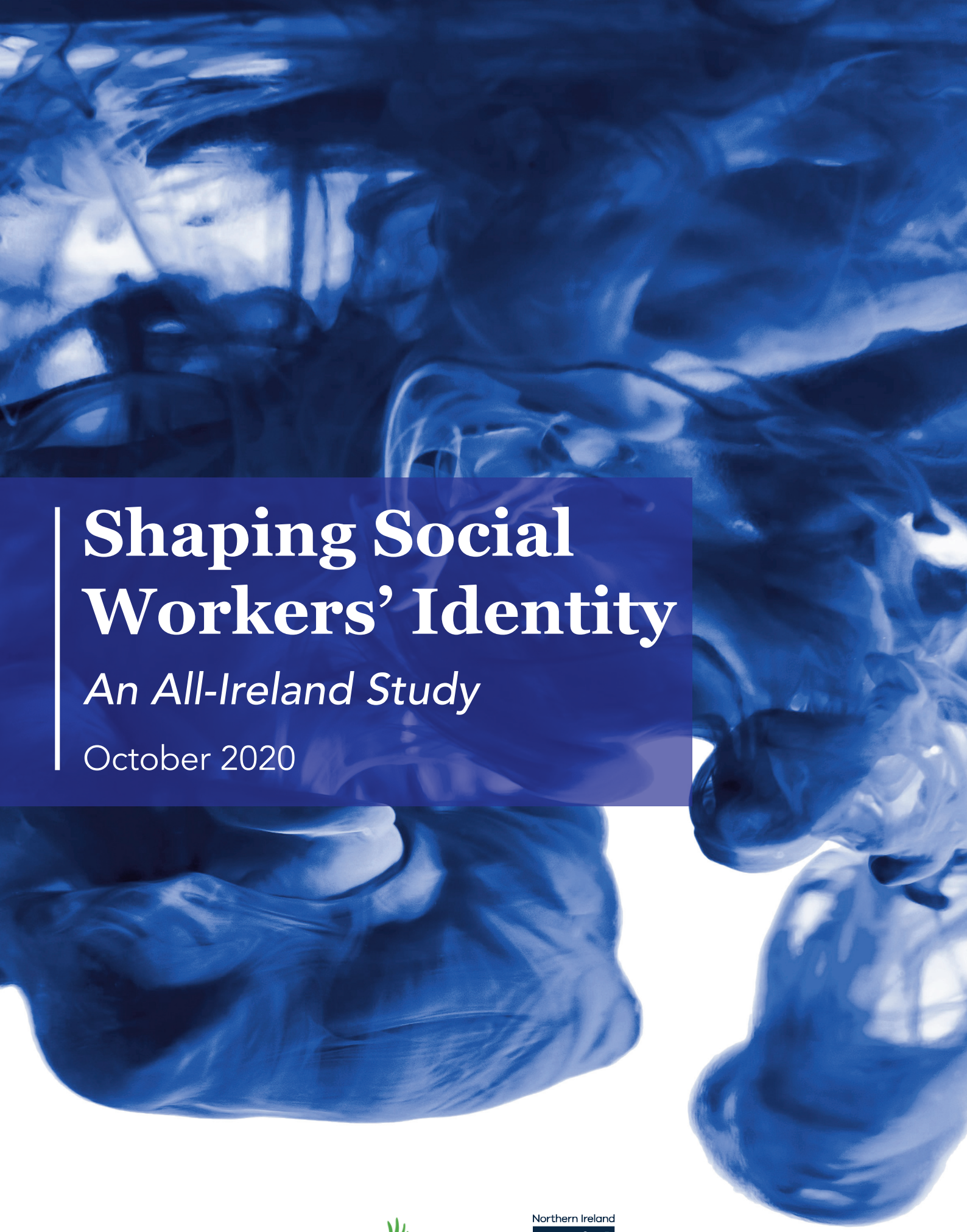


Shaping Social Workers' Identity

An All-Ireland Study

October 2020

BASW Northern Ireland
The professional association for social work and social workers

IASW
Irish Association of Social Workers
Cumann na hÉireann um Oibrithe Sóisialta

Northern Ireland Social Care Council

CORU
Ag Rialáil Gairmithe Sláinte agus Cúraim Shóisialaigh
Regulating Health + Social Care Professionals

Table of Contents

Foreword 3

Executive Summary 4

Introduction 6

The International Federation of Social Workers 6

The Global Definition of Social Work 6

Social Work in Northern Ireland 7

Social Work in the Republic of Ireland 8

Partnership Working 9

The Research Approach 9

The Demographic Profile of Respondents 10

Survey Findings 12

Assessing professional identity 12
Negative impacts 13
Regulated professional or employee 14
Identification with social work colleagues 15
Job title 15
Level of satisfaction 15
Reasons for feeling satisfied 16
Reasons for feeling unsatisfied 17

Comment from the Professional Associations 19

Comment from the Social Work Regulators 20

Conclusion 21

Recommendations 22

Appendices 23

Appendix A 23
Appendix B 29
Appendix C 29

Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to welcome publication of this important report and to congratulate the professional associations (IASW and BASW NI) and the national regulators (the Northern Ireland Social Care Council and CORU) for their creative partnership in undertaking this very important study. I am very pleased that this has been one of the first projects to be funded by the BASW International Development Fund at a time when cross-border co-operation and communication in Ireland, Europe and across the world has never been more important.

The report explores the sense of identity of social workers and how that is formed. Most social workers are of course employed by public or charitable bodies, although a small but growing number are self-employed. Commitment to the employer and work colleagues is crucial for every successful organisation but for social workers that can never be enough. We engage with people at some of the most crucial and vulnerable moments in their lives and exercise considerable influence and power. That awesome responsibility requires accountability to the community but also to high professional standards. Any study of social work in totalitarian regimes shows the grave risks to human dignity and human rights which can follow when social workers owe blind allegiance to the employer and forget their humanitarian values.

Good employers recognise the value of professional identity and commitment to professional values. In our context, those values and that identity find expression in the global professional networks of which our regulators and associations are active members.

This report challenges schools of social work and employers to be more active in supporting students and social workers to own and celebrate their professional identity. This is not a challenge to the commitment to their employer but a fundamental requirement for effective practice and public service.

Social workers have sometimes been suspicious of 'professionalism' seeing this as elitist and self-serving. In practice the opposite is true. A commitment to professional values respects partnerships with service users and communities, celebrates self-determination whenever possible, aligns with public service principles and acknowledges the proper limits of professional authority. There is clear evidence that agencies which embrace those values are the best at serving their communities.

This study has revealed 'the relationship-centred, value-based factors which contribute to social workers' professional identity'. It also highlights the important role of professional associations alongside regulators and other stakeholders.

If social workers wish to be understood and respected alongside other professional groups, we need to own and celebrate our professional identity, not in a self-serving way but as an expression of our respect for human rights and self-determination whenever possible. This report provides an effective platform for the continued debate about these ideas and the appropriate place of social work in our communities in the difficult years ahead.

David N Jones
Chair, BASW International Committee
President, International Federation of Social Workers (2006-2010)

Executive Summary

The breadth and adaptability of social work is a key strength of our profession. Central to this study is exploring whether the diversity of social work practice affects the professional identity of social work practitioners.

