Eastern Trust – Valerie Fox



Tell us briefly about your experience as a social worker and what stirred your interest in the Recruitment & Retention and Well Being Coordinator role?

Bringing over 20 years of experience within Children's Safeguarding in the South Eastern Trust, I have spent much of my career as a Team Leader in a busy Child and Family team. This professional background has helped me to understand the importance of attraction and retention, particularly in a busy frontline team where gaps in staffing positions can have a major impact on team morale, capacity and capability to meet the overall demands and deadlines.

I have always had a deep interest in team building and staff morale. After completing two Quality Improvement projects focused on recruitment and retention, I felt ready to transition into the Learning and Improvement team to help shape the future of our workforce.

What do you think are the key priorities for your new role?

This exciting new post is designed to promote, increase, and strengthen how we attract, recruit, and retain social workers across our Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland. It is ultimately about creating stability within our workforce. The role is incredibly diverse, focusing on two key pillars:

- 1. Attraction & Recruitment:** *Building the future of our profession by engaging with schools, colleges, and career fairs, and being the Trusts lead for the regional recruitment for Band 5 and student/AYE matching.*
- 2. Retention:** *Supporting our current teams by providing the training, direct liaison, and the stability needed to ensure the best outcomes for both our staff and those who require our support.*

What are you most excited about?

With a background that includes collaborating with colleges and universities to attract new talent, I am uniquely positioned to help South Eastern Trust navigate the challenges of retention and professional development and feel privileged to be part of this integral work.

Northern Trust – Jessica Kelly



Tell us briefly about your experience as a social worker and what stirred your interest in the Recruitment & Retention and Well Being Coordinator role?

After completing my social work degree at Ulster University I worked in Cornwall, where I gained valuable experience within Adult Community Mental Health, before returning to Northern Ireland in 2015. Since then, I have worked in Hospital Social Work Services and a Community Mental Health Team for Older People as both a senior social work practitioner and team leader.

Throughout my career, I have developed a deep understanding of the pressures facing the social work workforce, alongside witnessing the positive impact social work has on people and their communities. I have a passion in seeing others progress in their social work careers and have always enjoyed mentoring and supporting staff in their development. I have seen first-hand how workforce stability impacts not only staff wellbeing but also the quality of care for service users. It is this direct, frontline experience that has sparked my interest in the Recruitment, Retention and Well Being Coordinator role.

What do you think are the key priorities for your new role?

I believe the key priorities are attracting high quality candidates into the profession, creating supportive pathways for newly qualified staff and improving retention through meaningful engagement and development opportunities. Fostering a positive organisational culture where staff feel valued, supported, and empowered to grow.

What are you most excited about?

What excites me most about this opportunity is the ability to influence change at a strategic level, as well as being particularly passionate about strengthening the professional identity of social work and supporting staff across all stages of their careers.

Belfast Trust – Rosie Fleming



Tell us briefly about your experience as a social worker and what stirred your interest in the Recruitment & Retention Coordinator role?

I was working as a Social Work Assistant in BHSCCT when I was encouraged to apply for the Diploma in Social Work via the Employment Based Route. My first sw job was in Musgrave Park Hospital before moving into a Community Learning Disability Team for East Belfast. I worked in that team for over 20 years, and during that time I worked with many fantastic service users, carers and staff. Social work was highly valued in the service, largely due to strong professional leadership and committed social workers.

I worked as an Acting Team Leader for quite some time before seeing the opportunity of a temporary move into a social work recruitment and retention focussed post in Belfast Trust in 2022. Developing new recruitment strategies and focusing on retention was key for our workforce in that role. I have known many great social workers – people with a huge commitment to social work who reached tipping points in their careers and who sometimes were lost to the profession. Building the scaffolding to support social workers through challenges over a long career and supporting them to find value in their work was something I was very interested in.

When the new Recruitment, Retention and Wellbeing co-ordinator roles were developed regionally, I was delighted to be successfully appointed in Belfast Trust.

What do you think are the key priorities for your new role?

Retention – learning, sharing and implementing the best scaffolding of supports for social workers. Utilising ‘stay interviews’, feedback forums and touchpoints to develop knowledge of workforce related issues.

Wellbeing – embedding wellbeing for our social work staff as part of everyday practice.

Recruitment – developing new pathways to increase the diversity of our workforce. Increasing recruitment from outside NI - international recruitment is a key initiative for Belfast Trust.

What are you most excited about?

Working collaboratively with the other newly appointed Recruitment, Retention and Wellbeing leads and the Office of Social Services (OSS) will be good for Social Work NI. The commitment from OSS shows the priority placed on social work workforce development.

Guidance on supporting social workers issued to all social work employers



The Chief Social Worker, Aine Morrison, was delighted to formally launch Office of Social Services 'Guidance on Supporting Social Workers' at a NISCC lunchtime seminar in February 2026. The guidance is a resource for all social work employers in Northern Ireland but should be of interest to all social workers. An evidence-based document, it identifies key themes emerging from research about what supports social workers in their role and suggests a range of practical actions and resources for employers.



A recording of the seminar can be listened to at: [Lunchtime Seminars Resources - NISCC](#)

The document is available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/social-work-workforce-policyguidance>

Growing the social work workforce

Social work training places

The Department of Health has increased social work degree training places in recent years to grow the social work workforce in Northern Ireland.

The addition of the Open University Social Work Degree in 2020 has developed a work-based route for staff employed in relevant posts who wish to move into social work, and many Trusts have chosen to fund OU places in addition to DoH funded places.

