

Developing the Workforce: Northern Ireland Social Care Workforce Strategy 2025-2035

<u>Organisation(s):</u>	Department of Health, Northern Ireland	
<u>Country:</u>	Northern Ireland, United Kingdom	
<u>Contact:</u>	policy@esn-eu.org (we will function as an intermediary between you and interested organisations who want to learn more about the practice)	
<u>Theme:</u> Choose at least one option	☐ Ageing & Care ☐ Asylum & Migration ☐ Young People ☐ Support for Children & Families ☐ Community Care ☐ Integrated Care & Support ☐ Co-Production ☐ Disability ☐ Housing & Homelessness ☐ Artificial Intelligence ☐ Digitalisation ☐ Quality Care	☐ Labour Market Inclusion ☐ Social Inclusion ☐ Technology ☒ Workforce and Leadership ☐ Social Benefits ☐ EU Funding ☐ Social Services' Resilience ☐ Mental Health ☐ Person-Centred Care ☐ Research & Use of Evidence ☐ Management & Planning ☐ Other, please specify:
<u>Principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights:</u> <i>Which principles does your practice cover? Check the 20 principles here.</i>	☒ 1. Education, training, life-long learning ☐ 2. Gender equality ☒ 3. Equal opportunities ☒ 4. Active support to employment ☒ 5. Secure and adaptable employment ☐ 6. Fair Wages ☐ 7. Transparent employment conditions ☒ 8. Social dialogue ☐ 9. Work-life balance ☒ 10. Healthy, safe work environment	☐ 11. Childcare and child support ☐ 12. Social protection ☐ 13. Unemployment benefits ☐ 14. Minimum income ☐ 15. Old age income and pensions ☐ 16. Health care ☐ 17. Inclusion of people with disabilities ☐ 18. Long-term care ☐ 19. Housing and assistance to homeless ☐ 20. Access to essential services
<u>Current status of the practice:</u>	☐ Concept and Design Phase ☐ Testing or pilot phase ☐ Temporary practice that has terminated ☐ Temporary practice that is ongoing and has a termination date ☒ Established and ongoing practice ☐ Scaling Up and Transformation Phase ☐ Other (please specify):	
<u>Summary:</u> <i>Please summarise the practice in maximum 3 sentences. This</i>	The Northern Ireland Social Care Workforce Strategy 2025-2035 is the first dedicated strategy to support and develop over 41,000 registered social care practitioners who provide direct care and support across a range of settings and are distinct from professionally qualified groups such as social workers and nurses.	

<i>will be the disclaimer of your project on our website. Example here.</i>	The Strategy sets out a ten-year approach to improving recruitment, retention, workforce development, wellbeing and workforce planning. Its aim is to create a sustainable, skilled and valued workforce capable of meeting growing and increasingly complex care needs.
<u>Context/ Social issues addressed</u> <i>Please explain the problem you attempt to solve with your practice.</i>	Northern Ireland has a registered social care workforce of over 41,000 practitioners who provide care and support to children, adults and older people with a wide range of physical, emotional, mental health and social care needs. Social care practitioners play a vital role in supporting people to live independently and achieve positive outcomes. Unlike professionally qualified groups such as social workers and nurses, many social care practitioners deliver direct care and support without a requirement for a professional qualification. The social care sector faces significant workforce challenges. Demand for services is expected to increase due to an ageing population, rising poverty, increasing health inequalities and growing complexity of need. At the same time, employers continue to face challenges in recruiting and retaining staff, and many social care practitioners report feeling undervalued and insufficiently recognised for the important role they perform. The sector is also diverse, with services delivered across statutory, independent, voluntary and community organisations. Ensuring a consistent approach to workforce development across these sectors can be challenging, particularly given the size of the workforce and the number of practitioners employed by independent providers. Effective engagement with practitioners and employers is therefore critical to ensuring that workforce priorities are understood and that improvement activity reflects the needs of the sector. The Northern Ireland Social Care Workforce Strategy 2025-2035 was developed in response to these challenges. The Strategy aims to support the development of a sustainable, skilled, supported and valued social care workforce that is equipped to meet current and future demand for social care services.
<u>Objectives:</u> <i>Please provide a maximum of three objectives in bullet points.</i>	1. Increase the recruitment and retention of social care practitioners. 2. Strengthen the social care workforce through effective workforce planning, learning and development. 3. Improve recognition and value for social care practitioners.
<u>Activities:</u> <i>Please describe the activities put in place to achieve the objectives (maximum 400 words).</i>	Preparation Phase The Social Care Workforce Strategy 2025-2035 was developed through extensive engagement with social care practitioners, employers, representative bodies, service users, carers and key stakeholders across the statutory, independent, voluntary and community sectors. The Strategy also builds on the recommendations of <i>Power to People</i> (2017), the subsequent public consultation on adult social care, and Professor Ray Jones' review of Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland. This engagement and evidence informed the development of the Strategy's priorities and associated actions, which will be delivered over the ten-year lifespan of the Strategy. To support implementation, the Department of Health established the Social Care Workforce Implementation Board (SCWIB), co-chaired by the Northern Ireland Social

Care Council (NISCC), an arm's-length body of the Department of Health responsible for regulating the social care workforce and supporting workforce development through registration, standards setting, learning and professional development.

The Board brings together representatives from statutory, independent, voluntary and community sector organisations, service users, carers, trade unions and government departments. The Board provides strategic oversight of implementation and supports collaboration across the sector.

