



REPORT ON SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE PLACEMENTS IN IRELAND

A Scoping Exercise

Commissioned by the Irish Association of Social Workers, with the All-Employers Social Work Forum and the Social Work Education and Practice Teaching (SWEPT) group, to explore, assess and evaluate possibilities and make recommendations to improve social work practice placement availability and co-ordination in Ireland.

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An tSeirbhís Phromhaidh
The Probation Service



An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige
Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ireland does not have enough social workers. The profession is experiencing an ongoing recruitment and retention crisis. The implications of this are serious, especially for those populations – including vulnerable persons – with whom social workers serve in critical roles, including in disability, health, mental health, child protection and welfare, criminal justice and housing services, among others.

One obvious response to that crisis is to increase the number of places on social work programmes in Ireland, and to create new programmes, both of which responses are either being actively considered or are currently in the process of development, in a number of locations and initiatives. While this is taking place, alongside it is the important parallel issue of sourcing an adequate, and increasing, number of practice placements for students, as part of their programme, and as required under CORU¹ regulations.

There are significant and recurring challenges in the organisation of social work student placements in Ireland, challenges which are having an impact on the training of social workers in Ireland at this critical time and which are examined in this report. This scoping exercise was undertaken to explore social work practice placement as it is currently operating, assess the challenges and set out options to improve placement availability and co-ordination, to achieve the objective of supporting the training of social workers in Ireland.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- There is **widespread support** in principle among the multiple stakeholders with whom social workers interact, and who provided input to this project, **for the idea of a single centralised system of co-ordination and support of student practice placements**. There is no agreement however on how that could or would be organised, or the agency or department which would be responsible for it. It would take time to agree, design and establish such a single centralised system and therefore that alone cannot be seen as a short-term solution to the challenge of increasing the supply and coordination of quality student practice placements to a level which would meet growing need. It may not even be the perfect solution, and trying out less complex approaches could yield positive results in a shorter timeframe. Specific options in that regard are presented towards the end of this paper.

¹ CORU – Ireland’s multi-profession health regulator, established under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act, 2005 (as amended): www.coru.ie.

- A shorter term, albeit limited, response could be to have **the HSE, as the second largest employer of social workers, and the Probation Service, as the third largest employer of social workers, adopt a model similar to that developed by Tusla** in 2020 (Tusla, 2021). Called the Practice Development and Improvement Project (PDIP), it is located in the office of Tusla's Chief Social Worker and, in collaboration with HEIs, co-ordinates Tusla's practice placements around the country. It has grown the number of new practice teachers in Tusla by 325 since September 2020. The adoption of a similar model by the HSE and the Probation Service could help to alleviate the shortage of placements available in statutory agencies. Also, the announcement of the planned appointment of a Chief Social Worker by the HSE creates an opportunity to elevate social work practice education within the HSE and possibly see it adopting a similar approach to placements as that in place in Tusla, even though the two organisations are very different. Within the HSE, different areas of service responsibility employ varying numbers of social workers. Nor does the above option constitute a full response to the need for better cross-agency co-ordination of placements.
- Another approach could be the **adoption of an agreed policy by all stakeholders, designed to create a partnership** around the issue and led by a senior authority, such as a single government department.
- Using the example of the partnership approach that operates in Northern Ireland, one way forward could be to have the existing **All Employers Social Work Forum convene all social work employers and engage in a process to develop a partnership response** to the crisis, and specifically around the organisation of student placements.
- The **development of a stronger culture of practice education among employers of social workers**, one that would support practice teachers to provide placements, despite workload issues, was identified by many stakeholders as important, if not critical, to resolving the crisis and to the creation of the number of placements required. Some said that protected time for social work education should be made 'mandatory' in organisations that employ social workers.
- A process of **co-ordination of placements involving all the HEIs offering social work courses** could be undertaken, with the intention of making the process more efficient and streamlined, rather than having HEIs effectively compete with each other to secure placements. This could be underpinned with a Memo of Understanding between all HEIs delivering courses. The question arises as to who would lead this process; one option suggested is that it could be led by the Department of Further and Higher Education.

- Increasing the number of places on social work courses in HEIs is not the simple answer it might appear to be to the crisis in the recruitment and retention of social workers. The overall number of applicants to existing courses appears in fact to be falling recently, with some individual HEIs also reporting challenges in filling existing programme places from one year to the next. This is also set against a background of an accommodation crisis for students and high cost of living issues. Added to this is the fact of social work placements being unpaid, and sometimes requiring a student to have a car, and/or additional living expenses incurred, creating a **considerable cost barrier, and leading some interviewees to recommend that bursaries or allowances** in respect of the time spent on placement, and/or **access to travel and subsistence payments**, should be available to those students.
- Senior management ‘buy-In’ for increasing student practice placement numbers** – and even for providing *any* placements in the first instance – in an organisation, emerged as a necessary part of the linked issues of developing a culture of practice learning among social workers. In that context, adopting a policy of increasing the capacity for practice placements, even in the face of heavy workloads resulting from the shortage of social workers, was considered as a vital step in making placements available.
- An agreed **centralised system for the ongoing gathering of data**, to monitor and evaluate the evolving reality, is seen as critical. Such a system could, for example, demonstrate clearly what organisations, both statutory and non-statutory, are providing student practice placements each year, as well as clarifying the number of placements both needed and available, and is very important as a baseline to support the improvement of the placement process and encourage accountability. Such a system would also serve as a foundation on which to build support for and the capacity of employer organisations and individual social workers to offer practice placements.
- Any improvement in provision and co-ordination of practice placements needs to **take account of and provide for other demands for placement, such as those individuals seeking to Return to Practice** (those who qualified in Ireland but have been out of practice for some time) **or to complete Periods of Adaptation** (e.g. social workers coming from abroad, who need to satisfy specific CORU requirements), as a related and additional measure to facilitate access to placements for those with such requirements and whose access to registration would further increase the numbers of social workers available to work in Ireland.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2023 the Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW), on behalf of the All-Employers Forum and the Social Work Education and Practice Teaching (SWEPT) group, and with the assistance of and funding from Tusla, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and the Probation Service, commissioned Kathleen O'Meara to carry out a scoping exercise to assess and explore possibilities and make recommendations to improve social work practice placement availability and co-ordination in Ireland.