	Ulster University places	QUB places	Open University places	Total no social work training places	Year newly qualified social workers will enter the workforce
2019	148	112	0	260	
2020	148	112	15	275	
2021	148	112	15	275	
2022	148	112	25	285	
2023	148	112	25	285	By 2026
2024	160	127	38	325	By 2027
2025	163	127	50	340	By 2028

Over the next 3 years it is envisaged that there will be up to 950 social workers joining the social work workforce who have trained in NI. In addition, it is also hoped to attract others qualifying outside of N.I.

In 2026 the DoH plans to revise and recalculate the number of annual commissioned training numbers to ensure a sufficient supply of social workers to meet need.



Recruiting and retaining newly qualifying social workers in Trusts

Since 2023 the Office of Social Services has worked in partnership with Trusts to devise a process that moves newly qualifying social workers into Trust posts in a timely manner.

This resulted in 459 newly qualified social workers swiftly entering the HSC workforce across 2023 and 2024.



To stabilise teams these newly qualifying social workers were not permitted to move post internally during their AYE year. To understand if Trusts retained those social workers once they completed their AYE, the Office of Social Services and Trusts have kept track of those 459 social workers, and the vast majority have chosen to remain within Trusts and within their posts. As of January 2026:



87% of the 2023 group currently remain in the same post since they joined.

92% of the 2024 group currently remain in the same post since they joined.



These are encouraging recruitment and retention rates and reflect the additional supports Trusts have worked hard to put in place for AYEes and early-career social workers since 2023.

OSS and Trusts will continue to track incoming newly qualified social workers in the next few years to ensure this trajectory continues.

2025 qualifying social workers

The five Trusts have welcomed 272 social workers who qualified in June 2025 into post across 2025/26 – the largest recruitment intake regionally since devising this process.

Other social work workforce initiatives supported by SWWIB

Mindfulness based social work and self-care programme

A strong evidence base has demonstrated the positive impact this programme has on social worker well-being, and SWWIB continues to support delivery of this programme twice a year.

The next programme will take place Tuesday 15th September to Tuesday 20th October 2026.

The programme is delivered by Dr Alan Maddock from the Department of Health Psychology, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), Dublin. Dr Maddock previously lectured in QUB and is also social work qualified.

The programme is open to all registered social workers currently employed in a social work role in Northern Ireland.

It is co-ordinated by BASW NI but social workers **do not need to be BASW members to apply.**

Feedback from previous participants:

MBSWSC participants reported significant post programme:

Reductions in:

- ↓ Stress, Burnout,
- ↓ Anxiety, Depression,
- ↓ Depersonalisation, Aversion,
- ↓ Negative thinking

Increases in:

- ↑ Wellbeing, Mindfulness,
- ↑ Acceptance, Self-compassion,
- ↑ Attention regulation, Non-attachment, Non-judgement
- ↑ Mindful observation
- ↑ Emotion regulation skills
- ↑ Empathy
- ↑ Reflective practice capacities

Social work practice

"I used to waste a lot of emotional energy worrying about macro issues. This programme has helped me to pull back and focus on what's in front of me, and you know what...I've been much more productive because I am not overwhelmed".

Acceptance and changing culture

"I have been telling lots of people, you really need to get on to this here. It's really making a big difference...Mindfulness has a bit of a reputation, like a wishy-washy thing, but I've been trying to say well look, I've real experience of it being positive".

Stress coping

"I can't believe six weeks, but I feel like I'm a better person again. Not just in terms of the stress has lifted and I'm feeling less anxious, but also my body, it's less tense, freer to move"

Registration information will soon be available about the September 2026 programme at: <https://basw.co.uk/mindfulness-based-social-work-and-self-care-programme>

Quality Improvement in Social Work programme



The Regional Quality Improvement (QI) Programme for Social Work and Social Care is annually funded by the Office of Social Services, Department of Health. The 2025/26 programme continued to support the delivery of practical improvement to strengthen safety, reliability and workforce capability across children's and adult services.

Overview of the programme

- Over 15 improvement projects were delivered across Northern Ireland.
- 18 social work and social care leaders from 8 organisations across statutory and partner sectors participated in the programme.
- Over 100 people attended the final event, including service user representatives, practitioners, Trust senior managers, the Department of Health and NISCC.
- Over 60 NISCC leadership & strategic PIP requirements were achieved.

Impact of the programme

- Psychologically safe conditions were created to test, learn and embed change.
- Co-designed solutions were developed with colleagues, carers and people with lived experience.
- Improved reliability and consistency across social work.

Value of the programme

- Supports workforce capability while helping to mitigate operational and safeguarding risks.
- Produces low-cost, scalable improvement models suitable for wider spread.
- Contributes to a sustainable pipeline of improvement and capable social work leaders.
- Strengthens the use of quality improvement methodology in the profession.



Link to view project posters and summaries from the 2025/26 cohort available at:

<https://setrust-hscni.pagetiger.com/rqi-2025-26-posters/v2-update>

Dragons Den 2025

The regional Dragons Den is annually funded by the Office of Social Services, Department of Health. It provides social work and social care staff with an opportunity to pitch to a panel of 'Dragons' for funding to test out co-produced improvement ideas to support people who use services.

The Dragons panel reviewed 31 projects from across Northern Ireland, reducing that down to 8 finalists across 4 organisations.

The projects were so impressive that the Dragon's struggled to choose a winner and so **joint** first place went to:

Come Dine with Us: A Western Trust project bringing together people who are socially isolated to promote connection and improve health and wellbeing through sharing a meal.

Men who Foster: A Fostering Network project connects men who foster through online and in person activities providing peer support and shared learning.



Further information about the projects and Dragons Den can be found at:



Dragon's Den 2025 -
Outcomes.pdf

An update on last year's winners' projects is also available at available at:

<https://setrust-hscni.pagetiger.com/swandscddenootcomes/1>