

Children's Social Care Services Northern Ireland  
**An Independent Review**

**Independent Review of Children's Social Care  
Services - Workshop Summative Report  
April 2023**

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## **1. Introduction**

The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care Services commenced in February 2022. The Review is a fundamental examination of Children’s Social Care Services with a focus on quality, equity, resilience, and sustainability. Professor Ray Jones is leading the Review with the support of an advisory panel with relevant expertise which includes Professor Pat Dolan, Marie Roulston M.A. CQSW. OBE and Her Honour Judge Patricia Smyth.

## **2. Context**

A series of five thematic workshops were held across the region to gather information on Children’s Social Care Services. The workshops provided key stakeholders with the opportunity to engage, discuss and feedback on the main challenges and possible solutions in relation to Children’s Social Care Services. The workshops also provided an opportunity to feedback on what is working well. In total, 402 participants attended the five workshops. Delegates included children, young people, parents and carers, directors of children’s social care services, frontline social workers, managers, policymakers, academics, trade union representatives, regulators and representatives from the statutory and community and voluntary sector. It was important to hear from the experts with experiences as well as those who deliver and commission children’s services.

## **3. Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to present the summative analysis of the rich qualitative feedback that was obtained from the research questionnaires, speakers and roundtable discussions at each of the five themed workshops

and to identify key trends and patterns that emerged from the different delegate groups. The workshops focused on the following themes:

- Children and Young People with Disabilities and their Families
- Children and Young People with Care Experience
- Family Support Services
- Children's Social Care Workforce
- Children's Social Care Organisational Arrangements.

## **4. Workshop One – Children and Young People with Disabilities and their Families, held at the Junction in Dungannon, 06 September 2022**

### **4.1 Top Five Issues - Children and Young People**

1. Social Worker turnover
2. Missing school for appointments
3. Services not working together
4. Transition to Adult Services
5. More social opportunities needed for young people with disabilities

### **4.2 Narrative / Quotes - Children and Young People**

- “As soon as I get used to a social worker, they change and it’s confusing.”
- “Keeping the service open once you get to 18.”
- “I live in the countryside and that means there aren’t many social activities near my house.”

### **4.3 Top Five Issues – Parents and Carers**

1. Policy needs to reflect the need/lack of effective involvement from service users/one-sided policies/views are not taken into consideration
2. Certain service users not accommodated (hidden disabilities/complex needs)
3. Lack of respite/short breaks
4. Lack of social work training
5. Services are short-staffed

#### **4.4 Narrative / Quotes – Parents and Carers**

- “Not taking into account a child’s views.”
- “Respite essential to help all of us continue our care work.”
- “With staffing levels poor, nothing is working well enough to actually call it a service.”

#### **4.5 Top Five Issues – Practitioners**

1. Lack of early intervention
2. Staff turnover/recruitment/retention
3. Long waiting lists
4. Lack of short breaks/respites for parents/carers
5. Transition to Adult services

#### **4.6 Narrative / Quotes – Practitioners**

- “Pressures on the existing service then dilutes the service.”
- “Children presenting with increasingly challenging behaviours – long waiting lists to access support from specialist services.”
- “Short breaks facilities need to be suitable for young people – not nursing homes!”

#### **4.7 Top Five Issues – Service Managers**

1. Lack of resources/funding
2. Transition to Adult Services
3. Lack of short breaks/respites
4. Lack of appropriate services
5. Services need to be more integrated to enhance service provision

#### **4.8 Narrative / Quotes – Service Managers**

- “There are excellent practitioners on the frontline, but they need to be enabled ... by well-targeted funding.”
- “We need a smooth transition to stop people feeling abandoned at 18 or 19.”
- “Unclear pathways to access relevant support in health and education, different approaches in each Trust area.”