The key objectives of the exercise were:

- To establish what we know and do not know about social work practice placement co-ordination in Ireland and
- To identify options for improvements and what the next steps could be

METHODOLOGY

A Steering Group was established to oversee the exercise, convened by Vivian Geiran, Chair of the Irish Association of Social Workers. The Steering Group members were:

- Stella Owens, Project Manager, Office of the Chief Social Worker, Tusla
- Eleanor Kelly, Placement Co-Ordinator, University of Galway
- Paula Slavin, Placement Co-ordinator, UCD
- Ciara Doyle, Assistant Principal Officer, Social Work Specialist, with Des Delaney, Chief Social Worker/Principal Officer in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
- Vivian Geiran, Chairperson, IASW

APPROACH

Sixteen interviews were conducted, involving eighteen individuals, during December 2023, and in January and February 2024. The interviews were designed to:

- capture the perspectives of key stakeholders, including HEI placement co-ordinators, a range of employers in the statutory and non-statutory sectors, a representative each of NISCC,² CORU, IASW and the National Lead for the Health and Social Care Professionals group in the HSE.

² The Northern Ireland Social Care Council.

For a full list of those interviewed, see Appendix 1.

A review of relevant documentation, reports and articles were carried out to inform the exercise.

CONTEXT

The crisis in the recruitment and retention of social workers in Ireland, particularly in the last decade has been widely acknowledged,³ within the profession (O'Meara & Kelleher, 2022), by Committees of the Oireachtas,^{4&5} and by academic research (Murphy, et al., 2023), as well as more widely, including in public media.⁶

The number of identified (or identifiable) social work practice placements readily available each year does not match the demand for placements from the Higher Education Institutions (HEI), which in turn reflects students' CORU requirements for qualification. This is one of the factors inhibiting an increased provision in social work student places by HEIs, which is seen as a key measure required to tackle the recruitment and retention crisis across the social work sector. As reported by O'Meara & Kelleher (2022) in a report for the IASW, "the lack of placements is creating a bottleneck in the 'supply chain' of newly qualified social workers." This personalised, time-consuming, repetitive, and duplicated process results from and is indicative of insufficient placements being available or offered in the first place. Despite this, placements *do* get filled each year, evidence mainly of the extent of the commitment of practice placement co-ordinators. The most common reason given by employers, other than Tusla, who were interviewed for this scoping exercise, for the low level of placement provision was the workload of existing social workers, usually due to vacancies on teams and challenges in recruiting. One example given was of a team of twelve social workers that had eight vacancies, and therefore felt it impossible to take a student on placement. At the same time there is evidence of social workers generally enjoying being practice teachers and finding it rewarding (Murphy, *et al.*, 2023) (Tusla, 2021), even in pressurised work environments.

³ [Recruitment and retention in social care work in Ireland: A Social Care Ireland survey \(nuigalway.ie\)](https://nuigalway.ie)

⁴ [Pay changes proposed to tackle social worker shortage \(rte.ie\)](https://www.rte.ie)

⁵ <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/press-centre/press-releases/20190212-committee-on-children-and-youth-affairs-to-discuss-the-recruitment-and-retention-of-social-workers>

⁶ E.g.: Murphy, A. (2023) 'Calls to double third-level places on social work courses to counter "staffing crisis"', *Irish Examiner*, 12 September: <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-41223931.html>.

Some respondents in the present study highlighted challenges in attracting sufficient numbers of candidates for places on social work study and training programmes. These challenges are widely recognised and being addressed by the All Employers Social Work Forum, HEIs and others. Beginning in 2023, those bodies cooperated in the first (national) Social Work Awareness Week, incorporating a number of events and communications initiatives to both celebrate and publicise the diverse social work roles in Ireland. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has supported Tusla in the rolling out of a Social Work Awareness Campaign consisting of a series of live events across the country, and using social media, to create awareness of the social work role, particularly in second-level schools as well as more widely. These events also give social workers an opportunity to celebrate their achievements as well as to raise awareness of the important role they play.

The number of social work graduates annually is currently below that required to fill the existing level of vacancies, let alone the increasing number of social work roles across the country (Tusla, Report on the Practice Teachers Feedback Questionnaire, 2021) and the sourcing of the required number of social work placements has become increasingly difficult even with current student numbers.

As noted by Murphy (Murphy, et al., 2023), this shortage results from some employers being resistant to providing more placements because of the workload issues being experienced by and vacancies on their social work teams (O'Meara and Kelleher, 2022). These same difficulties associated with attracting social workers to supervise students on practice placements was also reported on by the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs, 2019 and was also referred to by interviewees for this exercise.

