



All-Party Group on Skills

Skills for Social Care Investigation Report:

A People-First Approach to Skills for Social Care.

The Open University in Ireland, Secretariat to the All-Party Group on Skills

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1. Introduction

This short report, *A People-First Approach to Skills for Social Care*, summarises findings from an investigation conducted by the All-Party Group (APG) on Skills of the Northern Ireland Assembly, supported by The Open University in Ireland as Secretariat. Informed by the All-Party Group's (APG) scrutiny of skill gaps, workforce development, and their impact on economic growth and societal wellbeing, this report reflects cross-party consensus on the urgent reforms necessary to strengthen Northern Ireland's social care sector.

Social care was selected as the APG's first investigation due to its critical role in sustaining communities, its diverse and undervalued workforce, and its growing economic indispensability. This short report reflects the voices of practitioners, service users, and stakeholders to shape a sustainable future for the sector.

2. Investigation process and context

The investigation ran from April 2024 to January 2025 with four official meetings related to the investigation.

The four meetings featured expert input from health and social care practitioners, employers, regulators, training providers and departmental officials from the Department of Health and the Department for the Economy.

External activity in the social care sector also guided and influenced the investigation including, chiefly, the Department of Health's publication of the **Social Care Workforce Strategy 2025 – 2035**. This correspondence from the APG on Skills should be viewed as complementary to the important work already done in the sector. The following pages provide a summary of the presentations to the APG, and the APG's cross-party recommendation on how the Executive should tackle the issues identified.

The investigation focused on the experiences and needs of the social care workforce. When reviewing our recommendations we ask you to be mindful of the individuals, families, and communities the social care workforce serves and lifts up including but not limited to those supported by:

- Children and adult residential homes
- Nursing homes
- Supported living facilities
- Home care
- Day care/day opportunity settings

Throughout the investigation, the APG retained a focus on people who are supported by social care and the practitioners who deliver it. During the investigation, an APG member commented:

"The key point is around the skills and how they benefit firstly the professional, but secondly those the professional is working with day-to-day."

How do the skills benefit the social care professionals and the individuals they are working with?

How do we reward and incentivise people to keep learning, to make sure that learning is a lifelong journey, and how do we ensure those skills are developed throughout someone's life and career?

That can't be done without a people-first approach.

The APG recognises that taking a people-first approach will require:

- Tailored services to suit the individual needs of service users promoting their dignity, independence, and quality of life.
- Appropriate recognition of social care practitioners' role through continuous professional development, fair compensation, and supportive work environments.

3. Overview of investigation findings

Societal context

The rising pressures on the health and social care system are frequently discussed at the Assembly, and it is expected the Executive will take decisive action to tackle the issues crippling public services, while also growing the economy.

During the investigation, members recognised economic inactivity as a core issue related to the discourse on skills and this APG's remit. The connection to health and social care is clear – by providing support through social care for individuals and families impacted by, for example, mental ill-health and other incidences of ill-health, disability and many other scenarios, social care practitioners are enabling individuals to regain participation in society including by entering or re-entering the workforce.

Providing support and care for individuals in society with additional needs produces an economic dividend as productivity increases, whilst also easing demand for more intensive and costly health interventions. At a time when the health and social care services require significant transformation, a renewed approach to social care is fundamental to reducing costs and increasing “peace of mind” benefits¹ including:

- Quality of life for citizens
- Reduction in unscheduled inpatient admissions to hospital
- Reduction in A&E presentations
- Enabling discharge from hospital

Analysis by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council suggests that the socioeconomic benefits of adult social care in Northern Ireland are £12.1

¹ Northern Ireland Social Care Council, '[Economic and social value of the UK adult social care sector: Northern Ireland](#)' (July 2024)

billion while costing £4.3 billion, therefore for every £1 spent there are £2.82 in socioeconomic benefits for the Northern Ireland population.

Furthermore, the adult social care sector is estimated to support 46,500 full-time equivalent jobs in Northern Ireland, and generates £1.5 billion in value when considering direct, indirect, and induced impacts, not including informal care.²

“Social Care is everyone’s business”

- Social Care Matters, Northern Ireland Social Care Council

Despite a projected decline in the child population, demand for children’s social care continues to rise, alongside high rates of mental illness linked to poverty and housing instability. Northern Ireland needs a sustainable, skilled social care workforce, supported by informed and responsive service planning to ensure the well-being of citizens, to support independent living and to address growing demand on health and social care services.