#### **4.9 Top Five Issues – Policy Makers**

1. Lack of respite/short breaks for parents and carers
2. Families, children and young people are unable to access services – lack of service provision for complex needs. Regional inconsistencies results to inequities in service provision
3. Transition to Adult Services
4. Need for greater service integration/collaboration
5. Lack of co-production with those with a lived experience when policies are formed

#### **4.10 Narrative / Quotes – Policy Makers**

- “Short breaks/respite – currently not accessible in four Trusts.”
- “Driven by need – not resource driven, or service structure driven.”
- “We need to ensure voices are central to policy development – not afterwards.”

#### **4.11 Top Five Issues – Other (Academics, Regulators, Inspectors, Trade Union Representatives and Youth Officers)**

1. Transition to Adult Services
2. Lack of appropriate services e.g., availability of specialist pathways

3. Lack of early intervention and prevention
4. Inadequate funding/resources
5. Long waiting lists

#### **4.12 Narrative / Quotes - Other (Academics, Regulators, Inspectors, Trade Union Representatives and Youth Officers)**

- “Lack of timely forward planning for transitions to Adult Services”.
- “Lack of access to emergency and planned respite.”
- “Need access to key specialist support e.g., psychology, psychiatry, behavioural services, nursing and social work.”

#### **4.13 Good Practice Identification across all Respondents**

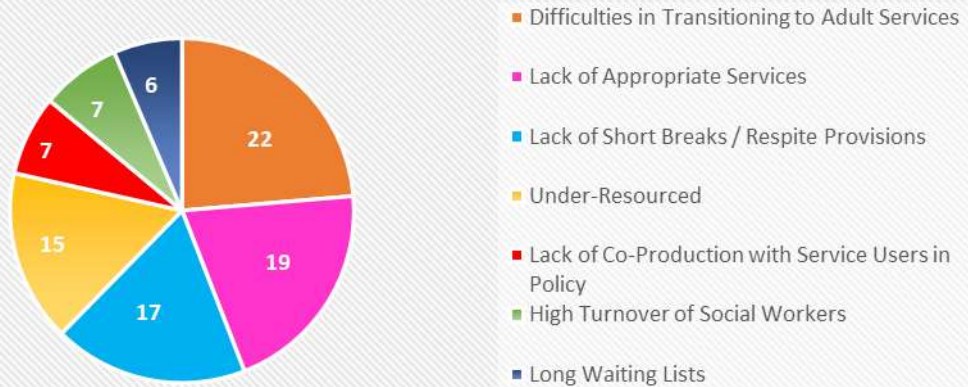
- “Social work staff in the Cedar Foundation are easy to talk to”.
- “Self-Directed Support allows families to have more control over the support they feel works best for their child/family”.
- “There are excellent practitioners on the frontline, but they need to be enabled.”
- “Family support hubs are a valuable partnership ensuring families can access the most appropriate services.”
- “Family support hubs have helped build relationships.”
- “Whole service approach within Trusts works well.”
- “Caring, kind, helpful social worker.”
- “Brilliant colleagues dedicated to their work.”
- “Multi-disciplinary working with services”.
- “Good support from management”.



### 4.13 Key Issues Identified



Key Issues Identified - Workshop for Children and Young People with Disabilities and their Families



## **5. Workshop Two – Children and Young People with Care Experience, held in Hazelwood Integrated College, 13 October 2022.**

### **5.1 Top Five Issues – Children and Young people**

1. Lack of contact with social workers; children and young people need to be involved in decision-making processes that affect their life
2. Need more support post 18 – social workers need to be there during vital stages of a young person’s life for example when applying for university
3. High turnover of social workers, difficult to build relationships
4. Too much admin involved in menial decisions regarding a young person’s social life
5. Social Workers need specialised training e.g. supporting care experienced young people with addiction

### **5.2 Narrative / Quotes – Children and Young people**

- “Told going away for the weekend and removed from home for 14 years”.
- “I moved at age 17 and they said that was my placement to age 18. I am 18 in less than a month, I have no social worker and don’t know what will happen”.
- “We need more compatible foster carers as most people don’t get along with theirs”.