The research was undertaken in partnership by the British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI), the Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) the Northern Ireland Social Care Council and Coru – Ireland's multi-profession health regulator.

The collaborative approach, characteristic of the social work profession, resulted in an impressive response rate in both jurisdictions. The data gathered from 1,691 social workers, via an online questionnaire, represents the views of 15% of social workers north and south of the border.

To gauge the strength of social workers' sense of professional identity, respondents were presented with a list of factors, some specific to social work, others generally applicable to any regulated profession, and some spanning both categories.

When asked to identify the single factor which contributes most to their sense of professional identity, three of the four most frequently selected factors fell within the social work specific category. One in four respondents (25%) identified most closely with *empowering service users and working in partnership with them.* For one in six (17%), *having a social work qualification* was most important, and for one in nine (11%), *promoting social work values, for example, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, and respect for diversity* mattered most to their sense of professional identity.

Many professions are committed to improving the lives of their patients or service users. However, what the research demonstrates is the centrality of social workers' dedication to working *collaboratively* with their service users to empower and facilitate them to make changes to improve their circumstances.

The survey identified *bureaucracy, workload pressure*, *insufficient time to spend in direct engagement with service users*, and *media portrayal of social work* as the factors most significant in negatively impacting social workers' professional identity. It is important to note that the first three factors are within the control of the profession to address – although decisive leadership is required to deliver meaningful change.

The research also highlights social workers in Northern Ireland are more likely than their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland to primarily consider themselves employees rather than members of a regulated profession. Perhaps unsurprisingly, members of a professional association are most likely to identify as members of a regulated profession – 55% of BASW NI members and 58% of IASW members fall into this category.

Just over half of respondents (53%) identify more closely with non-social workers they work alongside, whereas 47% identify more closely with social workers outside their area of practice. Given the finding that working in partnership with service users and improving their life opportunities is core to social work identity, it is understandable that many social workers would identify closely with the non-social work colleagues they work alongside to support service users.

It was welcome to find that 71% of respondents are satisfied in their role as a social worker. The reasons why social workers are satisfied include: the ability to make a positive difference to the lives of service users, the opportunity to gain skills, having a sense of pride in the profession, developing experience and resilience throughout the span of a career, and positive aspects of the organisation they work for, including their working environment.

The 29% of respondents who stated they were unsatisfied provided a range of reasons. These include: excessive bureaucracy, insufficient face-to-face contact with service users, a lack of respect from other professions, and work-related stress and pressure.

While individually social workers display a strong affinity with factors and qualities unique to social work, effort is required to foster a greater sense of collective identity across all sectors of our profession. The report concludes with a series of 29 recommendations intended to deliver this aim.

Recommendations are directed towards all stakeholders – from policy makers and employers, workforce regulators and professional bodies, to managers, practitioners, educators, and social work students. At their core is a drive to learn from and advance the findings outlined in this report. Together, we can enhance the strength of social workers' professional identity, and in doing so, improve outcomes for the families and individuals who social workers support.

Introduction

Social work is a unique and vital profession. Social workers are employed across a diverse range of services to improve the life opportunities of vulnerable individuals from all sections of society. They support individuals and families to overcome disadvantage rooted in social, economic, environmental and physical factors, including disability, physical and mental ill-health, poverty, abuse and neglect, immigration status, and addiction.

For example, social workers:

- Protect children and young people who are at risk of abuse and neglect, ensuring they grow up in a safe and stable environment
- Help older people to access the support services they need to live safely and independently at home
- Help people with a mental health problem to understand the challenges presented by their illness and support them as they work towards recovery
- Assist people with a physical disability to access and manage personal care services to live independently
- Help hospital patients by identifying care needs and arranging the support services they will need to live safely when they are discharged
- Work with young people who offend, helping them pursue alternative options by supporting positive choices in education and employment

This variety in social work roles speaks of strength and adaptability.

However, given the breadth of social work practice, a collective sense of identity is key to ensuring the profession can consistently and effectively represent its interests. Central to this study is exploring whether the diversity in areas of social work practice affects the professional identity of social work practitioners.

The International Federation of Social Workers

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) is the global representative body for the social work profession. The Federation and its national members strive for social justice, human rights and inclusive, sustainable social development through the promotion of social work best practice and engagement in international cooperation.

The IFSW has 141 members organisations, including the IASW and BASW – of which BASW NI is a part – across five regions. It supports these members by providing a global voice for the profession. IFSW has been granted Special Consultative Status by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations (UN) and the UN's Children's Fund (UNICEF). In addition, IFSW is working with the World Health Organization (WHO), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

The Global Definition of Social Work

"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels."

IFSW (2014)[1]

[1] www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work Accessed 23 Oct 2020.

Social Work in Northern Ireland

Responsibility for social work in Northern Ireland (NI) is devolved to the NI Assembly and the Minister for Health. The Office of Social Services sits within the Department for Health and is led by the Chief Social Work Officer. In 2012 the Minister for Health published a ten-year strategy for social work[2], the first of its kind in the UK and Ireland.

Responsibility for commissioning services is delegated to the Health and Social Care Board and the majority of services are delivered by five integrated Health and Social Care Trusts. Services are also delivered by organisations in the third sector, the criminal justice sector and the education sector. All Probation Officers and Education Welfare Officers in NI must be social work qualified.

Social worker is a protected title in NI and social work has been a regulated profession since 2005. There are 6,645 registered social workers in NI and a further 750 social work students who are also regulated.

Approximately 60% of social workers are employed by the five integrated Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland, with the remaining 40% working in the criminal justice, education and third sectors. Social workers are employed across a diverse range of programmes of care covering: children and families, older people, mental health, addiction, physical disability, criminal justice, education, learning disability, homelessness, fostering and adoption. They work in hospital, residential and community settings.

British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland

The British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI) is part of BASW, the UK's professional membership organisation for social work. Our 22,000 members across the UK work in all areas of social work practice and span all stages of the social work journey – from students and newly qualified social workers to experienced practitioners, managers, policy makers, regulators and academics.

Our members are professionals who are committed to the highest quality of professional standards and ethics. BASW is the independent voice of social work and offers services to members that support, protect, and develop them throughout their career.

Northern Ireland Social Care Council

The Northern Ireland Social Care Council (Social Care Council) is the regulatory body in Northern Ireland for social workers, social work students and social care workers. The purpose of the Social Care Council is to protect the public through raising standards in social work and social care. The Social Care Council sets the standards for the Degree in Social Work and regulates the delivery of the Degree. The Degree in Social Work is the entry qualification to the social work Register. The Social Care Council also has in place a comprehensive CPD framework for social workers – *Professional in Practice* – which provides professional social work awards at consolidation, specialist, leadership and strategic, and advanced scholarship levels[3].

[2] www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dhssps/social-work-strategy.pdf
[3] https://niscc.info

Social Work in the Republic of Ireland

Social Worker has been a protected professional title since 2013. There are 4,681 Social Workers registered to work in the Republic of Ireland.

Social Work in Ireland links to three Government Departments: Health, Children and Youth Affairs, and Justice and Equality, and operates mainly in the public service realm. There are other services that employ social workers operating in the voluntary sector though these operate exclusively with public funding. Additionally, there are a small number of private agencies (fostering agencies, Guardian ad Litem services and private hospitals) that employ social workers.