Legislative developments such as the Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) Act 2015, the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022, and the Children First Act 2015, which introduced mandatory reporting of child abuse, among others, alongside policy developments in safeguarding, mental health, disability, and criminal justice among others, have all contributed to an increased demand for social workers. The demand for social workers is particularly acute in a number of areas, including child protection, children's mental health, disability and probation services, with others also contributing to demand in varying degrees. Additional related factors include an increase in referrals to various services, and difficulty in retaining social workers, leading to a high rate of turnover in the profession (O'Meara & Kelleher, 2022).

Offering additional student places is one response to managing increased demand for social workers; however, the sufficient availability of quality practice learning placements has emerged as one of the significant barriers to growing the number of graduate social workers, in addition to that of attracting an adequate number of applicants across the various programmes.

Despite this, additional college places, including on new social work programmes, are coming on stream: Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) in Limerick is scheduled to offer a masters in social work from September 2024, while a new (masters level) apprenticeship programme for social workers is being developed by a partnership of universities, employers, and the Irish Association of Social Workers, with University College Cork providing the initial academic aspect of this programme, and due to come on stream in 2024. At the same time, some HEIs report that numbers applying to a number of existing courses are dropping. Creating new courses is not therefore the only answer to the recruitment and retention crisis, and insufficient placements is not the only challenge.

For social work students, practice placements constitute about fifty percent of social work programmes, including both undergraduate and post-graduate courses and successful completion of such placements are a core requirement to meet CORU standards and requirements for qualification for graduation and registration.

As stated by The National Practice Teaching in Social Work Initiative⁷,

The objective of the social work practice placement is to provide students with opportunities to acquire relevant knowledge, skills, values and professional training in social work practice, supervised by a practice teacher i.e. a CORU registered social work practitioner.

⁷ The National Practice Teaching in Social Work Initiative (NPTSWI) was established following collaboration between the six universities in Ireland that deliver social work education (University College Cork, University of Galway, Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin, Maynooth University & Atlantic Technological University), supported by the Irish Association of Social Workers and led by UCC. The aims of the NPTSWI included enhancing the professional profile of practice teaching in social work and to promote collaboration among stakeholders. As a multi-stakeholder collaboration and in the context of the Irish Government's commitment to increase the number of Social Work graduates, NPTSWI represented a significant innovation in the development of social work practice education in Ireland. The achievements of the initiative included the creation of a website of learning and teaching resources and CPD resources generated from online CPD from collaboration with the IASW to support practice teaching. (The NPTSWI acknowledged the support from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth [DCEDIY]).

CORU mandates that each social work student must complete a total of 1,000 hours of practice placement, at least 350 of which must be in one block and full time (students typically complete two periods of 14 weeks each). It is a requirement of CORU that there is diversity of placement learning across the two placements. One placement is usually in a statutory organisation e.g. Tusla or the Probation Service, and a second in a non-statutory or other type of service, with at least one placement being with children and families. A key role of practice learning co-ordinators is to ensure the CORU requirement is being met.

Student practice placements are a core part of training people to become social workers, as well as being a requirement to successfully graduate as a social worker in Ireland. The practice element of social work education provides the opportunity for students to turn theory into practice and to develop the skills necessary to take on a role as a social worker. Broadly, practice placement constitutes fifty percent of the social work academic programme. According to Ruth Murray, in an article for the Irish Association of Social Workers (Murray, 2018):

The significance of placements to social work students cannot be underestimated due its importance for the personal and professional development of students. We all know it is an intrinsic part of their training, not least because students cannot qualify if they fail on placement. Placements offer the students the opportunity for reflection and reflexivity on their emerging professional selves. Being on placement and working collaboratively with an experienced social worker facilitates this process. I cannot overstate the key role that the practice teacher plays in this regard as he/ she will model good professional practice, act as mentor, advisor and “critical companion” in this learning journey. The placements also afford them the opportunity to apply academic and theoretical learning to real life situations.

The process of the practice learning placement is based on what Rogers (1996), quoted by Wilson (George Wilson, 2009) *et al* calls a “grace and favour” approach, one which relies heavily on the relationship between practice placement co-ordinators and social work employers, and more significantly on individual social workers.

There are examples of the current process working well at individual employer level, in the internal co-ordination of placements in Tusla and in some departments within the HSE, for example. Overall, however, the access to and supply of placements is insufficient to meet need and therefore a barrier to an increase in student places required to meet growing demand for social workers. Over 5,000 social workers are registered with CORU, (though not all are available to be practice teachers⁸) and employed by a range of statutory and non-statutory organisations. Approximately 480 placements are required each year as part of HEI programmes, suggesting that securing agreement from employers is the key to resolving the challenge of filling practice placements.

Should the HSE, as one of the largest placement providers, and the Probation Service, the third largest employer of social workers, adopt a similar approach to that developed by Tusla, it would be likely to improve the situation considerably, in terms of increasing the number of practice placements available. The recent statement⁹ by Bernard Gloster, CEO of the HSE (and former CEO of Tusla), of his intention to appoint a Chief Social Worker in the HSE, could result in an increased supply of placements if the learnings from the Tusla model were adopted by the HSE. It could also be an example of leadership that might inspire other employers such as the Probation Service, and others, to examine the possibility of adopting a similar approach, to support placement availability and coordination.