### **5.3 Top Five Issues - Parents and Carers**

1. More support to deal with post-adoption trauma

2. Contact can be traumatising for the child; adoptive parents have no say
3. More awareness of trauma on the school curriculum, teachers need to be better informed of how care impacts a child's learning
4. Inadequate staff within children's social care services, high caseloads lead to burn out
5. Lack of appropriate services

#### **5.4 Narrative / Quotes - Parents and Carers**

- "No child should be carrying their belongings in a black binbag".
- "Trauma does not diminish after adoption".
- "Inequity and disparity in the system; there is a postcode lottery in regard to access to services, allowances and fees".

#### **5.5 Top Five Issues - Practitioners**

1. Recruitment and retention of staff
2. Lack of resources such as therapeutic services to support young people with mental ill health and addiction issues
3. Lack of appropriate placements
4. Young people's voice not at the centre of decision making
5. Inconsistencies in practice across teams, directorates, and Trusts

#### **5.6 Narrative / Quotes - Practitioners**

- "Staffing issues such as long waiting lists, difficulty retaining and recruiting staff leads to young people having numerous social workers which means lack of consistency and poor relationships".

- “Poor mental health, increase in self harm and suicide attempts – lack of therapeutic interventions. Over one year waiting list for CAMHS then they are discharged if two appointments not attended. There are barriers around referrals. Impact of trauma for looked after children is paramount”.
- “Juvenile Justice Centres are not effectively connected to children’s social care services due to differences in legislation which has had a detrimental impact on the children and young people that I have supported”.

### **5.7 Top Five Issues – Service Managers**

1. Unstable workforce within LAC Teams due to recruitment and retention issues which makes it difficult to build meaningful relationships with children and young people
2. Lack of appropriate placements with high numbers in children’s homes
3. Need to increase the skill-mix i.e. multi-agency support to achieve better outcomes, in particular support with education to help close the educational attainment gap between LAC children and their peers
4. Increased complexity of children and young people’s needs – need therapeutic services to deal with trauma
5. Transition to adult services - greater support required post 18

### **5.8 Narrative / Quotes – Service Managers**

- “Changes to working patterns of staff to ensure that staff are available to support children and young people to attend to their needs on a 24/7 basis, 365 days a year”.

- “There needs to be access to equal services, for example therapeutic access between children in residential care / kinship care / foster care are starkly different”.
- Lack of resources in LAC Teams, in WHSCT there has been a 40% increase of LAC since 2011 – 2021, yet no increase in resources. Staff are over stretched and leave to work in areas that are less stressful”.

### **5.9 Top Five Issues – Policy Makers**

1. Recruitment and retention of social workers in LAC teams needs addressed due to inconsistencies
2. Foster carers need better supports and training
3. Greater need for specialised placements due to increased complexity to focus on individual need
4. Use of language by professionals over complicates the discourse
5. Social Worker caseloads are too large

### **5.10 Narrative / Quotes – Policy Makers**

- “Employ a social worker in every school to help with early intervention”.
- “There are massive inconsistencies between Trusts in terms of LAC services”.
- “Support for foster carers – in particular kinship carers as there needs to be increased autonomy”.

### **5.11 Top Five Issues – Other (Academics, Teachers, Regulators, Trade Union Representatives)**

1. Unstable workforce due to high turnover of social workers

2. Additional support needed when leaving care / post adoption
3. Lack of appropriate placements
4. Decisions driven by finance and not the best interests of the child / young person
5. Lack of joint-up working, there is a need for a more consistent approach across the five Health and Social Care Trusts

### **5.12 Narrative / Quotes – Other (Academics, Teachers, Regulators, Trade Union Representatives, etc)**

- “When a child is adopted, they no longer get the “benefits” attached to being “care experienced”.
- “Social work workforce issues impact across all services, having a direct impact on the quality of service provision for children and young people, their families and also carers and adopters”.
- “Variation of experience across the five Trusts – there’s no consistency”.