The three main public service streams that employ social workers are: Health Services, Children and Family Services, and Criminal Justice services. Social work education takes place at degree and master's level across thirteen accredited courses, and the education and skills development of registered social workers is an ongoing process through Continuing Professional Development, professional supervision as well as further study, teaching and research which contributes to the development of the profession.

- The Health Service Executive employs social workers in their hospitals and community services. They also fund many services in the voluntary sector where social workers are employed. Some service sectors in Ireland remain very reliant on this sector, for example, services for people with intellectual disability.
- The Child and Family Agency (Tusla), established in 2014, is the dedicated state agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children, including child protection and welfare, early intervention, and family support services. Tusla employ many social workers in discharging their various functions. Tusla also funds private care services where social workers are employed.
- The Probation Service provides services to the court including assessment and supervision of offenders. They run programmes to reduce reoffending, youth diversion programmes, and prisoner support and welfare programmes. Most Probation Officers are qualified social workers.

The Irish Association of Social Workers

The Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) is the national professional body for social workers in the Republic of Ireland (RoI). It was founded in 1971 and has a membership of over 1,300 social workers.

The Objectives of the Association are:

- Ensuring the sustainable development of the IASW, as the professional body supporting and representing the social work profession in RoI.
- Improving the standards and quality of professional social work practice.
- Assisting social workers to meet the continuing professional development demands of their work and registration.
- Increasing access to information and support for social workers.
- Enhancing the public profile and perception of social work.
- Using social work expertise to influence the development of local, national, and international policy and practice.

The Association operates by means of an elected Board of Directors. Council is made up of the Special Interest Groups (SIG's), Associate Groups and Committees, and is the advisory body to the Board.

CORU

CORU is Ireland's multi-profession health regulator. Its role is to protect the public by promoting high standards of professional conduct, education, training and competence through statutory registration of health and social care professionals.

CORU currently regulates the following professions: Social Workers, Dietitians, Dispensing Opticians, Medical Scientists, Occupational Therapists, Optometrists, Physical Therapists, Physiotherapists, Radiographers, Radiation Therapists, Speech and Language Therapists. CORU sets the standards for and regulates the delivery of social work qualifications for entry to the social work register.

Partnership Working

BASW NI and IASW have developed a strong relationship over the past ten years and have collaborated in several joint projects, most notably in the SWSD18 global Social Work conference which brought 2,000 social workers to Dublin from across the globe.

The event featured a session on professionalism and identity, with colleagues participating from New Zealand, Australia, the UK and Switzerland. Importantly, the session included regulators and professional bodies alongside practitioners – marking the genesis of this project.

BASW NI and the Social Care Council have a longstanding positive relationship and welcomed the opportunity to work more closely with Coru to explore social work identity across the island of Ireland. The four organisations established a steering group to commence this study and were fortunate to secure funding from BASW's International Development Fund finance for a member to lead the project.

Our model has been one of genuine partnership, with BASW NI, IASW, the Social Care Council and Coru collaborating to conduct an all-Ireland social work survey – the largest of its kind. It is the first time that professional bodies and the regulators of social work have partnered in this manner to explore concepts of identity and professionalism.

While our data relates to Ireland, north and south, many countries across the world may find it reflects their own experiences and helps inform their understanding of identity in a social work context.

The Research Approach

A collective sense of identity is key to ensuring a profession can consistently and effectively represent its interests. Central to this study is exploring whether the diversity in areas of social work practice affects the professional identity of social work practitioners.

Data was gathered via an online questionnaire which ran from 4 November until 16 December 2019. The survey was open to all registered social workers in NI and RoI. The questionnaire is attached in Appendix A.

A total of 1,691 complete responses were submitted[4]. Most social workers who responded (1,675) were employed. 1,061 worked in NI (63% of the sample) and 622 worked in RoI (37% of the sample). Eight respondents worked in both jurisdictions.

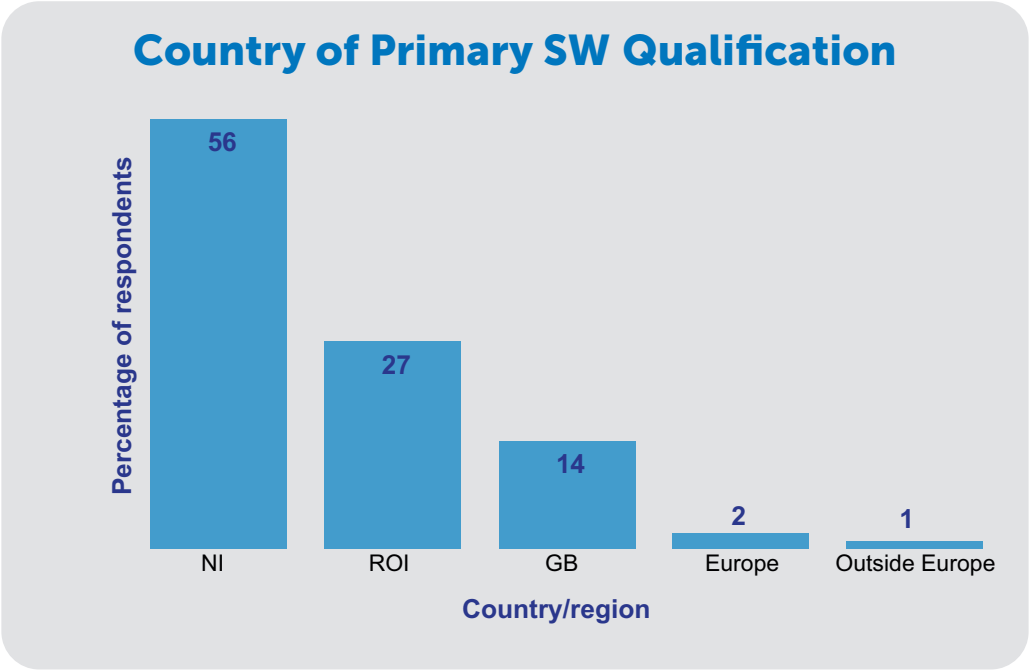
A further 16 responses came from social workers who were not employed. Of this group, 11 held their most recent post in NI and five in RoI.

The response rate was particularly high, representing 15% of all registered social workers north and south of the border. However, it is recognised that the sample was self-selecting and therefore, is not claimed to be directly representative of the social work population in NI or RoI.

Plans to further explore findings via focus groups have been temporarily postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and digital focus groups will be convened in the coming months.

