

Professor Ray Jones
C/o Children's Social Care Services Independent Review

24th April 2023

Dear Ray

Re. Children's Social Care Services Independent Review

Can we first say thank you for the number of meetings we have had over the last year or so and for facilitating such important discussions on the future of children's social care in Northern Ireland. There has been much discussion and debate and we hope we have contributed to the undoubted energy that exists regarding this important subject.

We are aware you are reaching the recommendation stage of your review, and we wish you well, as you approach the final stages of what we know has been a very significant challenge. We thought, as you approach this point, it would be worthwhile putting in writing a NIPSA submission, on where we are now and as we stare into the future of a particular service very many of our members are deeply committed to.

We hope you have time to consider the following, which is has been written in conjunction with not only NIPSA Branches, but with our members working across children's community services at all grades in Northern Ireland.

Who we are?

The Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) is the largest public sector trade union in NI representing members across all section of the public sector including Health, Civil Service and Education etc. sectors.

Specifically in relation to this consultation, NIPSA is by far the largest representative body for Social Workers in NI, across the statutory and community sectors. NIPSA has a long and proud record in campaigning, responding and contributing to all proposals affecting Social Work practice and the delivery of services. This also includes taking part in present and historical strike action and action short of strike action. While the focus of the present dispute is on pay, safe staffing and recruitment and retention issues are also factors that presently and historically led to action by NIPSA and our members.

Why are we here?

NIPSA views the current pressures across children's social services as a part of a broader historical failure by the DOH and SPPG (formally HSCB) to fulfil a range of core functions. Below are some of the key reasons NIPSA believes we are facing a

crisis that underpins the clear need for the scale of systemic and organisational reform that we believe your review will be the key catalyst for:

- Workforce planning: The comprehensive failures of the DOH in workforce planning, spanning a number of years, has left massive workforce gaps in small highly specialist teams across full service areas, running anywhere from 25-50% regionally with workload deficits absorbed by HSC Trusts and the highly motivated workforce they employ. This was already particularly important at the beginning of the pandemic, the intervening years have only compounded the planning failures.
- It was always NIPSA's view that that as the pandemic ended there would be an increase in referrals to mental health and children's services, due to the lack of safety nets for children and vulnerable adults not being in place and driven by the outworking's of the pandemic itself. Whilst the DOH under Richard Pengally did put together a workforce plan (around 2018), this was both inadequate and not properly thought through. The more recent workforce planning report by the DOH is firmly a step in the right direction, however it has meant we are some way off in fully realising the requirement to have appropriate levels of staff in place and it will likely take at least 3 years before we can assess its effectiveness.
- Demand surge: In a post pandemic world, the response from the DOH and SPPG has been glacial to deal the outworkings of the pandemic and its impact upon communities in NI. Regional indicators show an increase in child and family concerns that have come directly to the front door of children's services across NI. Whilst regionally this varies, in Belfast there has been a huge surge of over 40% since the beginning of the pandemic and with children coming into the care system. The response from the DOH and SPPG is simply too slow to respond to this.
- Poverty and Finance: The cost of living crisis has most impacted upon those families who have the least capacity to mobilise either economic or social resources to mitigate the impacts of societal change. These processes have had a profound impact on children's welfare. While there is a move to embed responses at local level, the reality is this response is too slow, fragmentary and not developed anywhere near to where it should be. The lack of a functioning Government is also clearly affecting developing responses. However, historically poverty and a downturn in socio-economic standards are clear indicators that have ramifications for children's social care services demand.
- BSO Recruitment Processes: NIPSA and indeed all trade unions have repeatedly highlighted the mess the HSC has made of the fundamental responsibility of actually getting people into vacant posts. This has not only created inefficiencies across a range of community based services, but has also created huge vested interests in maximising the opportunities for 'opportunistic staff savings,' as the easiest of low hanging savings fruit for Trusts, which in

turn have a disproportionate impact upon staff left in post. These staff then quickly experience burnout and in turn seek to leave the service.