² Northern Ireland Social Care Council *Social Care Matters’ Challenges and Opportunities for the Social Care Workforce in Northern Ireland* (October 2017)

Case study: The need for dementia training for social care practitioners

An issue the APG returned to repeatedly was the growing strain on the health service due to Northern Ireland's ageing population and the specific skills this necessitates. To aid the investigation, the APG received a briefing from the Alzheimer's Society on improving the provision of dementiaspecific training for social care practitioners working in adult services. According to research commissioned by Alzheimer's Society and Carnall Farrar (2024): "The economic impact of dementia: Annual costs of dementia"³ has estimated that nearly 25,000 people are living with the condition in Northern Ireland. However, recent diagnosis statistics from March 2025 show that only 14,608 individuals have a formal diagnosis—meaning over a third remain undiagnosed.⁴ This figure represents a 5.1% increase in diagnosis rates compared to March 2024. Currently, the annual economic cost of dementia in Northern Ireland is £1 billion and this cost is projected to more than double by 2040 due increasing prevalence of dementia in our ageing population.

"An ageing population means the number of the UK population with dementia will increase by 43% by 2040, with the biggest increases in Northern Ireland (51% and in London (53%)⁵."

³ Commissioned by Alzheimer's Society from Carnall Farrar, [The economic impact of dementia](#) (May 2024)

⁴ Department of Health [Raw Disease Prevalence in Northern Ireland – 2023/24](#) (May 2024)

⁵ Commissioned by Alzheimer's Society from Carnall Farrar, [The economic impact of dementia](#) (May 2024)

Alzheimer's Society has called for urgent reforms to dementia care in Northern Ireland, recommending that when commissioning adult social care services, Trusts should include a contractual provision obliging care providers to ensure staff undertake dementia training mapped to the Dementia Learning and Development framework.⁶

Considering these recommendations, this APG recommends the Executive give due consideration to introducing a statutory requirement for dementia training, where appropriate, as part of its Programme for Government (PfG) commitment to support Northern Ireland's ageing population. Currently, no such requirement exists, and the lack of comprehensive data on training uptake undermines workforce preparedness. Aligning the PfG's goals with statutory obligations would ensure consistency across Trusts, address systemic gaps, and empower practitioners to meet the needs of a growing demographic.

Training and progression pathways

The APG recognises the issue of training goes beyond the highlighted discussion on dementia care. Many other challenges were flagged as barriers to skills development in the wider social care sector.

⁶ Department of Education [*Learning and Development Framework for Early Years – Birth to Three*](#). (2016)

Disparities in training access arise from underfunded contracts that fail to cover both training costs and backfill staffing. While many private providers invest in development when adequately resourced, practitioners across sectors report challenges such as unpaid time off for training and out-of-pocket expenses for mandatory courses. Systemic reforms to commissioning frameworks are needed to ensure equitable support for professional growth.

Social care practitioners should have access to skills development relevant to their area of practice and the communities they serve. Presentations were made by officials from the Northern Ireland Social Care Council, who highlighted findings from their recent report *Economic and social value of the UK adult social care sector: Northern Ireland*.⁷ The APG recognised the value of the new Care in Practice (CiP) Framework delivered in partnership between the NI Social Care Council and the Department of Health. The CiP includes a Level 2 Certificate in Safe and Effective Practice which provides a solid foundation for career-long professional development that ensures the workforce is skilled to meet existing and emerging social care needs in Northern Ireland.

A presentation was made by the Department for the Economy to outline plans to strengthen apprenticeships through cross-departmental collaboration, new apprenticeships frameworks done in collaboration with

⁷ Northern Ireland Social Care Council [*Economic and social value of the UK adult social care sector: Northern Ireland*](#). (2025)

the Department of Health, and targeted inclusion efforts for underrepresented groups. Initiatives discussed included efforts to address regional disparities, Pre-Apprenticeship Academies for underqualified candidates, and partnerships to develop roles in emergency services and classroom support.

This APG recognises the significant value of care provided across the sector and has found that training and professional development opportunities must be prioritised for social care practitioners. Progress is already being made through the Care in Practice (CiP) Framework and building on the previous Health Minister's £70 million support package to address rising wage costs, the current Minister's £50 million commitment to fund the Real Living Wage for social care is a crucial step toward improving terms and conditions and stabilising this essential workforce.

To ensure these efforts lead to long-term change, the Executive should work with the Department for the Economy to align this agenda with the Good Jobs legislation, embedding fair employment practices, secure contracts, and clear development pathways across the social care workforce. A people-first approach is required to protect not only the individuals receiving care, but also the practitioners providing the care. This protection must include a commitment to workforce development.

Key features of the social care workforce:

- 40,607 registered social care practitioners in NI (as of 09/01/2025).
- 84% of that workforce is female.

- 488 organisations employ social care practitioners across the private (45%), statutory (24%), voluntary (18%), and agency (13%) sectors.