WHAT WE KNOW

One of the obstacles to assessing what is known regarding social work placements is the lack of hard data. While some data do exist, these are not generally collected, stored in and disseminated from a central point. In fact, there is no central collation of data on social work student practice placements, including the actual number of placements required annually and/or the number being made available by statutory and non-statutory organisations. This is not surprising considering the absence of a centralised co-ordination of placements. The up-to-date data for this scoping exercise was supplied by one HEI student practice placement co-ordinator, who gathered it by reaching out to her colleagues and making those statistics available here.

⁸ This can be due to a number of reasons, including some registered social workers being employed in academic, research or managerial posts, or in roles not involving direct access to service users, being in part-time employment, on leave, career break or retired, or currently living outside Ireland, for example.

⁹ CEO Memorandum to HSE Senior Leadership Team – HSE Centre, New Assignments – dated 09 February 2024, accessed at:

https://assets.hse.ie/media/documents/Memo_from_CEO_Bernard_Gloster_on_HSE_Centre_-_New_Assignments_9_February_2024_1.pdf.

Six approved Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) graduate social work students every year. They are: Trinity College Dublin, University College, Cork; the University of Galway; University College Dublin; Maynooth University and the Atlantic Technological University (ATU) in Sligo. (Mooney, Wilson, & Kelleher, 2023, p. 9) They will be joined by Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) with a new masters in social work coming on stream in 2024. Currently there are an estimated 520 persons on social work programmes across eight programmes (undergraduate and postgraduate) at any one time, with this number expected to increase because of the new master's programme in Limerick, as well as a proposed additional intake under the National Apprenticeship Scheme.¹⁰

Approximately 480 student practice placements are currently required each year,¹¹ and this will increase with the new programmes coming on stream. In addition, an unknown number of social workers coming to Ireland from abroad, and who may have graduated in other jurisdictions, are required to undertake Periods of Adaptation in supervised social work. Other social workers, returning to practice after a break and where their registration has lapsed, may be required to undertake supervised periods of work in order to re-enter the CORU register.

Currently, placements are organised directly by the individual HEIs, either through an agency or organisation which employs social workers, or directly with individual social workers. Students must complete a total of 1,000 hours practice placements, with most students completing that in two separate 14-week practice placements, which generally take place in semesters running from January to May, or September to December. Students must complete a placement in both a statutory and non-statutory setting. Students on placement are unpaid. There is also some demand for placements from May to September for repeat placements where either students have failed, or to meet exceptional circumstances, and/or to facilitate international students undertaking their placements in Ireland. This last cohort appears to have increased since Brexit.

¹⁰ [Social Worker Apprenticeship | Psychology & Social Care Sector Apprenticeship | CareersPortal.ie](#)

¹¹ Not all social work students are required to undertake practice placements every year of their course. Those on bachelor's programmes are only required to undertake a professionally supervised social work placement during their final two years of study (UCC and TCD offer such programmes as well as master's degree programmes in social work). A small number of students undertaking programmes in any year may not be academically ready for placement and have to defer undertaking it. In addition, a particular course may have a specified number of places available but may not have filled all of those places and finally, some students may exit their programme without completing it, for any number of reasons. As a result, the numbers given above are estimates.

The agencies and organisations taking students on placement, known as *employers*, include:

- Tusla, the child and family agency
- HSE – across in a range of ‘departments’ or practice areas, including: Primary Care, Adult Mental Health, CAMHS, Safeguarding, Medical Social Workers, Social Inclusion and Disability
- Probation Service
- Hospitals
- Disability service providers
- Local Authorities
- Irish Defence Forces
- Other non-statutory organisations
- Community and voluntary organisations

Among the group of non-statutory, and community and voluntary organisations employing social workers are large NGOs such as Barnardos and large disability service providers, and such relatively significant employers – in terms of numbers of social workers employed – should therefore be considered as part of any process of co-ordination of social work student placements.

The number of social workers available to act as practice teachers at any point in time is not known. Out of an estimated 5,250 registered social workers in Ireland (CORU, October 2023), it is not known how many are available in reality as practice teachers, due to being in management posts, in academia, in research, or on secondment or other roles etc.¹² In addition to various types of leave that social workers (or indeed other workers) may avail of, given that social work is largely statistically a predominantly female profession means a percentage of social workers are likely be on maternity, parental or carers leave in any given year. The CORU requirement for a practice teacher having two years’ practice experience also serves to reduce the number of practice teachers potentially available at any one time.

¹² See footnote 8 above.

DATA

The chart below sets out a breakdown or ‘snapshot’ of placements according to employing organisations. The data for 2020 and 2021 were compiled by the National Practice Teaching in Social Work Initiative and the data for 2022 and 2023 were compiled specifically for this scoping exercise by one HEI practice placement coordinator gathering the data from her colleagues.