A range of measures have also been established to monitor progress. These include workforce data, stakeholder feedback, engagement events, focus groups, and analysis of complaints and compliments. Ongoing engagement with practitioners, employers, service users and carers is used to assess progress, identify emerging issues and inform future activity.

Co-production is core to both the development and implementation of the Strategy. Engagement activity is undertaken on an ongoing basis to ensure that implementation reflects the experiences and priorities of those who deliver and receive social care services.

Objective 1: Increase recruitment and retention across the social care workforce

- Delivered a regional recruitment campaign to promote social care as a rewarding and fulfilling career and increase awareness of opportunities within the sector. An independent evaluation has been completed and findings are awaited.
- Developed learning and development pathways to support entry into social care and career progression within the sector.
- Developed a business case to support implementation of the Real Living Wage across the social care sector, subject to Ministerial agreement and available funding.

Objective 2: Strengthen the workforce through effective strategic workforce planning

- Published *Responding to Racism and Promoting Inclusion*, a resource for social care employers which includes practical guidance, tools and supporting materials. Feedback from employers has been positive, and the Welsh Government has sought permission to adapt the resource for use within Wales.
- Commenced engagement with employers and practitioners to develop a regional social care supervision policy and supporting guidance. A report, *Supervision Matters*, has been produced and will inform future policy development.
- Begun work to identify supports for practitioners whose first language is not English.
- Commenced engagement with commissioners regarding the inclusion of workforce-related provisions, including training and workforce development, within commissioned service contracts.
- Progressed work to better understand and support workforce health and wellbeing.
- Developed the *Care in Practice Framework* in partnership with NISCC to support learning and development across the social care workforce. The

	Framework received recognition through the European Social Network Awards 2025. Objective 3: Improve the extent to which social care practitioners feel recognised and valued for the role they deliver • Commenced work to establish baseline information on workforce experience, recognition and perceptions of value to inform future actions and measure progress over the lifetime of the Strategy. • Continued workforce engagement activity to ensure practitioners' views directly inform implementation and future policy development.
Outcomes: <i>Please explain what the results were/are so far and how you evaluated this (i.e. statistics, a study, or feedback)</i>	As the Social Care Workforce Strategy was launched in 2025, implementation remains at an early stage and the focus to date has been on establishing the foundations required to support long-term workforce improvement. Early outcomes include strengthened partnership working across the statutory, independent, voluntary and community sectors through establishment of the Social Care Workforce Implementation Board (SCWIB), providing a mechanism for co-ordinated delivery and oversight of the Strategy. Workforce engagement has also continued throughout implementation, ensuring practitioners, employers, service users and carers are able to shape emerging work and influence future priorities. Feedback on <i>Responding to Racism and Promoting Inclusion</i> has been positive, with social care employers reporting that the guidance provides practical tools to support inclusive workplaces. Interest in the resource has extended beyond Northern Ireland, with the Welsh Government seeking permission to adapt the guidance for use within Wales. The Care in Practice Framework, developed in partnership with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC), has provided a structured approach to learning and development for social care practitioners and received recognition through the European Social Network Awards 2025. A further milestone has been the completion of a business case to support implementation of the Real Living Wage across the social care sector. The Health Minister has publicly stated his commitment to implementation, with provision for payments to be backdated to April 2026, subject to budget availability. This represents an important step towards improving recognition of the contribution made by social care practitioners and supporting recruitment and retention across the sector. Progress is evaluated through workforce data, stakeholder feedback, engagement events, focus groups, complaints and compliments analysis, and implementation reporting. Baseline information is also being established in key areas, including workforce experience, recognition and perceptions of value, to enable the impact of the Strategy to be measured over time and inform future priorities.

Funding Source	EU Funds: ESF+ ☐ INTERREG ☐ ERDF ☐ ERASMUS ☐ RRF ☐ other ☐ ☐ National Government Funds ☒ Regional Government Funds ☒ Local Government Funds ☐ Private Sponsorship / Public-Private Partnership ☐ Financial contribution of People using Services ☐ Other, please define:
Links to supporting documents: <i>e.g. project website or report of the practice, articles</i>	- Department of Health: <u>SOCIAL CARE WORKFORCE STRATEGY 2025 - 2035</u> - Department of Health: <u>Responding to Racism and Promoting Inclusion – guidance for social care employers</u> - <u>Minister pays tribute to Northern Ireland's 42,000 social care practitioners - NISCC</u> - <u>'Social care – Making a difference' campaign 2026 – Campaign toolkit - NISCC</u> - <u>'Social care – Making a difference' 2026 campaign launch and toolkit</u> - <u>20260429 Review of Supervision PPs Report Final SMcS.pdf</u>
Comments and tips i.e. for people willing to implement your Practice in their service	The importance of strong cross-sector partnership working has been one of the key lessons from the development and early implementation of the Strategy. Partners across the statutory, independent, voluntary and community sectors have brought different perspectives, expertise and practical support, helping to build a shared approach to workforce improvement. Meaningful engagement with practitioners, employers, service users and carers has also been critical. Providing sufficient time and opportunities for people to be heard helps ensure that priorities reflect the realities of frontline practice, although this can be challenging given the size and diversity of the social care workforce. Sustained leadership commitment is essential. Competing priorities and changes in focus can affect momentum and delivery. Consistent communication, strong governance arrangements, regular review of actions and continued stakeholder engagement have all been important in maintaining progress and supporting implementation. For organisations considering a similar approach, establishing shared ownership across partners, investing in engagement from the outset and putting clear monitoring arrangements in place can help support long-term and sustainable change.