The social care workforce is the largest within the Health and Social Care system in Northern Ireland and the sector continues to face significant challenges around working conditions, qualification completion, and professional development, which impact recruitment and retention.

Factors hindering the completion of qualifications:

- Time constraints.
- Lack of employer support.
- Accessibility challenges.
- Critical funding gaps for employer backfill (financial support to cover temporary staff replacement).

Without addressing these issues, alongside gaps in employer support and flexible learning options, social care practitioners remain unable to prioritise professional development.

The APG heard the perspective of Further Education colleges, which play a key role in providing high-quality education and skills training to help people enter or progress within Health and Social Care. The colleges flagged key challenges to qualification access and completion, including:

- Placement shortages for courses (e.g. counselling).
- Recruitment issues for qualified lecturers.
- Difficulties securing staff release for training.

The Open College Network Northern Ireland, which has developed 40 health and social care qualifications aimed at addressing specific skills gaps in the sector – described similar challenges. The APG discussed efforts to expand and update training and qualifications to address growing demand, such as flexible learning options including blended learning modules, which may prove more accessible to staff working long hours.

Reframing Social Care's Value & Perception Challenges

Social care sustains Northern Ireland's society and economy, supporting 100,000+ individuals annually and generating £1.5 billion in economic value. As outlined in the Department of Health's *Workforce Strategy 2025-2035*⁸ the sector reduces NHS pressures, enables economic participation, and empowers citizens with additional needs. Yet systemic undervaluation persists, driven by public and political misunderstandings of its complexity and impact.

Key Perception Challenges:

- **Poor Terms & Conditions:** Low pay, high workloads, and limited training access deter talent.
- **Role Misconceptions:** This workforce is often not viewed as highly skilled despite requiring expertise in dementia care, trauma support, and critical thinking.

⁸ Department of Health [Social Care Strategy 2025-2035](#). (2024)

- **Lack of Recognition:** Underestimated societal value, despite delivering £2.82 in socioeconomic benefits for every £1 invested.

4. The All-Party Group on Skills' recommendations

As the Executive progresses its plan to tackle the big issues and create a brighter future for everyone, we recommend taking a people-first approach with future skills investment. This will require:

- **Tailored services** to suit individual needs of service users, promoting dignity, independence, and quality of life.
- **Appropriate recognition of social care practitioners' role** through:
 - **Continuous professional development** (e.g. funded time for training, backfill staffing costs).
 - **Fair compensation** (e.g. accelerating the Real Living Wage commitment).
 - **Supportive work environments** that reflect the sector's strategic role through secure contracts and progression pathways.

Specifically, it is recommended that:

- **Greater protections** are given for social care practitioners undertaking induction, training, and learning related to continuous professional development.
- **Commissioning frameworks** require reform to ensure equitable support for professional growth in all sectors.
- **Access to role-specific training** (e.g. dementia, palliative care) must be prioritised to address growing demand and workforce retention.

Cross-departmental action is critical:

- **Reframe social care's value** by promoting its £1.5 billion economic contribution and £2.82 societal return per £1 spent via public campaigns.
- **Embed career pathways** in schools, apprenticeships, and careers services (Department for Education).
- **Prioritise social care** in skills strategies as a key growth sector (Department for the Economy).
- **Lead workforce planning** to mandate service and role relevant training (e.g. dementia training), and sustainable service delivery (Department of Health).
- **By aligning with the Good Jobs Agenda and Care in Practice Framework**, the Executive can ensure social care is recognised as essential infrastructure for a healthier, fairer, and economically resilient Northern Ireland.

5. Conclusion

Social care is vital to Northern Ireland's society and economy, supporting 100,000+ individuals annually and delivering £2.82 in socioeconomic benefits for every £1 invested. Yet chronic undervaluation of its workforce is marked by low pay, fragmented training, and misconceptions of "lowskilled" roles jeopardises sustainability. This investigation urges the Executive to adopt a **people-first approach**. Cross-departmental action must reframe social care as a skilled career through schools, public campaigns, and skills strategies. Failure to act risks deepening workforce shortages and health inequalities. By prioritising these reforms, the Executive can transform social care into a pillar of economic growth, health resilience, and societal fairness—fulfilling its promise of a brighter future for all.

6. Acknowledgements

The following organisations provided expert input to the APG meetings:

Northern Ireland Social Care Council

The Alzheimer's Society

Open College Network Northern Ireland

Northwest Regional College

Southern Health and Social Care Trust

Positive Futures

Extra Care

Independent Health Care Providers

Department for the Economy

Department for Health

Association for Real Change

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For more information visit:

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