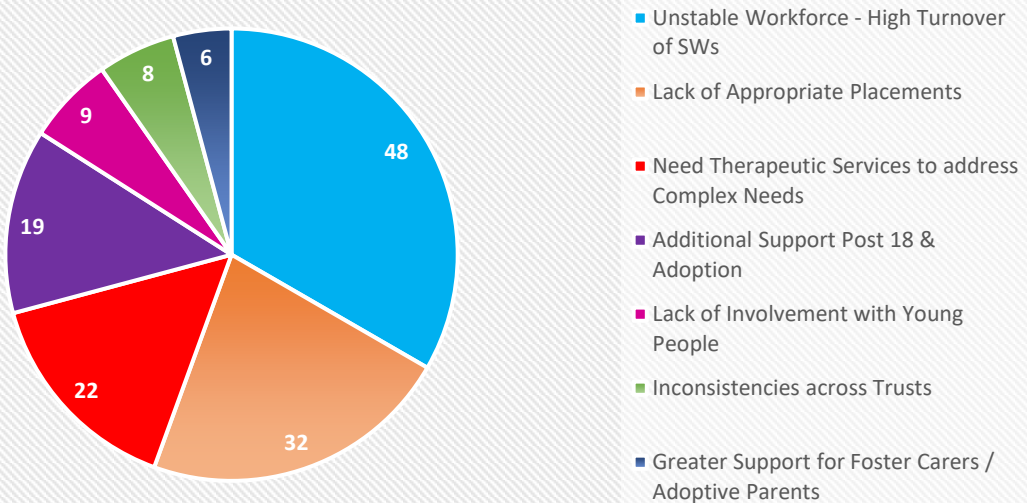
### **5.13 Good Practice Identification across all Respondents**

- “Dedicated, hardworking staff within the teams, placing children at the centre of everything they do”.
- “Support from VOYPIC – giving children in care a voice”.
- “Support from supported living and fostering achievement.”
- “Support groups in the Voluntary Sector offer a great deal of practical help for adoptive parents”.

## 5.14 Key Trends and Patterns



Key Issues Identified - Workshop for Children and Young People with Care Experience



## **6. Workshop Three – Family Support Services, held in The Junction, Dungannon, 15 November 2022.**

### **6.1 Top Five Issues – Parents and Carers**

1. Improvements needed in training
2. More support/integration for refugees/migrants
3. Lengthy waiting lists
4. Lack of resources/funding
5. Need for more respite/short breaks for families & carers

### **6.2 Narrative / Quotes – Parents and Carers**

- “There is a need for more trauma training and understanding.”
- “Social workers need training in addiction and mental health.”
- “Waiting lists.... are beyond insufficient.”

### **6.3 Top Five Issues – Service Practitioners**

1. Lack of resources/funding
2. Recruitment/retention/staff turnover
3. Lengthy waiting lists
4. Lack of appropriate services
5. Services need to work together more effectively

### **6.4 Narrative / Quotes – Service Practitioners**

- Funding is “not sufficient to sustain services in areas where oversubscribed and [the] demand for unmet needs cannot be alleviated by merely signposting or referral to inaccessible services.”



- “Infrastructure not in place. Demand – housing shortage, education/school places.... Waiting lists are diabolical.”
- “Connecting family support services to frontline family intervention teams can be a problem, lots happening in communities that can be unknown.”

## **6.5 Top Five Issues – Service Managers**

1. Workforce demand - capacity/pressure – increased referrals – high caseloads
2. Lack of resources/funding
3. Recruitment/retention/staff turnover
4. More collaboration needed with the Community and Voluntary sector
5. Lack of appropriate services including regional inconsistencies

## **6.6 Narrative / Quotes – Service Managers**

- “Resources squeezed – forced to prioritise child protection/care experienced family support. Early intervention is suffering as a result.”
- “Fixed-term contracts for voluntary sector causing difficulties for recruitment and retention of staff.”
- “Complex referrals made to family support hubs which includes families who require more intensive support than can be provided by the hubs. Overspill of pressures on statutory services causing a reliance on hubs to fill the gaps which is outside their remit.”