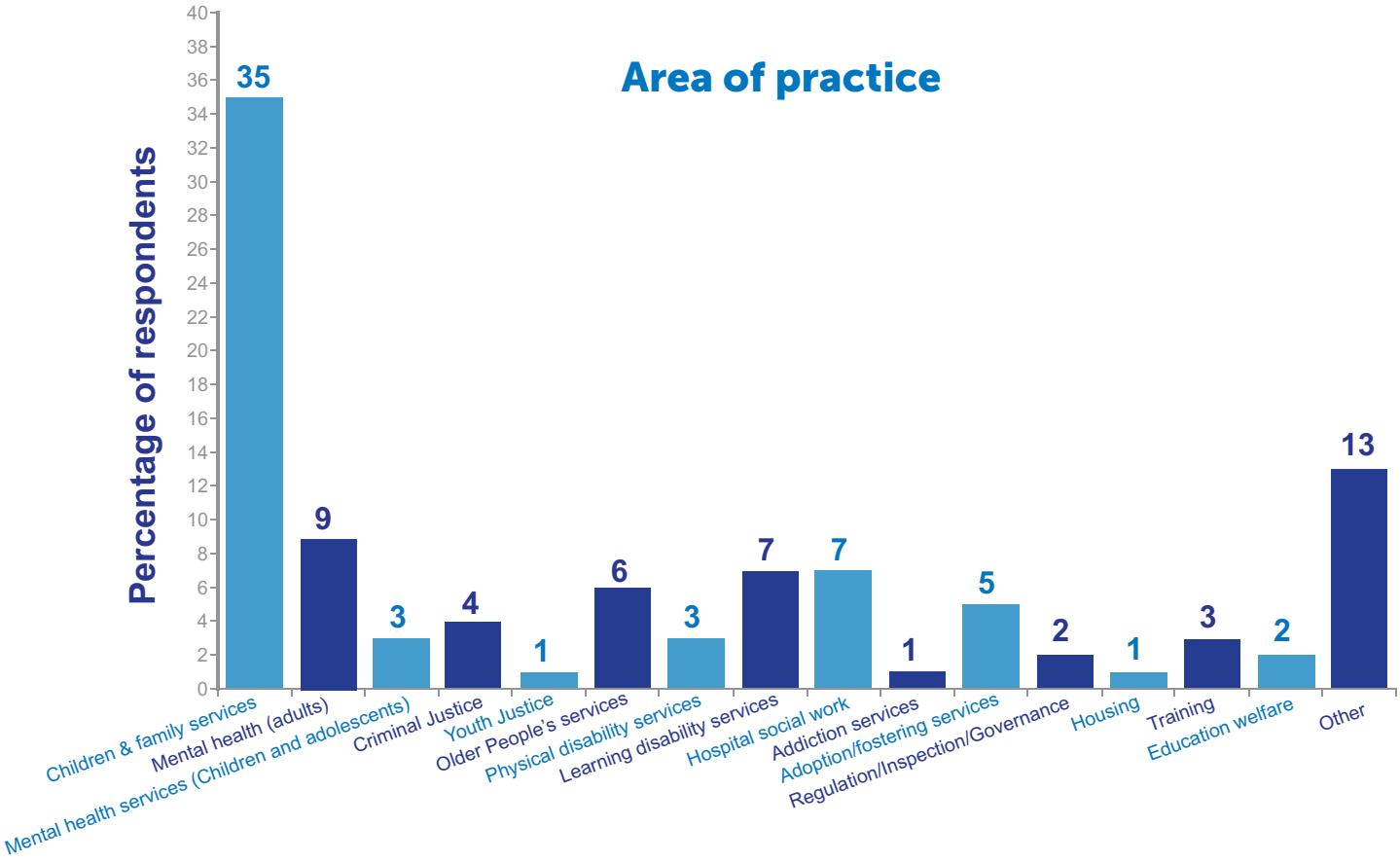
[4] To ensure consistency throughout the quantitative data analysis process the data set was restricted to the complete responses. However, answers provided to open questions submitted in a further 241 partially complete responses were included in the dataset for qualitative analysis.

The Demographic Profile of Respondents

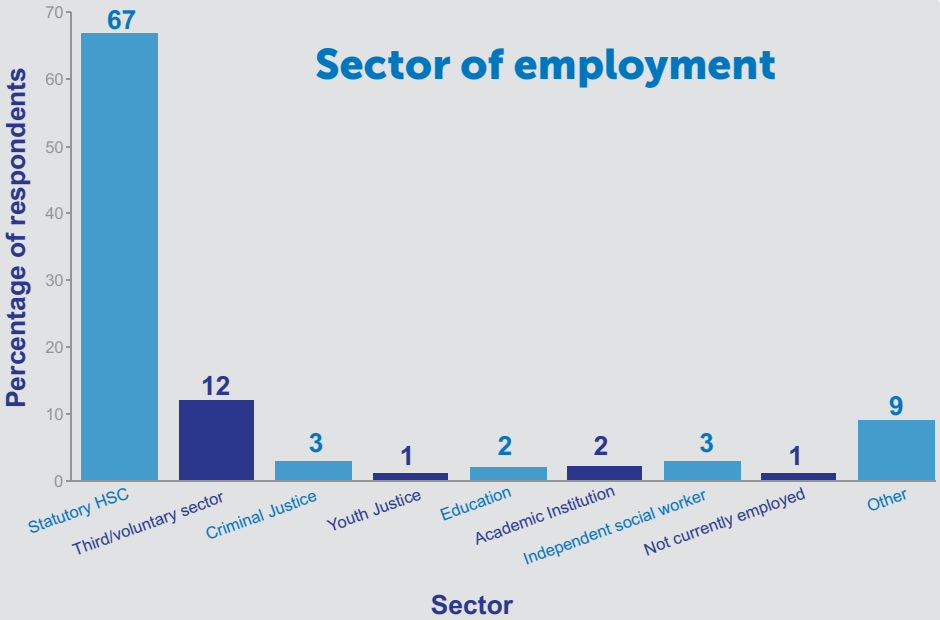


Awarding Institution of primary social work qualification	Percentage of respondents
Ulster University and affiliated further education colleges	**36%**
Queen's University Belfast	**20%**
Trinity College Dublin	**9%**
University College Dublin	**9%**
England – all universities	**8%**
University College Cork	**8%**
Scotland – all universities	**4%**
Other USA Europe	**3%**
National University of Ireland Galway	**1%**
Wales – all universities	**1%**

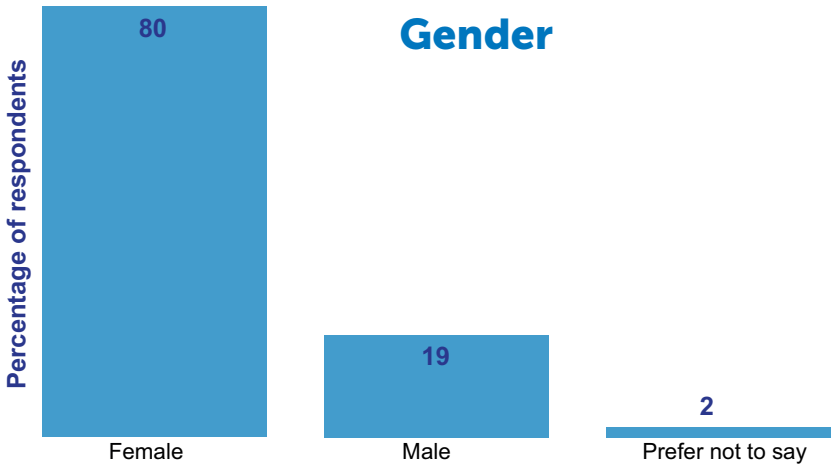
Area of practice



Sector of employment



Gender



Survey Findings

Assessing professional identity

Subjectivity is a significant factor in the construction of an identity. What is held to be a core feature of Social Worker A's professional identity may not feature among the factors which inform Social Worker B's perspective.