	2020	% of total	2021	% of total	2022	% of total	2023	% of total
Tusla	173	42%	216	48.7%	211	43.96%	205	43.07%
HSE* (see below)	141	34%	131	29.5%	162	33.75%	191	40.13%
Non-statutory agencies	38	9.2%	48	10.8%	38	7.92%	25	5.25%
Disability	34	8.2%	33	7.5%	23	4.79%	17	3.57%
Probation	23	5.6%	13	2.9%	20	4.17%	19	3.99%
Other (statutory)	4	1%	2	0.5%	25	5.21%	26	5.46%
TOTAL	413		443		480		476	

*Social Work Student Placement areas in HSE, included:

- Adult Mental Health
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
- Safeguarding
- Medical
- Social Inclusion
- Disability

Clearly, data are not being collected on a comprehensive or consistent basis, with no agency having responsibility for doing that, and no single repository for such data. The data above do however confirm that:

- Tusla takes the largest number of students, reaching almost 50% in 2021, when the PDIP had been adopted.
- HSE is the second largest placement provider with Adult Mental Health and hospitals being the largest source of placements.
- The Probation Service is taking a relatively small number of student placements, lower than disability services.

It is noteworthy that while the Probation is the third largest single employer of social workers in Ireland, after Tusla and the HSE, the Probation Service currently employs 249 Probation Officers and 49 Senior Probation Officers,¹³ a total of 298 at these grades.¹⁴ Tusla has around 1,609¹⁵ social workers and the HSE has over 1,350.¹⁶ Both Tusla and the HSE employ multiples of the number of social workers employed by the Probation Service. While it must be borne in mind that Tusla and the HSE are by far the largest employers of social workers in Ireland, nevertheless, increased availability of placements in the Probation Service, as with other employing organisations, would collectively represent a significant improvement on the overall current situation.

¹³ Senior Probation Officer is a local manager / team leader position.

¹⁴ Most Probation Officers in Ireland trained and qualified as social workers. Nevertheless, they do not use the title of 'social worker' and therefore – strictly speaking – do not have to be registered with CORU. This is likely to have some bearing on the number of potentially available practice placements in the Probation Service. At the same time, it is recognised that a significant (but at present unquantified) proportion of Probation Officers and Senior Probation Officers are qualified to supervise social work practice placements.

¹⁵ Figure cited by Tusla in connection with National Social Work Awareness Week, November 2023, accessed at: <https://www.tusla.ie/swaw/i-always-wanted-a-job-that-was-different-every-day-in-social-work-you-get-that/#:~:text=Currently%2C%20Tusla%20employs%201%2C609%20social,child%20protection%20and%20family%20support>.

¹⁶ Figure at 2022 – *Health Service Employment Report* – accessed at: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/staff/resources/our-workforce/workforce-reporting/health-service-personnel-census-september-2022.pdf>.

TUSLA PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPROVEMENT PROJECT (PDIP)

Since 2020, Tusla, the Child and Family agency, has operated a centralised internal social work student placement programme called the Practice Development and Improvement Project (PDIP) (Tusla, 2021). It aims to:

- Provide co-ordinated, consistent, and quality student practice placements.
- Develop practice teacher/educator competence.
- Provide comprehensive supports to early career social workers.
- Develop a post qualifying framework.

Placement co-ordinators in the seventeen Tusla areas are tasked with placing social work students with practice teachers in their area, and to liaise with practice placement co-ordinators in the HEIs to match students with practice teachers. Tusla provides between 40% and almost 50% of available student placements annually and since the PDIP model was introduced in Tusla, has increased the number of placement teachers internally by 325.

This model is the exception among employers of social workers, in the organisation of student practice placement in Ireland. It was adopted in 2020 in response to the recommendations of a HIQA inspection report in 2018. Tusla's internal reports (Tusla, Report on the Practice Teachers;s Feedback Questionnaire, 2021) (Tusla, Report on the Student Placment Feedback Questionnaire, 2021) state that the experience of both students and practice teachers since the introduction of PDIP is very positive, with a high level of direct recruitment of practice students into Tusla as social workers following graduation.

The Health Service Executive employs social workers across a range of practice areas or 'departments' but does not operate a centralised placement process. The relatively small number of social work students being accepted for placements in hospitals for example was commented on by some respondents during the interview phase of this process. It was also noted that some medical professionals' contracts include protected teaching time; this is not available for social workers.

HANAFIN PROPOSALS FOR CO-ORDINATION

In a report to government in 2019, researcher Sinead Hanafin (Hanafin, 2019) set out options for a national governance structure for the co-ordination of student social work placements, which included the establishment of a national steering group of relevant stakeholders, statutory agencies and key voluntary agencies, while other options included an appropriate Memorandum of Understanding between the HEIs, TUSLA, the HSE, Probation Service and Local Authorities.

Hanafin also outlined a potential formal structure for the co-ordination of placements by creating an office with responsibility for social work student education at national level, with options for its location either in Tusla, the national office for Health and Social Care Professionals in the HSE, externally under the auspices of CORU, or as a standalone office. To date, this recommendation has not been actioned.

HSCP QUALITY FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE EDUCATION AND ADVANCED PRACTICE FRAMEWORK IN THE HSE

A significant development to be considered is the evolution within the Health Service Executive of its Quality Framework for Sustainable Practice Education (Hills and McMahon, 2022), across the range of (twenty-two) Health and Social Care Professions – including social work – employed within the HSE. According to the Framework, it aims to provide:

...a structure to facilitate the partnership between Higher Education Institutions (HEs) and the Health Services Executive (HSE) and other practice education providers. This partnership acknowledges the collective responsibility for quality practice education. The ultimate goal of practice education is to produce HSCP graduates that deliver quality patient care. While quality in practice education is multifactorial, the National Health and Social Care Quality Framework for Sustainable Practice Education uses common language to deliver, measure, and report on both quality and sustainability in practice education. This common language helps to bridge professional divides and unites health and social care professionals in the drive for continuous quality improvements in the delivery of a sustainable practice education system.

