

# ***Final Report***

## ***Executive Summary***

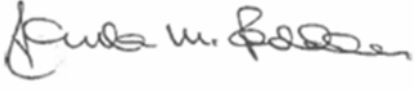
**Progress Report**

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## HSC R&D Division Award Details

<b>HSC R&amp;D File Reference</b>	STL/5562/19
<b>HSC R&amp;D Funding Scheme</b>	PPI in Research Support – Small Grant Scheme
<b>Project Title</b>	Impact of Children's Social Worker Turnover on Service-Users and Families
<b>Award Holder Name (Employer)</b>	Professor Paula McFadden (Ulster University)
<b>Host Research Organisation</b>	Ulster University
<b>Award Duration</b>	
<b>Award Start Date</b>	01.11.24
<b>Award End Date</b>	28.02.25
<b>Name of Lead Supervisor:</b> (only applicable to training awards)	

## Signature

<b>Award Holder Signature:</b>	
	Date: 10/02/25

## Evidence Brief

(1 page: which may be used for dissemination by HSC R&D Division)

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<p>Why did we start?</p> <p>(The need for the research and/or Why the work was commissioned)</p>	<p>We initiated this service user engagement PPIE project to address growing concerns about the impact of social worker turnover on children, families, and carers in Northern Ireland. Specifically, this project relates to child protection services and how child protection social worker turnover impacts on service continuity and service quality from a service recipient perspective. We recognised the need to include service user perspectives and their unique lived experiences in the co-production of this research agenda as it is relevant to social work workforce retention and the children's social work service user perspectives is an under-researched area. Persistent workforce challenges, high turnover rates, staff shortages, and increasing caseloads, have created instability in service provision, affecting the continuity of care and the well-being of vulnerable children, families, and carers. By including the voices of service recipients, we were able to inform an application for funding for further research in the area, locally to the Enabling Award Scheme and nationally and we planned future application to the NIHR Social Care Research Program. The future research (if funded) aims to examine the moral and fiscal implications of social worker turnover in child protection services in NI and across the UK.</p>
<p>What did we do?</p> <p>(Methods)</p>	<p>To explore the impact of social worker turnover on children, families, and carers, we employed a qualitative approach by listening to service user perspectives and experiences. We engaged in interviews and focus groups with service users, including care leavers, foster carers, and kinship carers, to capture lived experiences. Specifically, we conducted 3 engagements via focus groups with young people: 2 with foster carers and 2 with parents with lived experience of child protection interventions. We also engaged in interviews with care leavers (x2). In total we engaged with 30 service users during these engagements.</p>
<p>What answer did we get?</p> <p>(Findings)</p>	<p>Our findings revealed that social worker turnover has significant emotional practical consequences for service users. Key themes included feelings of abandonment, lack of service continuity, and the distress caused by repeatedly retelling traumatic experiences. Service users highlighted inconsistencies in support, a perceived lack of compassion, and frustrations over limited communication when social workers left. Additionally, service users emphasised the systemic challenges social workers face, including high caseloads and burnout, underscoring the need for improved workforce planning, training, and investment to enhance stability and service quality. While the majority of reflections from service users were negative, some provided examples of positive relational based practice that were responsive at critical life junctures, and during crises.</p>

<p>What should be done now?</p> <p>(Practice/Policy Implications and/or Recommendations)</p>	<p>This project has informed the research agenda, bringing a lens from the service user perspective into the context of research on the challenges of social work workforce turnover, particular in child protection social services in Northern Ireland.</p> <p>Turnover in social work is related to burnout and intention to leave (McFadden et al, 2015; 2024) and it is well known that burnout is related to working beyond human capacity for a prolonged period (McFadden, Taylor and Campbell, 2015). Workloads, therefore, are receiving attention by commissioners and government. Safe staffing and workload levels is on the agenda in other countries, such as Scotland, and Finland, and some US states (McFadden et al 2024).</p> <p>It is progressive that Northern Ireland is soon to have Safe Staffing Policy Guidance issued by the Department of Health NI, and Safe and Effective Staffing legislation in the coming years. The current PPIE findings will help to inform the core issues and challenges of social worker turnover and implications for service users, and therefore help to inform employers on retention and wellbeing policies to retain a sustainable workforce.</p> <p>To conclude, there is limited research on the impact of social worker turnover on service users themselves. This work has updated knowledge on this unique perspective, which is critical voice, and central to ensuring that those who need the service most, are heard. The project points towards the need for four key priorities to improve the service user experience: (1) Improved social work workforce planning for a sustainable workforce. (2) Employer wellbeing and retention supports social workers and their wellbeing. (3) Burnout training within social work undergraduate and postgraduate education. (4) Service continuity and improved outcomes for service recipients, needs to be informed by 'expert by experience' perspectives. Therefore service user perspectives need to be central to research and policy developments.</p>
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# Final Report

(no more than 20 pages)

***Please structure the report using the headings below***

- **Background**

Children's social work plays a critical role in safeguarding vulnerable children and supporting families in crisis. However, the sector faces persistent workforce challenges, including high social worker turnover, which disrupts relationships, affects service continuity, and impacts the well-being of children and families (Curry, 2014). Research indicates that turnover leads to negative experiences for service users, including lack of trust, repeated retelling of traumatic experiences, and feelings of abandonment (Bell, 2002). Service user engagement was commissioned to examine the impact of social worker turnover in Northern Ireland, providing evidence to inform policy and workforce planning from lived experience perspectives.