To ensure consistency in the evaluation of participants' views, the strength of each survey respondent's sense of professional social work identity was assessed against criteria deemed by the project steering group as characteristic of social work values and practice. Respondents were presented with these social work specific characteristics in a randomly assorted list which also included a number of factors which the steering group considered generally applicable to any other professions, and several factors which span both categories[5].

When asked to select all factors which contribute to their sense of identity as a social worker, respondents indicated strong levels of identification with the social work specific factors – the two most frequently selected factors were social work specific.

Of the top ten, a further three were social work specific and three span both the social work specific category and the category of factors generally applicable to any other professions. Factors from the *generally applicable* category did not feature higher than the ninth and tenth most frequently selected factors.

The five most frequently chosen factors are shown in the table below.

Factor	Category	Percentage chosen
Promoting social work values, for example, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, and respect for diversity	Social work	**86%**
Empowering service users and working in partnership with them	Social work	**85%**
Improving life opportunities for service users	Spans social work & generally applicable to any profession categories	**83%**
Having a social work qualification	Social work	**80%**
Working to professional standards of conduct and practice	Spans social work & generally applicable to any profession categories	**75%**

When respondents were asked to identify the single factor which contributes most to their sense of professional identity, they again sided primarily with social work specific factors.

Only four factors were selected by more than 10% of respondents. Three of these were social work specific, as shown in the table below.

Factor	Category	Percentage chosen
Empowering service users and working in partnership with them	Social work specific	**25%**
Improving life opportunities for service users	Spans social work & generally applicable to any profession categories	**19%**
Having a social work qualification	Social work specific	**17%**
Promoting social work values, for example, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, and respect for diversity	Social work specific	**11%**

[5] The full list of factors is presented in Appendix B.

The ranking of factors changes when participants are required to identify the single most important factor in shaping their professional identity. In the single-choice scenario, *promoting social work values…*, falls to the fourth most frequently cited response. In comparison, *empowering service users and working in partnership with them*, is chosen most often, and is the most significant factor in determining professional social work identity for a quarter or participants.

Many professions are committed to improving the lives of their patients or service users. However, the responses to these questions demonstrate the centrality of social workers' dedication to working *collaboratively* with their service users to empower and facilitate them to make changes to improve their circumstances. Co-production has become something of a buzzword with the myriad benefits of co-design and truly meaningful user participation much more the norm. Long before it was fashionable, social workers were often the lone voice advocating for informed choice, autonomy and self-determination of all citizens.

Responses to both the multiple-choice and single-choice questions demonstrate that recognition of this unique role through a professional social work qualification is a significant aspect in shaping social work identity.

Negative impacts

Survey respondents were asked questions to examine the factors which negatively impact their sense of professional identity.

When choosing all factors which negatively impact their professional identity from a list of options[6], *bureaucracy* was the most frequently cited factor. Overall, it was selected by 74% of respondents, with social workers in Northern Ireland (76%) more likely than their counterparts in RoI (70%) to cite bureaucracy as having a damaging influence.

In the multiple choice scenario, the other most frequently cited factors which negatively impact professional identity were: *workload pressure* (70%), *insufficient time to spend in direct engagement with service users* (62%), *media portrayal of social work* (57%), and *insufficient time or opportunities to keep up to date with relevant knowledge and research* (57%).

When asked to select the single factor most significant in negatively impacting their professional identity, again *bureaucracy* came to the fore. It was cited by 26% of respondents.

Workload pressure was identified as the most significant factor by 24% of social workers, *insufficient time to spend in direct engagement with service users* by 20% and *media portrayal of social work* by 11% of respondents.

Research conducted by BASW NI and BASW UK dating back to 2012 has highlighted the negative outcomes for social workers arising from heavily bureaucratic processes[7]. While detailed and precise record keeping of engagement with service users is a vitally important aspect of social work, it is essential that paperwork supports, rather than constrains practice.

Given the evidence base established by BASW's previous research, it was unsurprising that in both the multiple-choice and single-choice questions, *bureaucracy* was closely followed by *workload pressure* and *insufficient time to spend in direct engagement with service users* as the factors most significant in negatively impacting professional identity.

Unnecessary, duplicative bureaucracy inevitably deprives social workers of time which they would prefer to spend in direct engagement with service users. Not only does this inhibit a profession whose members consider empowering service users and working in partnership with them as the most significant factor in shaping their professional identity, it is also likely to affect outcomes for service users.

Social work is a profession based on relationships. By affording more time for social workers to engage directly with service users, the human connections and trust which form the foundation of practice will be strengthened. This will facilitate a culture in which service users feel their needs are fully understood – with social workers empowering service users as a result of being enabled to fully involve them in shaping the service they receive.

[6] The full list of factors is presented in Appendix C.

[7] *Social Work Not Paperwork: Cutting Bureaucracy in Childcare Social Work* (November 2012), *A Blueprint for Change for Adult Services Social Work in Northern Ireland* (May 2014), *Above and Beyond: At What Cost?* (September 2016), *UK Social Workers: Working Conditions and Wellbeing* (August 2018) – Dr Jermaine M Ravalier and Dr Charlotte Boichat, Bath Spa University.

It should also be recognised that managing the responsibility of casework encumbered by overly bureaucratic processes also results in workload pressure, which in turn, adversely affects professional identity.

Although BASW NI and IASW play a distinct role in promoting the public standing of the profession via clear and positive public relations messaging, the profession has no direct control of the media portrayal of social work. Therefore, ability to reduce the negative impact on professional identity resulting from this factor is limited.

However, it is cause for optimism that the majority of factors which negatively impact professional identity – bureaucracy, workload pressure and insufficient time to spend with service users – are within the control of the profession to address. It is fundamentally important that bureaucracy is streamlined to free up social workers' capacity.

Following a reduction in bureaucracy, it is vital employers assess the impact on social workers' roles. To ensure the negative impact of workload pressure is addressed, it is essential the bureaucratic burden is not replaced by heavy increases in allocated caseloads. Given the desire demonstrated by social workers to spend additional time in direct contact with service users, employers should prioritise this engagement from any newly realised capacity.

Regulated professional or employee

Participants were asked whether they primarily think of themselves as a member of a regulated profession or an employee of the organisation they work for. The responses given contrast with the strong sense of professional identity suggested by high levels of identification with factors specific to social work uncovered earlier in the survey.

Just under half (48%) of respondents primarily think of themselves as a member of a regulated profession while 52% primarily think of themselves as an employee.

There is a clear division between respondents from NI and RoI. More than half of respondents (55%) from NI primarily consider themselves employees, whereas in RoI, the same percentage primarily consider themselves members of a regulated profession. In comparison to the NI average, Members of BASW NI, are significantly more likely to consider themselves members of a regulated profession (55%), and in RoI, 58% of IASW members fall into that category.

Social workers who trained in England, Scotland and Wales (55%) or RoI (54%) are more likely to primarily think of themselves as a member of a regulated profession than those who trained in NI (44%). University College Cork is the academic institution whose graduates are most likely to identify primarily as a member of a regulated profession (57%). In comparison, graduates trained at Ulster University or an affiliated further education college, are those most likely to primarily identify as employees (57%).

For further exploration

While there is evidence of teaching on professional identity in all degree programmes, the emphasis is varied. We will conduct focus groups with students and teaching staff to explore ways to support students develop their professional identity.