This Framework sets out a range of workstreams to achieve its goals across the range of HSCPs. As well as outlining a cross-discipline approach to practice education, it also develops a number of implementation and evaluation templates, which would be useful if employed effectively in relation to the social work aspect of these issues. As the Framework is envisaged to be implemented as a series or sequence of actions, it could potentially have an impact on the development of social work placement provision and coordination, and specifically of a centralised, co-ordinated process of social work student practice placement within the HSE.

Although the Advanced Practice Framework, published by the Health and Social Care Professionals Office of the HSE in 2023, has a different focus and is a less critical document in relation to practice placements, it would seem to have relevance for the structured development and recognition of practice teachers in the health services, as well as more widely. A full exploration and discussion of these two documents is beyond the remit of the present study, however they do evidence the extent of thinking and planning that is being brought to bear on the wider issue of practice teaching and placement across the relevant professions. The Advanced Practice Framework has its objective the enabling of the health service “to meet the ever-expanding healthcare needs of the people of Ireland” and “to assist in the recruitment and retention of HSCP disciplines”¹⁷. While the Advanced Practice Framework relates only to the HSE, it does also include social work as a discipline and therefore should be considered as part of this scoping exercise.

The interview conducted with the HSCP Lead and Lead for education and practice education indicated that in the context of the quality framework for practice education for all the 22 professions, there is potential for collaboration across disciplines and for using the regional HSE structure to build greater inter- and intra-disciplinary supports, including around practice placements.

PROPOSED APPOINTMENT OF A CHIEF SOCIAL WORKER BY HSE

Tusla already has a post of Chief Social Worker, reporting to the organisation’s CEO. Similarly, the Probation Service, headed by a National Director, also has a post that is recognised as the equivalent of a Chief Social Worker.¹⁸ The CEO of the HSE, Bernard Gloster, has stated his intention to appoint a Chief Social Worker in the HSE.¹⁹ Mr. Gloster has a deep knowledge of child protection from his previous role as CEO of Tusla, including during the period when the PDIP was adopted. It is hoped that this proposed appointment of a Chief Social Worker in the HSE presents an opportunity to generate an increased recognition of the importance of social work practice education within the HSE, whether via the Quality Framework for Sustainable Practice Education and Advanced Practice Framework or by adopting and adapting the learnings available from the experience of Tusla in developing a centralised placement coordination model.

¹⁷ Objective/Purpose of HSCP Advanced Practice Framework

¹⁸ Designated as the Director of Effective Services, at Deputy Director level.

¹⁹ This post was subsequently advertised by the HSE in April 2024

The HSE as an organisation is very different from Tusla; social workers are employed in a range of different services or ‘departments’ within the HSE, including Primary Care, Adult Mental Health, hospitals, safeguarding, and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), among others, all of which are very different environments. The experience of placement coordinators as recorded in this exercise is that there are examples of very good practice in relation to placement provision among some social work teams in the HSE, but there is no single consistent approach to placements across the organisation. The HSE is the second largest employer of social workers in Ireland and its deeper and broader engagement on the issue of placements is therefore crucial if the placements crisis in social work is to be successfully addressed.

The Probation Service, as the next largest employer of social workers, also has a key role to play, as referenced above. Non-statutory agencies, and the community and voluntary sector, which includes Barnardos and large disability service providers, for example, as well as those bodies employing smaller numbers of social workers, are also relevant to this discussion as employers of social workers, and to providing solutions to resolve the crisis.

NORTHERN IRELAND MODEL (AND OTHER JURISDICTIONS)

The experience of the placement coordination model adopted in Northern Ireland is worth examination. It is underpinned by a partnership between all employers and universities. A Regional Allocations Committee asks designated providers to take students on placements and informs them of the number of students who will be allocated to them in the coming semester. Five health and social care trusts are required to make placements available. Students are centrally allocated, and while there is “human intervention” to ensure that, for instance, students with a disability or other relevant issue are accommodated, for the most part there is no negotiation of placements. The Committee is underpinned by a mandate from the Department of Health and the “partnership approach is what makes it work,” according to one respondent. The main challenges reported include travelling distances and when a student does not have a car. The interviewee in question was also of the view that the size of the region and number of students coming from just three campuses makes the process manageable and efficient. Other examples of centrally organised student placements include Canada, where employers/providers interview students seeking a placement.

FINDINGS: THEMES EMERGING FROM INTERVIEWS

Sixteen interviews, involving 18 people, were undertaken to explore the themes of the scoping exercise:

- the process being currently used to place social work students;
- the experience of the placement of students across a range of stakeholders, including employers, social work placement co-ordinators, officials in DCEDIY, key leaders in the HSE's HSCP Office. Views on the experience of the Northern Ireland model were also gathered.
- the potential for a centralised co-ordinated system of student practice placement, across all perspectives.