## **6.7 Top Five Issues – Policy Makers**

1. Lack of resources/funding
2. Need for greater collaboration between services
3. Workforce pressures – high and complex caseloads
4. Strategic leadership/direction needed
5. Need for increased skills mix

## **6.8 Narrative / Quotes – Policy Makers**

- “Lack of resources, both staff and funding.”
- “Multi-year ringfenced investment required to facilitate family support due to the need to build relationships etc.”
- “Delivery of a strategic framework for family/parenting support in NI.”

## **6.9.1 Top Five Issues – Other (Academics, Regulators, Inspectors and Trade Union Representatives)**

1. Need for early intervention
2. Lack of resources/funding
3. Recruitment/retention/staff turnover
4. Integration needed for services
5. Lack of appropriate services

## **6.10 Narratives / Quotes – Other (Academics, Regulators, Inspectors and Trade Union Representatives)**

- “The services provided by family support hubs do not have enough investment to deliver and meet need. This must be addressed by grants as the procurement process is too cumbersome and timescales are too long.”

- “Ensure systems are integrated and responsive to children’s and family’s needs rather than driven by organizational structures and imperatives.”
- Early intervention isn’t prioritised – “social workers are firefighting.”

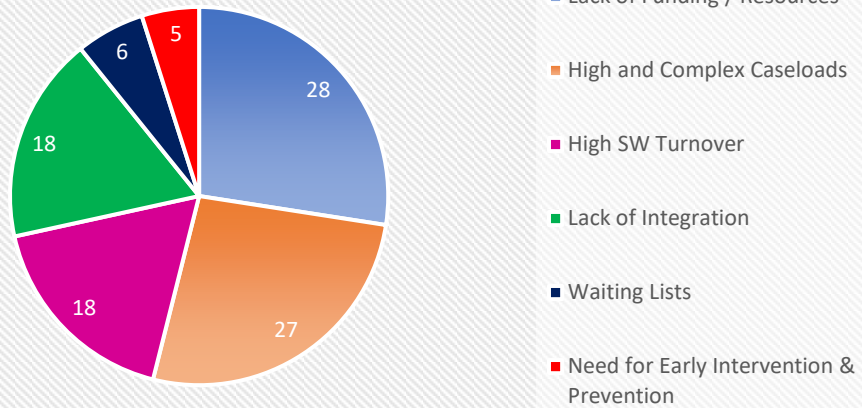
### 6.11 Good Practice Identification across all Respondents

- “Every day I meet colleagues who go over and above. For families, this is reassuring, and goodwill is strong.”
- “Hard work, commitment and dedication of staff.”
- “Willingness of community and voluntary sector to assist.”
- “I am amazed at the level staff will go to support children and young people.”
- “Staff commitment to our project is really good, given the pressures and case load they all carry.”
- “Strength in depth and experience of family support hubs.”
- “Fearless advocacy and representation of the needs of the marginalized.”

### 6.12 Key Issues Identified



## Key Issues Identified - Workshop on Family Support Services



## **7. Workshop Four – Children’s Social Care Workforce, held in Oxford Island Discovery Centre, Lough Neagh, 24 November 2022.**

### **7.1 Top Five Issues – Practitioners**

1. Recruitment/retention, turnover, staff shortages – lack of consistency, unable to build relationships with children and young people
2. More support for staff wellbeing – lack of career progression
3. Too much bureaucracy
4. High caseloads
5. More streamlined services

### **7.2 Narrative / Quotes – Practitioners**

- “Time with service users – no time for real ‘social work’ – young people miss out on support.”
- “Bureaucracy is a huge issue for staff, this leads to increased pressure and time away from service users.”
- “Trying to keep a work-life balance whilst getting all the work done is difficult.”