When categorised in relation to length of practice, social workers who have been qualified for more than 20 years are the only group more likely to primarily consider themselves members of a regulated profession (59%) than employees (41%). Of all groups, social workers qualified for less than a year, are most likely to primarily identify as employees (63%).

This greater sense of belonging to their profession apparent among social workers qualified for more than 20 years is despite the protection of title and social work regulation being introduced after they qualified.

In NI there is a clear split between the statutory Health and Social Care (HSC) sector and voluntary sector in relation to this issue. Of social workers in the statutory HSC sector, 60% primarily identify as an employee. In direct contrast, 60% of social workers in the voluntary sector primarily identify as regulated professionals. Similarly, voluntary sector social workers in RoI are also more likely to primarily identify as members of a regulated profession (61%).

In terms of programme of care, NI social workers who work in Training are by far the most likely to primarily think of themselves as a member of a regulated profession (82%). In RoI, propensity to identify primarily as a member or a regulated profession is highest among learning disability social workers (69%) and mental health social workers (67%).

NI Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services social workers are the most likely to primarily think of themselves as an employee (63%), followed by children and family services social workers (61%) and older people's social workers (61%).

For further exploration

Focus group research involving statutory and third sector employees will explore the extent to which systemic factors lead to higher levels of identification as employees.

Identification with social work colleagues

Respondents were asked whether they identify more closely with non-social workers who work in their area of practice or social workers who work outside their area of practice. Just over half (53%) stated they identify more closely with non-social workers they work alongside, whereas 47% identify more closely with social workers outside their area of practice. Social workers in NI are slightly more likely to identify with non-social workers in their area of practice than their RoI counterparts.

NI social workers who work in training (76%) adoption/fostering (57%) and criminal justice (55%) were most likely to identify more closely with social workers outside their area of practice.

It is perhaps unsurprising, given the extent to which respondents highlighted the central importance to social work identity of working in partnership with service users and improving their life opportunities, that many participants would identify closely with the non-social work colleagues with whom they work to support their service users. While this is welcome, it should, however, be recognised that **development of a strong sense of identity across all areas of social work practice will play an important role in enabling the profession to represent itself collectively.**

For further exploration

Focus group research will be conducted involving practitioners from groups who had the strongest sense of professional identity, namely: Voluntary Sector, Training Teams, Adoption and Fostering and Criminal Justice.

Alongside this we will run focus groups with those displaying the least satisfaction, namely those qualified between two and ten years in other sectors.

The discussions will aim to determine what factors are significant in fostering a common sense of identity and satisfaction across the profession.

Job title

The majority of participants (68%) have the term 'Social Worker' in their job title. However, there is a marked difference in the results when separated by jurisdiction. In RoI, 80% of respondents state their job title contains the words 'social worker' compared to 61% of NI respondents.

Overall, 72% of participants who have 'social worker' in their job title report it having a positive impact on their sense of professional identity, whereas 24% state it has no impact and 4% report a negative impact.

Level of satisfaction

It is welcome to find that the majority of respondents (71%) are satisfied in their role as a social worker.

In NI, social workers who work in regulation/inspection/governance (96%), training (92%) and physical disability (79%) are the most likely to be satisfied. In terms of length of time in practice, social workers qualified for less than one year (76%) and more than 20 years (76%) are the most likely to be satisfied in their role.

In comparison, 81% of social workers in RoI who have practised for more than 20 years are satisfied in their role, but satisfaction levels are lowest for those in practice for 1-5 years (63%).

In RoI, hospital social workers are the most likely to be satisfied in their role (89%) whereas there are below average levels of satisfaction for social workers who work in adult mental health services (69%), children and family services (66%) and adoption and fostering services (64%).

After answering whether they felt satisfied or unsatisfied in their role, respondents were asked, via an open question, to explain the reasons why. The following sections are based on the analysis of the qualitative data collected.

Reasons for feeling satisfied

The reasons given by the 71% of social workers who explained they are satisfied in their role fall within the following themes. They include parallels to many of the factors cited by social workers as central to contributing to their sense of identity.

Making a difference

The majority of satisfied respondents mentioned making a difference, with their intervention contributing to a positive outcome for their service users as the reason why they felt satisfied in their role. Having sufficient time to support their vulnerable service users, enabling challenges to be addressed and barriers overcome to make meaningful interventions, albeit often small and difficult to measure, was an important aspect in contributing to whether respondents expressed satisfaction.

Participants highlighted a great sense of privilege, fulfilment and enjoyment comes from making a direct impact to effect positive changes in service users' lives.

"I have the privilege of working closely with people from all walks of life and even if there is one small change that will improve their quality of life, then I am doing my job." **(Learning disability services social worker)**

Social work knowledge skills and values/ sense of pride in the profession

The experience of gaining specialist knowledge and skills in social work, combined with specific social work values, contributed to feeling satisfied. Having a sense of pride in the profession and feeling proud of being a social worker was important to the participants that fell within this group.

Respondents felt that social work is an innovative, solution focussed profession, underpinned by a core value base, with a particular set of useful transferable skills that enables others. This gives social workers a sense of pride and many are confident promoting the social work profession despite the role being challenged at organisational levels where more credit can be given to other (often medical) professionals.

"Social work is built on a sound value base and is supported through a framework of social work interventions, methods, and research to support the most disadvantaged in society to reach their full potential." **(Older people's services social worker)**

Experience/Length of service

This group includes social workers at the start of their career who noted they have not yet become jaded or cynical, and those who have been in practice for more than 20 years who have developed expert skills and resilience.

Only on reflection, after many years of practice, were respondents able to recognise the small immeasurable changes their experience had made to their levels of satisfaction. Learning something new every day, developing ways to cope with pressure and working with service users or training those at the start of their social work journey were noted as important. Using evidence informed practice even after a considerable length of service, and their years of experience being recognised and respected also contributed to higher levels of satisfaction.

"I knew when I trained to be a social worker it was a challenging role that required me to be a strong evidence informed practitioner who needed to be all things to all people whilst maintaining professional standards – My experience of the last 20+ years has been just that.

I worry for new social workers who are saying they are finding social work hard in relation to hours, emotional impact and demands because it doesn't get any better, you just learn to

manage it better." **(Social worker working in Regulation/Inspection/Governance)**

Working environment

Respondents noted their workplace, their employer (the majority of those cited were from the third sector) and their specific role as reasons why they were satisfied. Many respondents identified that by changing to different social work roles or places of work they now enjoy a greater sense of satisfaction.

There is growing recognition that social factors impact on physical and mental health and as result there are increasing opportunities for social workers to advocate on behalf of their service users, especially in a medical environment. The essential role of social work with unique knowledge and skills was particularly showcased in complex cases where the focus had previously been on a medical model. Some respondents felt satisfied that they were given the opportunity to work in a therapeutic and holistic way when other professionals had a narrower focus. Others mentioned working in motivated and innovative multidisciplinary teams where the emphasis was on collaboration to deliver the best outcome for their service users.

"After working in statutory roles and gaining fantastic experience in very challenging teams I now work in a senior position in the voluntary sector and I have so many opportunities to be creative and influence the way my teams work to improve the lives of young people." **(Learning disability services social worker)**

Reasons for feeling unsatisfied

The following broad themes were identified for the 29% of respondents who explained they are unsatisfied in their roles. Many responses included a number of the themes outlined below.