Respondents expressed views in relation to the above themes, as follows:

1. THE CURRENT PROCESS

Broadly, statutory, and non-statutory organisations do not operate a centralised or co-ordinated process of practice placement, so that from one year to another, or from one semester to another, the number of placements being offered can vary significantly, and often requires the HEIs to approach social workers directly and in person to request that they take a student. This places a large burden on practice placement co-ordinators and is a source of stress for students. It means that placements are dependent on a grace and favour relationship and can be, in the words of one interviewee, “risky and precarious.” The fact that placement requirements *are* filled is a witness to the high level of commitment on the part of individual practice placement co-ordinators, who sometimes must rely on personal relationships with individual social workers, to fill demand for student placements. In the words of one interviewee, “it is hard to convey the administrative burden that’s involved in the process.” There is concern also that the current process is unfair to students, and a source of stress. Some of those interviewed went so far as to call it “chaotic” and “*ad hoc*.” One HEI co-ordinator said the system is “very vulnerable and not structurally supported.” Another interviewee from a HEI said, “the system has become standardised into a non-standardised precarious situation.”

The experience of Tusla, the Child and Family agency, which developed and rolled out an internally co-ordinated system, beginning in 2020, in response to a HIQA inspection report, is that the approach being taken there is succeeding in having the majority of students who have completed placements with Tusla, then being successfully recruited into the agency. The support of the leadership of Tusla has been important in having the centralised system adopted. The HSE is the second biggest employer of social workers in Ireland, albeit across six departments. It is hard not to conclude that the HSE, as well as the Probation Service, and possibly other significant employers of social workers, adopting a centralised model would help to ameliorate the serious challenges being faced.

2. POTENTIAL FOR A CENTRALISED CO-ORDINATED SYSTEM

All interviewees spoke positively about the benefits of a centralised system, but as a potential response, and an idea rather than a proposal. It would be “fair”, “transparent,” and “would help to formalise the system in terms of supports for the people who are effectively tutors” and would be “of huge benefit” in creating a culture of practice education in social work employment. “Retaining the current system is to the detriment of everyone,” according to one interviewee, who also said a centralised system should be run as “an independent, neutral body.”

There are a few potential models for a centralised co-ordination system, ranging from a model of co-operation or Memorandum of Understanding among HEIs and employers, internal co-ordination by large employers such as HSE and the Probation Service, or a highly structured process operated by a single national office, ideally underpinned by legislation.

3. A CULTURE OF PRACTICE EDUCATION

A quote from an interviewee in one of the HEIs set the issue of practice placements in context and describes well the challenges faced by social workers on the ground. Her comments were echoed by her colleagues in other HEIs and by some employers interviewed:

I think we can't look at just practice learning and student placements without looking at the bigger picture of why is it difficult for teams to take social workers on board? Why is there not more of a practice learning culture, within teams, because invariably, I think what happens is when teams are depleted of staff, when they have to cover vacancies, when the resources aren't there to promote practice learning, when the priorities are more the direct work with the families, the service users, the clients that they're working with, when there's pressures on, maybe discharges, for example, in an acute hospital setting, the priority of practice learning moves down and down and down that list. So that is a significant barrier.

The lack of protected time for teaching students on placement was referred to by several interviewees. One interviewee from an employer body spoke of taking students “being a bit of an optional extra.” She also spoke of the “relatively informal way” placements are being organised, with her own “close personal relationship” with two Dublin universities being the reason students are taken in her organisation. Workload and the complexity of social work is the main reason given for not taking students, as was the issue of the lack of physical space. Some said the sometimes extreme challenges of placing a student and its *ad hoc* nature could raise the issue of the governance standards of some placements.

Making taking students effectively mandatory was raised as one way to shift this culture: “Taking someone should be seen as a professional duty,” as one interviewee put it. Alongside this, what must be stated is the commitment of individual social workers to practice education, even in a difficult environment. Interviewees report that there is a cohort of social workers who are “passionate about working with students” and see it as a way to stay in touch with new developments in the profession, and any research emerging.” Some also view it as important for their own professional development.

4. NEED FOR PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

Notable from the interview with the NISCC is the importance of partnership among stakeholders in generating and maintaining practice placement opportunities. The interviewee from Northern Ireland spoke of the partnership approach which is the foundation of the centralised process they use, involving all stakeholders, both statutory and non-statutory, coming together to generate sufficient placement opportunities each year. It is notable that the process in Northern Ireland has a statutory foundation.

5. PAYMENT FOR PRACTICE TEACHERS

The payment made to social workers to be practice teachers did not emerge as a significant factor either way, as it does not appear to reflect the responsibility of the role and the work required to be a practice teacher. The stipend to practice teachers in Northern Ireland is £2,841 for a 100-day placement, compared to €750 in Ireland.

6. THE NEED FOR BUY-IN FROM THE TOP

“There needs to be a directive from central management, [that] this is something we want to resource, we want to create the culture,” one interviewee in a senior role in a statutory organisation, said. More than one interviewee said that lack of buy-in from management is an inhibiting factor to the creation of a culture of practice education and for increasing the number of placements available. This is attributed to “the pressure to get things done” (i.e. managing busy caseloads and service demands) being greater than the strategic aim of increasing the number of social workers available. One respondent commented that: “We were told by management we weren’t allowed to have students because we’re too busy.” Most of those interviewed were of the view that this would not change without a directive “from the top.” This would indicate that creating a centralised process would benefit by being supported by a government department, for example, if it is to succeed.

In Tusla, practice teaching and taking students as part of the PDIP has been fully supported by senior management, leading to the development of a practice teaching and learning environment by the Agency, one which has many learnings for other large social worker employers including the Probation Service and the HSE.