### **7.3 Top Five Issues – Service Managers**

1. Retention/recruitment – social work needs to be more attractive
2. Demands on workforce - workload/caseloads/complex cases
3. Staff wellbeing
4. Lack of strategic leadership
5. Workforce structure – e.g., pay bandings

#### **7.4 Narrative / Quotes – Service Managers**

- “Demand outstrips supply throughout the system.”
- “Not enough staff to fill the posts. Staff are not attracted to the job in frontline childcare due to pressures and poor work-life balance.”
- “Processes linked to timely recruitment, e.g., from interview through to staff being in post in a timely manner.”

#### **7.5 Top Five Issues – Policy Makers**

1. Workforce issues - recruitment/retention, staff shortages/vacancies, reliance on agency staff
2. Lack of strategic leadership
3. More support for staff
4. Need for skills mix
5. Need for greater partnership working

#### **7.6 Narrative/Quotes – Policy Makers**

- “Effective and visible leadership to set the strategic and operational direction.”
- “Strategies to ensure that once recruited, staff are supported to remain in post.”
- “Retaining experienced staff.”

#### **7.7 Top Five Issues – Other (Academics, Regulators, Inspectors and Trade Union Representatives)**

1. Recruitment/retention – making children’s social work attractive
2. Staff wellbeing – pay, conditions, career progression – appropriate training for entry level social workers

3. Workforce demands – staff shortages, caseloads
4. Lack of strategic direction/leadership
5. Need for increased skills mix

## 7.8 Narrative / Quotes – Other (Academics, Regulators, Inspectors and Trade Union Representatives)

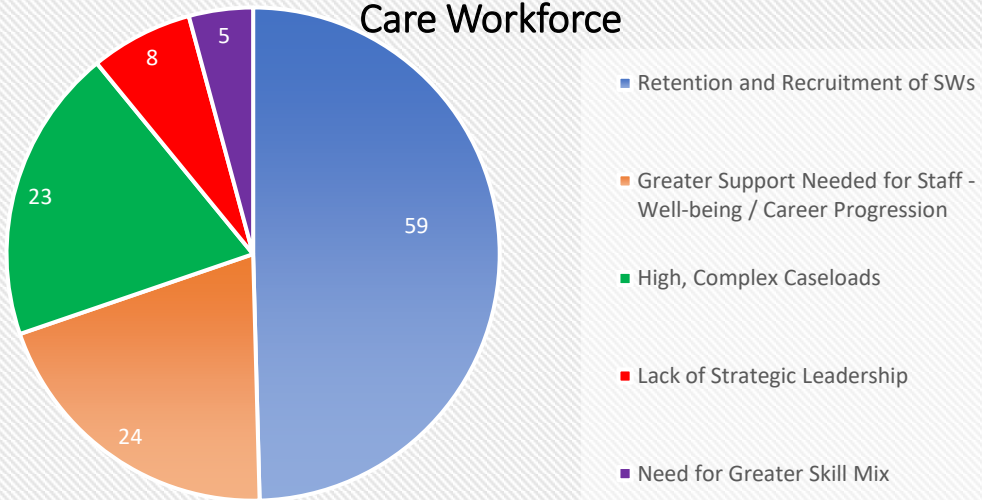
- “Vocational routes into social work – these are not freely available/commissioned – evidence tells us retention is much greater when staff go through this route.”
- “Better remuneration across the workforce – make social work an attractive prospect.”
- “Stress and responsibility of [the] person behind the workforce number.”

## 7.9 Key Issues Identified



A word cloud of key issues identified in social work. The words are arranged in a roughly circular pattern and vary in size and color. The words include: mentor, progression, training, retention, high, inexperienced, demand, burn-out, skill-mix, vacancies, bureaucracy, turnover, recruitment, complexities, pressure, and well-being.