These themes are concurrent with the factors that have the greatest negative impact on identity, including a common reference to bureaucracy. Many respondents gave thorough and thoughtful comments, taking significant time to detail the reasons for their lack of satisfaction.

Bureaucracy/Paperwork

A major cause of feeling unsatisfied concerns bureaucracy and the impact of excessive paperwork and procedures. These frustrations include being less able to spend time with service users as social workers are spending a disproportionate amount of time at their desks, often working unpaid overtime to complete what are considered unnecessarily lengthy documents.

Respondents reported feeling demoralised, as administrative tasks, reminiscent of a managerialist culture, have overtaken the focus of social work as a caring profession. Time constraints, a focus on targets, accountability, and agency protection, with little acknowledgement – by often inexperienced senior managers – of the pressures caused by bureaucracy, all have direct impacts on levels of satisfaction. It was also noted that being unsatisfied can result in work related stress and burnout.

"There is a ridiculous amount of duplication of paperwork as well as IT systems that are constantly changing and often do not work, particularly in conjunction with each other." **(Adult mental health services social worker)**

Insufficient face-to-face contact

A common response was that work-related pressures have a direct impact on the ability to spend time with service users. Excessive paperwork inhibits social workers' physical and emotional availability to service users, preventing them from engaging in direct work. This leads to further frustrations, including unrealistic expectations from line managers—with maximum outcomes expected from minimal time spent with service users. Many feel defeated and consider it impossible to maintain professional integrity when not enough importance is given to relationship-based practice with service users.

"Pressure of firefighting most of the time with little or no time for direct social work involvement." **(Adoption/fostering services social worker)**

Lack of respect from other professions

Many respondents identified a lack of respect, especially from medical professionals, as a reason for feeling unsatisfied. While working in medical settings, social workers reported having to continually justify their general social work role, knowledge and skills against that of specialist nursing roles. A poor understanding exists of the unique social work role, yet unrealistic expectations are placed on social workers by other professions and the public. This leaves social workers feeling overworked and underpaid for the often high-risk, isolated roles they undertake. The role is often undervalued by the courts, with little emphasis placed on social workers' expertise and recommendations, in comparison to psychologists, for example.

"There is a lack of respect from medical and nursing professionals and an absence of understanding of the role of social work and a refusal or willingness to develop one." **(Adult mental health services social worker)**

Work related stress and pressure

High caseloads and work-related stress have a significant impact on levels of satisfaction. Respondents are concerned the increasing demands of their job, coupled with compassion fatigue and burnout, are negatively affecting their home and family life. Children's services social workers feel there is little recognition given to the complex and heavy caseloads and longer hours in child protection, yet they are paid the same as social workers in other fields. Verbal abuse from service users and negative press also contribute to feeling overwhelmed and close to burnout.

"Despite being proud of my work with families, I'm realising, to an increasing extent, that in order to do my job properly, I need to work way over and beyond my 37.5 hours per week, and I'm not prepared to have it impact on my family life in that way." **(Children and family services social worker)**

Comment from the Professional Associations

One of the most interesting findings for BASW NI and IASW is that those social workers who are members of their professional body are more likely to have a stronger sense of identity and belonging to a collective profession. Both professional bodies see this as fundamental to building a strong, confident profession. It is therefore significant this research provides evidence to support that position.

A frequent cry from social workers is *"why do we not get the same media coverage or public acknowledgement as health professionals?"* The reasons are complex. We are, relatively speaking, a new profession and our statutory roles are often unpopular and challenging. For us, one key issue is our relative weakness as a collective. Nurses, doctors, occupational therapists, and many other allied health professionals have almost 100% membership of their respective professional bodies. As a result, they have a strong professional collective voice.

Within social work across Europe, the UK, and Ireland we have an average of 30% membership of professional associations. As a result, our collective voice is undermined. This report now adds evidence to this debate. To grow as a profession, to continue to develop our reach and influence and to have strong, confident professionals who are part of a community that extends beyond the bounds of employment, we need all social workers to join their professional body.

This study also adds further weight to our calls for systemic change. Unnecessary and duplicative bureaucracy has long been cited as an impediment to social work practice, with many professionals reporting they feel like administrators, brokers, and bureaucrats. BASW NI produced its first paper on this topic, *Social Work not Paper* Work, in 2012, in which the Association highlighted the impact of an overly bureaucratic system on social workers and the people they support. Despite many efforts to address this perennial issue, including the Strategy for Social Work in Northern Ireland: 2012-2022, there has been no significant change. This study highlights how significantly this is impacting our collective sense of self and our sense of worth. It is time for change.

The findings concerning identity as an employee as opposed to a member of a regulated profession give us cause to reflect. Consideration must be given to how we support our social workers to connect with each other across teams, programmes of care, and statutory and voluntary agencies. The notable difference between the south and the north merits further exploration. There is a role for us all to play in building identity across our profession. By working together, professional bodies, regulators, policy makers, employers, universities, teams, and individuals have the opportunity to truly shape the future of the profession.

Comment from the Social Work Regulators

The findings in this research about the role of regulation as a contributor to professional identity chime with the findings of research carried out with other health professions. For all professions, the single most important factor in determining professional identity is working with service users/patients. Therefore, it is not surprising that social workers selected 'empowering service users and working in partnership with them' as the most significant determinant.

The regulation of social work has created a community of social work practitioners who are unified through a common body of knowledge, skills and values. The legal protection of the title of Social Worker means that those who have achieved the social work qualification can legitimately lay claim to the profession of social work and are assured that their professional identity is protected.

For newly qualified social workers their initial registration as a social worker is their rite of passage into their chosen profession, however the formation of professional identity starts as a student and is nurtured during their social work qualification.

Social work education and training is fundamental in shaping a professional social worker and a commitment to continuous professional development (CPD) is the hallmark of any professional – keeping up to date with evidence-based practice and knowledge. *Being committed to continuous professional development* was one of the list of factors we asked participants about and while it didn't rank in the top five most frequently chosen factors, it was ranked as 7th in the list with 68% of respondents considering CPD to be relevant. This is a welcome response demonstrating that social workers value CPD in supporting their development as confident and empowered practitioners with an enhanced sense of their professional identity.

As workforce regulators, the Social Care Council and Coru are the validators of professional identity – providing the regulatory framework, education and practice standards which shape the profession of social work. However, as this research has shown, the formation of a social worker's professional identity is also shaped by a number of other factors, such as the influence of the workplace and membership of a professional body. It is notable that in both jurisdictions respondents to the research who are members of BASW NI and IASW are significantly more likely to consider themselves members of a regulated profession than as employees of an organisation. The duality of these systems – regulation and a professional body – work together to foster a strong social work professional identity.

Conclusion

This study has revealed the relationship-centred, value-based factors which contribute to social workers' professional identity. Yet despite this strong shared character, a significant proportion of social workers primarily identify as employees rather than regulated professionals. Furthermore, many identify more closely with the non-social work colleagues they work alongside, than with their fellow social workers employed elsewhere.

Further engagement with practitioners who have identified most strongly with social workers in other areas of service delivery will be important in understanding what informs their sense of professional identity. The learning from this should inform how the profession can most effectively foster a strong sense of professional identity focused on professional collectivity and community.