- Targeted Funding: The “smoke and mirrors” approach to financial savings mentioned above is one aspect of a complex approach to public sector finances in NI. Allocations exist as a platform from which the differing stakeholders of DOH, SPPG and HSC organisations ‘spend’ to achieve, in our view, not outcomes for children and families, nor services with objective quality, but predetermined financial objectives. This creates the scenario that sees the superstructure of NI’s current delivery structures, reporting and assurance frameworks appear untouched while the front line services they rely on are hollowed out to the point of existing in name only in many areas.
- In particular NIPSA sees the financial management approaches taken in the five HSC Trust’s as too often enabling an ‘equity of misery’ type approach to the above by pursuing fixed policies in regard to resource extraction and savings across widely different service settings and areas. This means that an **early intervention** approach, or even a “spend to save” approach, directly targeting the most deprived communities across NI, from which children’s Social Work gets the most referrals from, are often given little consideration or not fully realised. This means family situations worsen with a higher probability that children end up in the care system, which in turn requires a longer-term financial commitment from HS Trusts. These costs are significantly higher than if there had been a clearly targeted early intervention approach in high socially deprived communities. It is NIPSA’s view that specific ring-fenced funding, targeting areas of high social deprivation, will provide better outcomes for children, young people and families and indeed would have financial benefits on a longer-term basis.
- Doable Jobs and Retaining Staff: Over the years, there have been many initiatives across children’s Social Work seeking to improve responses to children in need and families requiring support. Most of these initiatives however have failed to address the central tenet of what Social Workers want to do – make a positive difference to the lived experiences of children, young people and families. Fulfilling work is, after all, foundational to any real retention strategy.
- The 10 Year Social Work Strategy, the Reform and Implementation Team, Regional Recruitment, Regional Workforce Planning Group as well as other projects the DOH have overseen, have failed to deliver in any meaningful way on definitions as to what the remit and quality of children’s social care services should be. They failed to reduce bureaucracy, or address what a reasonable caseload looks like for front line workers. Services in these areas are now in a situation that Student Social Workers will work ABC (anywhere but children’s) and attrition rates for those left in service are increasing. The failure of the DOH, SPPG (formally the HSCB) and in HSC Trust’s, in not addressing this fundamental aspect of making Social Workers feel that they are actually doing Social Work, is a key component of the current crisis. HSC Trusts are now

facing being unable to recruit and retain a sustainable and/or viable workforce. It is NIPSA's view that the recent reduction in Agency Social Work, whilst welcome, will not address the key workforce reinforcements required across these areas. Having a mantra of support for AYE SW's, again whilst welcome, will not retain the workforce required for the challenges ahead, because too often the job is described by SW's themselves as being impossible due to demand pressures. It is implausible to believe that by simply getting SW's in the door you will retain them for years to come by tinkering with a few elements of their workload. Fundamental change is required to give a safe and doable workload, which in turn, is a key factor in maintaining people in the service for years to come.

Operational impact upon NIPSA members

The seemingly ever-growing pressures of working at the coalface, being held accountable for often-unundoable levels of activity, pressured within a severely depleted workforce has had a frankly brutalising affect upon what are now entire generations of Social Workers.

The DOH's failures in workforce planning, allied to the mushrooming of Social Work posts in other settings e.g. MCA, MDTs Adult Safeguarding and the growing depletion of front line management makes this cycle accelerate, year on year.

NIPSA's analysis shows a workforce at a population level, across children's services becoming ever younger, less experienced and more transient. This situation has been compounded by the unfortunate, but it has to be said, understandable rejection of the very concept of public service, by growing numbers of Social Workers. Many of these SW's are/were NIPSA members and they have reported to their trade union, their belief that HSC employers routinely demand unreachable targets, with grossly inadequate resourcing and supports.

A consequence of the above has meant a workforce migration into agency working, with reports of lower workload expectation, greater work life balance and higher remuneration. These sit alongside a perceived escape from problematic organisational cultures, as being the main drivers reported to NIPSA by exiting members.