## Key Issues Identified - Workshop on Children's Social Care Workforce





## **8. Workshop Five – Children’s Social Care Organisational Arrangements held in Oxford Island Discovery Centre, Lough Neagh, 27 January 2023.**

### **8.1 Top Five Issues – Parents and Carers**

1. High social work turnover
2. Need for regional strategy
3. More recognition of foster carers/adoptive parents
4. Need for child-centred approach
5. More support for families

### **8.2 Narrative / Quotes – Parents and Carers**

- “Change of staff disrupts families.”
- “Tackling resistance to change at managerial level in Departments and Trusts.”
- “Need for increasing respect and acknowledgement of the skills and experience of foster and kinship carers.”

### **8.3 Top Five Issues – Service Practitioners**

1. Workforce issues – staff recruitment/retention/turnover
2. Need for regional strategy/leadership
3. Needs-based approach
4. Need for comprehensive/integrated services
5. Competition with acute services for resources

### **8.4 Narrative / Quotes – Service Practitioners**

- “Collapse of workforce due to lack of coherent planning and poor pay.”

- “Consistency in approach – implementation of policies and procedures regionally.”
- “Fixation on acute services”.

### **8.5 Top Five Issues – Service Managers**

1. Need for regional strategy/leadership – current structures not working – absence of direction
2. Workforce issues – staff retention/recruitment/turnover – high caseloads and high level of unallocated cases
3. Inadequate allocation of services – children’s social care has to compete with acute services for acknowledgement/resources
4. Lack of resources/funding – budget constraints
5. Greater service integration

### **8.6 Narrative / Quotes – Service Managers**

- “Trusts unable to agree where their own resources can be directed.”
- “Commissioning is now absent and there is a great void in the system.”
- “Current organizational arrangements both internally in Trusts and externally in SPPG/DOH are not conducive to children’s social work.”
- “Social care falls behind priority of acute services.”
- Inability, “to deliver positive outcomes with the current budget.”
- “Any new structure needs to adequately resourced.”

### **8.7 Top Five Issues – Policy Makers**

1. Workforce issues – staff recruitment, retention, turnover

2. Workforce demand - capacity issues e.g., unallocated cases, high caseload, safe staffing
3. Lack of appropriate services – regional inconsistency
4. Need for overall strategy, direction, leadership
5. Need for greater service integration

## **8.8 Narrative / Quotes – Policy Makers**

- “Turnover of staff and associated loss of training and experience.”
- Recruitment and retention challenges need to be, “understood systemically and contextually and not dealt with in isolation.”
- Children’s social care needs to be viewed as, “a whole system issue with whole system solutions.”

### **8.9.1 Top Five Issues – Other (Academics, Regulators, Inspectors and Trade Union Representatives)**

1. Workforce issues – recruitment, retention, staff turnover, high caseloads
2. Need for overall strategy, direction, leadership
3. Needs-led, child-centred, family-centred approach
4. Access to services – regional inconsistency
5. Children’s social care having to compete with acute services

## **8.10 Narrative / Quotes – Other (Academics, Regulators, Inspectors and Trade Union Representatives)**

- “Existing structures are so diverse, differently structured and completely inward focused, meaning they will struggle to shift to a new model and anticipate resistance.”

- Need for, “clarity of purpose, clear pathway, champions to realise the vision.”
- “Needs of children across their lifespan and in the context of the whole family and community.”

### **8.11 Actions Suggested to Tackle Current Organisational Issues**

- “Specific support or mentor programme for newly qualified staff.”
- “Better training for all levels in teams, better overtime pay, less bureaucratic demands, caseloads lowered.”
- “Multi-disciplinary teams.”
- “Adequately funded and strategic direction which thinks about children and families, not only in childhood but also across adulthood. Much better interface with communities, housing, and education.”
- “I like the idea of a single agency to work on behalf of children, young people and families.”
- “Strategic workforce planning.”
- “Broadening of career pathways, entry points... to increase workforce. Review social work pay bands to improve retention.”
- “Ring-fenced budget in each Trust.”
- “Introduction of one court order.”
- “Treat children as people who have experienced trauma rather than offenders when in conflict with the law.”
- “Clear structural lines of accountability.”
- “Considering the long-standing and significant challenges, a radical reform is required. More ambition for children and staff.”
- “Think big do small, not think small do big!”