ADVANTAGES OF THE CURRENT PROCESS

The intensive exercise engaged in to locate and manage student practice placements does result in the university based placement co-ordinators building a personal relationship with practice teachers, which allows them to be fully informed about the issues being faced by social workers on the ground, as well as feedback about student performance, which for them is valuable in informing the preparation of students for placement.

The co-ordinators are also very familiar with the needs of individual students, both educational and personal and work hard to “match” students with appropriate practice teachers, and in appropriate settings. They also provide support for the students and practice teachers while on placement.

This relationship based approach and support to students and practice teachers, as well as the “matching” of students with practice teachers, are the features of the process which many of those interviewed believe is important to retain, should the process become centralised. One interviewee was of the opinion that this level of relationship could be “reconfigured” in a centralised system and should not be a barrier, but rather might even be a help in the establishment of such a system.

OTHER POTENTIAL BENEFITS FROM A MORE COORDINATED PLACEMENT SYSTEM

As well as offering the possibility to coordinate and streamline the way social work practice placements are organised, from a practice development perspective *per se*, an improved coordination structure and process might well afford the opportunity to go beyond facilitating students to appropriately link and test the relevant theories with and in practice. As pointed out by one contributor to the present study, an improved placement coordination structure could provide a way of addressing the issue of risk management in relation to practice placements, incorporating an agreed and shared approach to the management of those risks that may present in the placement environment, referencing the APPEL²⁰ joint pharmacy schools Code of Conduct in that regard.

This contributor pointed out, regarding risk, governance, policies and procedures, that “Placements are complex places; it is in all our interests to ensure that if anything goes wrong, risk is managed.” This might be better addressed through a more coordinated approach to assessment and management of a range of potential risks across practice placements in social work, particularly so that such risks are assessed and managed so that they do not become a barrier to placement or practice teaching in social work.

²⁰ An affiliation between the Schools of Pharmacy of UCC, RCSI and TCD, accessed at: <https://www.appel.ie/training-establishments/placements/>.

OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

In light of the above, the following options, which are not mutually exclusive and could also be implemented separately and/or incrementally, as well as in some combination, are presented for consideration:

1. Develop a single national co-ordinated process of social work student practice placements. The following are some approaches that could be taken, depending on the agreed or required level of co-ordination:
 - a. IASW, as the professional body for social workers, takes a co-ordinating role by agreement with all stakeholders. This would involve for example developing and publishing a policy on co-ordination of student practice placements, in the context of a commitment to developing a culture of practice education in the profession. This policy could call for: a. co-operation between all HEIs in the co-ordination of practice placements; b. a commitment to protected time for practice teachers as a way of developing a culture of practice education; c. bursaries for social work students on placement; d. statutory bodies, including the HSE and the Probation Service, and voluntary organisations funded under both Section 38 and Section 39 of the Health Act 2004, who employ social workers being required to provide practice placements, the number being calculated based on the number of social workers being employed.
 - b. The seven HEIs which graduate social workers every year (including new Limerick TUS programme) and the National Apprenticeship Programme, sign a Memorandum of Understanding to co-operate and co-ordinate social work student placements, to eliminate duplication and streamline the placements process.
 - c. HSE and the Probation Service as large employers of social workers, adopt the learnings from the Tusla PDIP experience, and design a model appropriate to their structures, and in the process substantially increase the number of practice teachers and student placements available in their organisations.
 - d. Using the example of a partnership approach which operates in Northern Ireland, have the existing All Employers Social Work Forum convene all social work employers and engage in a process to develop a partnership response to the crisis.

2. A government department convenes all stakeholders to discuss and agree a centralised co-ordination of student practice placements. This could be a. Department of Health as funder of HSE and many statutory and voluntary organisations which employ social workers; b. Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth which has responsibility for Tusla and for child protection; c. Department of Further and Higher Education, to which HEIs and the National Apprenticeship Programme reports. None of these departments has statutory responsibility for the Probation Service, local authorities, or the Defence Forces, however.
3. A government decision is taken to establish a single office with a legislative mandate to co-ordinate all social work student practice placements, removing the role currently held by HEIs and absorbing the new apprenticeship programme.
4. Use the HSE National Health and Social Care Professions Quality Framework for Sustainable Practice Education, and the Advanced Practice Framework, developed by the Health and Social Care Professionals Office, to inform the roll out a centralised, co-ordinated system for social work student practice placements.

CONCLUSION

Given the critical role played by social workers among vulnerable groups, and the ongoing crisis of recruitment and retention of social workers, and despite the challenge in developing a level of co-ordination, taking no action to ameliorate the ongoing crisis is not an option. The range of options set out here range in complexity, while at the same time offering the stakeholders an element of choice. A key consideration must surely be those vulnerable citizens who daily require the services of trained social workers and whose vulnerability is exacerbated by the difficulties in recruiting and retaining social workers in Ireland. Taking action to increase the cohort of new graduates by improving the co-ordination of student placements is a good place to start.

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Appendix 1

Interviewees:

Those interviewed for the project are employed in the following organisations:

- HEIs: UCD, NUIG, UCC, Maynooth University, TCD
- TUSLA, Child and Family Agency
- Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
- The Probation Service
- Irish Association of Social Workers
- National Rehabilitation Hospital
- Mater Hospital
- CORU
- NISCC
- Health Service Executive
- Brothers of Charity
- Senior leads in Office of Health and Social Care Professionals, HSE



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