The increasing deficits and instability in this workforce, in turn trigger risk management and service driven responses to this situation by employers. Often these measures, even if they are unavoidable, only further impact the relational foundations, which underpin Social Work services. In turn, this amplifies 'the doom loop' that in NIPSA's view it is becoming evident that children's services regionally is at risk of tipping into.

What to do?

A series of reviews from Appleby and Nuffield Trust research onward, have found that core children's Social Work and Social Care in Northern Ireland has experienced relative underfunding vis a vis its UK counterparts over many years. Given the huge

size of the overall HSC funding pots, it is a fundamental criticism of our supposedly “Integrated Health and Social Care System” that it has till now been unable to effectively wrap around and support these core but niche services in ways that produce better outcomes for children and families.

Instead the whole system costs of the siloed, ‘penny wise pound foolish’ approach by the HSC is there for all too see. For example, the numbers of care experienced children in our adult mental health and justice systems and the correlation between the levels of activity by our services and poor outcomes educationally, economically and socially from those localities and groups, we lavish social services attention upon, affect many other governmental silos and fiefdoms. This highlights the lack of effective Social Work intervention especially when tied to outdated models of care with a rampant command and control centralism evident throughout the HSC.

NIPSA believes that ending the current failed commissioning model is central to this review. In reality, the current commissioning arrangements primary purpose is to enable and sustain a game of financial smoke and mirrors, aimed at regulating spend and enabling closet savings, rather than committing resource to organisations and ensuring effectiveness of spend. Clear transparent and accountable arrangements between the DOH and any body charged with service delivery should replace the current arrangements, which ensure responsibility and accountability in financial terms is a two way process.

Organisational structures

In Northern Ireland, we have a finely developed sensibility on devising and developing structures. NIPSA views the current arrangements as being demonstrably inadequate to the scale of crisis being faced. There is an absolute need for urgent action!

However, given our long and rich history on establishing structure that obfuscate and complicate the issues it seeks to address, NIPSA must express deep reservations on this aspect of the review. In the options appraisal session our reasoning was explored in more depth, but in its distilled form it amounted to this:

- Current arrangements are failing. Not least because in NIPSA’s view, the current structures have abjectly failed to use and build on tools which would address many of the shortcomings we expect the review to identify. For example, the Children’s Services Cooperation Act 2015, explicitly envisaged shared and pooled budgets in pursuit of common purpose. While the failure here is not solely the DOH’s, as this crisis has built over the last number of years, the apparent policy of radical inaction, in terms of realising the imperative for effective cross agency and integrated working, whether through the CYPSP structures or Community Planning structures for example, is unjustifiable in our view.
- NIPSA has had all too much experience of the unintended enervating effect upon service planning and delivery that the process of design and construction of new structures takes.

- NIPSA states that the energy and effort that would inevitably be entailed in the creation of a DOH sponsored ALB, even an executive agency with powers such as a HSC Trust, would likely create insufficient positive change as to be worth the investment of time and effort at this point.
- While alignment with other HSC colleagues brings many benefits. Without transparent and effective linkage to the other determinants of children's outcomes, in anti-poverty work, education and other places, a departmental ALB will not be capable in NIPSA's view of delivering the change children need within timeframes that are meaningful.

Given the storm that is upon us, this pushes the bar for action much higher for the review. Conjuring the new into existence while focussing effectively upon the here and now crisis, is likely beyond the capacity of the current system to deliver. However, this is not a call for doing nothing!

For example, if this review calls for the creation of an overarching child welfare agency, seated at the heart of Government, reporting directly to the assembly (TEO), with an independent board, which has experts by experience and experts by delivery as key elements of an independent board, alongside public representatives, then NIPSA believes this objective would be worth pursuing. It is NIPSA's view that only an effort of this scale would have the capacity to deliver the transformative change this system needs.

NIPSA's believes in the imperative of a hard, multi-agency, Social Work led pivot NOW, towards collaborative earlier help models is the only viable approach at this stage. This should be underpinned by existing resources such as the CSCA and by reimagining existing cooperative structures, such as that outlined above, while longer-term future structures are agreed.

This concludes NIPSA's submission to this review.