- **Aims and objectives**

This study aims to explore the experiences of service users, including children, families, and carers, regarding social worker turnover in children's services. By capturing their perspectives, the research seeks to understand the relational, emotional, and practical impacts of turnover, highlighting both challenges and potential areas for improvement. The study also aims to include PPIE in the exploration of service user perspectives to inform research questions and study design.

## Objectives

To examine how social worker turnover affects relational-based practice, service continuity, and emotional well-being of service users. To identify common themes in service users' experiences, including perceptions of support, communication, and decision-making.

To explore how turnover influences the quality of relationships between social workers and service users.

To generate recommendations for improving retention, training, and structural support for social workers based on service user insights.

To establish a service user advisory group for a further larger regional and national study.

- **Methods**

To investigate the impact of social worker turnover on children, families, and carers, we employed a qualitative approach. We conducted interviews and focus groups with service users, including care leavers, foster carers, and kinship carers, to capture lived experiences.

- **Personal and Public Involvement (PPI)**

This research places service users at the centre, ensuring their voice shape both the findings and future research questions and study design. These service user groups align with social work's historical commitment to social justice and human rights. Through engagement with groups such as PASNET, VOYPIC, and Action for Children NI, we have gained critical insights into the impact of social worker turnover on trust, relationship-building, and service continuity.



By engaging with service user groups, social work could develop more collective, empowering, and anti-oppressive practices that informs workforce planning that is evidence informed and aims to improve social worker working conditions and relational-based practice.

Moving forward, we will establish an advisory group comprising service users to guide a local (NI) study leading to a larger NIHR UK-wide study. This will ensure that lived experiences inform research design, policy recommendations, and practical solutions for improving social work services.

- Findings

Our findings revealed that social worker turnover has significant emotional and practical consequences for service users. Key themes included feelings of abandonment, lack of continuity, and the distress caused by repeatedly retelling traumatic experiences. Service users highlighted inconsistencies in support, a perceived lack of compassion, and frustrations over limited communication when social workers left. Additionally, the study emphasised the systemic challenges social workers face, including high caseloads and burnout, underscoring the need for improved workforce planning, training, and investment to enhance stability and service quality. Positive themes also emerged when service users reflected on relationships with social workers “who went the extra mile”. Consistent positive relationships, feeling heard, and supported through crises and challenges impacted on life outcomes for service users.

- Conclusion

Service users consistently highlighted the emotional and practical consequences of social worker turnover on their experiences and lack of service continuity. A lack of continuity in social work relationships led to feelings of abandonment, distrust, and frustration, particularly when they had to repeatedly share traumatic experiences. Many perceived social workers as overburdened, leading to limited availability and inconsistent engagement. Some service users felt power imbalances, where concerns were dismissed, and complaints were not addressed, with one care-leaver angrily remarking social work was “my last resort”, noting how abandoned service users felt. A lack of planned endings meant that there was no handover, and vital information was lost between social workers. Also noted was the issue of burnout training for social workers and the emphasis was on social workers themselves rather than the systemic structural issues that impacts services demands and staffing supply.

- Practice and Policy Implications/Recommendations

To improve support for children and families, we need to reduce social worker turnover by making the job more manageable and ensuring workers feel supported. Workforce planning and Department of Health (DoH) safer staffing policy and legislation (due for implementation in NI 2025-2027) will provide welcome baselines for the examination of social worker workload within capacity. Training improvements such as embedding burnout training in undergraduate and post-graduate curriculum and having more trauma informed training for compassionate practice. Additionally, service users should have a stronger voice in shaping policies. Complaints and concerns should be properly addressed, and social workers should have fewer cases so they can build better relationships with the families they support.





- Pathway to Impact

**Input:** Renumeration of service user engagement is fundamental to the principles and practices of PPIE. The small grant scheme enabled service users to be remunerated at the recommended rate of £25 per hour. Post-doctoral research assistant Dr. MacLochlainn and Professor McFadden's time.

**Activities:** Data collection and analysis. Post-doctoral research assistant Dr. MacLochlainn and Professor McFadden's time spent engaging service users, planning, recording, data analysis, and report writing. Training service users "Getting involved in Research" in the value of lived experience and engagement in research (Blair et al., 2022)

**Outputs:** Formation of an advisory group for both a local (NI) and a larger (UK-wide) NIHR study comprising of service users. The advisory group will include a care leaver, a foster carer and a parent with lived experience of the child protection services. Report for the Public Health Agency Research and Development. Provision of training for service users engaging and participating in research as advisory and participatory research team members.

**Outcomes:** The expected benefits are to empower service users enabling them to inform and influence research that could inform policy makers, employers, and commissioners around workforce planning. Train, recruit, and retain are central themes from the NHS Workforce Plan (2023) and this PPIE engagement will support developments around education, recruitment, and retention policies.

**Impact:** This research has the potential to create lasting change by improving social work practices, workforce stability, and ultimately the quality of care for children and families. In the long term, service user involvement in this research will strengthen the integration of lived experiences into policy and academic discourse. By forming a dedicated advisory group, this study will help shape future workforce planning, ensuring that training, recruitment, and retention policies are more responsive to the needs of both social workers and service users. Additionally, findings may inform wider UK policies, leading to systemic improvements in child protection services.

- References

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- Relevant Logos