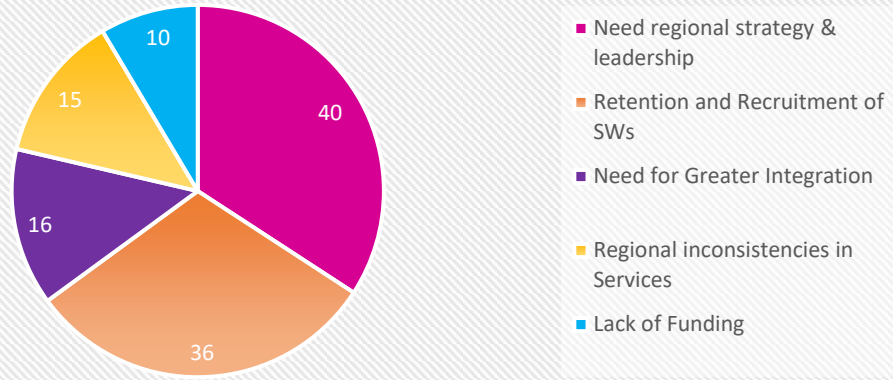
- “Clarity of roles, responsibilities and strategic priorities.”
- “Clarity regarding commissioning arrangements, roles and responsibilities.”
- “Clear guidance on how professionals should communicate with each other and families.”
- “Have more direction over the five Trust areas to stop competition for services.”
- “Consistent training across all sectors.”
- “Long-term strategic investment.”
- “Commitment from the government to invest in early intervention.”
- “Quick implementation of safe staffing legislation.”
- “A whole system approach that utilizes the expertise of all sectors and contributes to children’s social care in a joined-up way that is not competitive/siloed.”
- “A central management to feed down to the five Trusts to ensure service users receive a consistent level of service regardless of where they are situated.”
- “Establishing steering groups of carers to represent views.”
- “Community agenda needs central priority within hospital driven trusts though difficult to see how this will be achieved in the current climate.”
- “Reduce bureaucracy. Make the profession attractive.”
- “Skills mix within teams.”
- “Regional social care lead. Review of policies to allow sharing resources, staffing etc., so regional services can be established rather than Trusts leading for all.”

- “Investment in support services within the community and voluntary sector.”
- “To promote relationship-based practice – end of agency staff, give social workers fixed and permanent contracts, no more short-term precarious contracts. Senior management listening to social workers when they say case demands are unmanageable – a strong voice from the frontline feeding up.”
- “Greater collaboration and co-operation between statutory, voluntary and community sectors.”
- “Leadership.”
- “Remove the Trusts, create a single coherent body and insure regular inspection of all foster care services.”
- “Fix the problems we have within the system that we have.”
- “Maintain connections to [the] frontline.”

## 8.12 Key Issues Identified



## Key Issues Identified - Workshop on Children's Social Care Organisational Arrangements



## **9. Prevalent Themes and Trends across all five Workshops**

- i) Staffing issues – recruitment, retention, staff turnover, vacancies – young people and their families/carers are unable to build strong relationships with social workers. Increased pressure on the remaining workforce
- ii) Service accessibility – specialist services are often not available to access. Lack of consistency between Trusts, meaning young people and their families/carers are also unable to gain access to services
- iii) Lack of resources, funding, budget constraints
- iv) Lack of regional strategy, leadership, direction
- v) Workforce pressures – high demand, high caseloads, complex cases, low capacity
- vi) Need for increased collaboration/integration between services
- vii) The transition to adult services is difficult for many young people – this process is often disjointed, with support dropping off once they reach 18
- viii) Young people should have more support at this stage of their lives.



### Key Issues Identified across Five Thematic Workshops