However, it is immediately clear that as members of a profession which centres on a relational approach to empowering service users and improving their lives, social workers are hampered by factors readily within the control of policymakers. This research has highlighted that a desire to empower service users and work in partnership with them is central to why many social workers are part of the profession. Any factors which detract from efforts to deliver for service users must be addressed as a priority.

To both enhance the strength of social workers' professional identity, and improve outcomes for the individuals they support, a reduction in bureaucracy and associated workload pressure is essential. Facilitating this change is key to enabling the relationship-based practice at the heart of professional social work identity to flourish.

Recommendations

For students

- Social work students should be supported to examine their own sense of identity and how this is linked to professional identity during training. As part of their curriculum engaging with ideas of identity and belonging will be central to their development as professionally qualified social workers.
- All social work students should join their professional body.

For educators and mentors

- Support and foster students' sense of professional identity early on in learning and training by motivating and encouraging students to develop professional identity.
- Collective leadership will be required to support a culture change which sees student social workers understand the importance of belonging to a community of practitioners linked by values, ethics and knowledge and skills.
- Continue as a professional advisor role throughout each social workers' career.

For social workers

- Take time to make connections with other social workers outside of their team and engage with professional forums and communities of practice.
- Act as ambassadors for the profession by taking opportunities to articulate to colleagues the unique role social workers perform.
- Engage with opportunities to inform the public about the work social workers do.
- All social workers should join their professional body.

For social work managers

- Encourage and permit social work staff to take time to make professional connections and attend professional social work forums.
- Ensure that social workers have space and time to think beyond their daily work by having safe and manageable caseloads.
- Work collectively to actively reduce bureaucracy.
- Actively support attendance at professional forums.

For employers

- Work with policymakers to ensure safe caseloads are maintained.
- Place value on relationship-based practice to enable more face to face contact.
- Re-evaluate outcome measurement tools and develop effective social work impact measurement tools.
- Learn from other professionals who build-in professional development as a core component of a working week.
- Work collectively to actively reduce bureaucracy.

For policymakers

- Create a task force to reduce unnecessary and duplicative bureaucracy and streamline paperwork and recording systems.
- Create systems that enable relationship-based practice.
- Articulate support for professional development activities as core social work business.

Workforce Regulators

- Promote an understanding of workforce regulation as the guiding framework for the profession of social work which supports practitioners to develop a collective professional identity.
- Promote engagement in continuous professional development as a means of empowering social workers and enhancing the profession of social work.

Professional bodies

- Promote the benefits of membership of the professional body both individually and collectively.
- Continue to campaign on the importance of relationship-based practice and the need to reduce bureaucracy.
- Share findings with colleagues across the UK and internationally to support the development of a global social work identity.
- Offer improved professional fora across the island of Ireland, with opportunities for all-island groups.
- Continue to be the independent voice of the profession in the media and at government level, influencing and advocating for the profession.
- Be part of the collective leadership response.

Appendix A

Introduction

This survey is being conducted to identify the issues which contribute to social workers' sense of professional identity across the island of Ireland.

The findings will be used to inform work by the social work professional bodies and regulators in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

All responses are anonymous and none of the questions will identify the organisation you work for. The information collected via the survey will be stored by the British Association of Social Workers and kept for a maximum of three years.

If you have a query about the survey please email a.mcclenaghan@basw.co.uk

1. Please indicate which factors contribute to your sense of identity as a social worker.

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Being a member of a regulated profession
- ☐ Having a social work qualification
- ☐ Working to professional standards of conduct and practice
- ☐ Improving life opportunities for service users
- ☐ Being committed to continuous professional development
- ☐ Empowering service users and working in partnership with them
- ☐ Promoting social work values, for example, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, and respect for diversity
- ☐ Promoting social justice
- ☐ Participating in political causes to improve the lives of service users
- ☐ Meeting the expectations of my employer
- ☐ Being empowered to make decisions
- ☐ Having protection of the 'Social Worker' job title
- ☐ Being a member of a professional association
- ☐ Using reflective practice
- ☐ Engaging with social work research
- ☐ Acting within legislation
- ☐ Engaging in supervision to develop my practice
- ☐ Practising in an evidence informed manner
- ☐ Adhering to policy and procedures
- ☐ Keeping accurate records

2. Please indicate which one of the factors you have selected contributes most to your sense of identity as a social worker

- [ ] Being a member of a regulated profession
- [ ] Having a social work qualification
- [ ] Working to professional standards of conduct and practice
- [ ] Improving life opportunities for service users
- [ ] Being committed to continuous professional development
- [ ] Empowering service users and working in partnership with them
- [ ] Promoting social work values, for example, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, and respect for diversity
- [ ] Promoting social justice
- [ ] Participating in political causes to improve the lives of service users
- [ ] Meeting the expectations of my employer
- [ ] Being empowered to make decisions
- [ ] Having protection of the 'Social Worker' job title
- [ ] Being a member of a professional association
- [ ] Using reflective practice
- [ ] Engaging with social work research
- [ ] Acting within legislation
- [ ] Engaging in supervision to develop my practice
- [ ] Practising in an evidence informed manner
- [ ] Adhering to policy and procedures
- [ ] Keeping accurate records

3. Please indicate which factors negatively impact your sense of identity as a social worker.

Tick all that apply.

- [ ] Workload pressure
- [ ] Bureaucracy
- [ ] Insufficient time to spend in direct engagement with service users
- [ ] Insufficient time or opportunities to keep up to date with relevant knowledge and research
- [ ] Working environment
- [ ] Views of other professions
- [ ] Views of the public
- [ ] Views of service users
- [ ] Media portrayal of social work

4. Please indicate which one of the factors you have identified has the greatest negative impact on your sense of identity as a social worker.

- [ ] Workload pressure
- [ ] Bureaucracy
- [ ] Insufficient time to spend in direct engagement with service users
- [ ] Insufficient time or opportunities to keep up to date with relevant knowledge and research
- [ ] Working environment
- [ ] Views of other professions
- [ ] Views of the public
- [ ] Views of service users
- [ ] Media portrayal of social work

5. When you consider your role as a social worker, do you primarily think of yourself as a member of a regulated profession or as an employee of the organisation you work for?

- ◯ I primarily think of myself as a member of a regulated profession
- ◯ I primarily think of myself as an employee

6. Do you identify more closely with non-social workers who work in your area of practice or social workers who work outside your area of practice?

- ◯ I identify more closely with non-social workers who work in my area of practice
- ◯ I identify more closely with social workers who work outside my area of practice

7. Do you feel respected in your role as a social worker by colleagues working in other professions, for example—medical, nursing or legal professionals?

- ◯ I feel respected by all my colleagues from other professions
- ◯ I feel respected by some of my colleagues from other professions
- ◯ I do not feel respected by my colleagues from other professions

8. Overall, are you satisfied or unsatisfied in your role as a social worker?

- ◯ I am satisfied in my role as a social worker
- ◯ I am unsatisfied in my role as a social worker

9. Why do you feel this way about your role as a social worker?

10. Does your job title contain the words "Social Worker"?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

11. Does this affect your sense of professional identity?

- ◯ It affects my sense of professional identity in a positive way
- ◯ It affects my sense of professional identity in a negative way
- ◯ It does not affect my sense of professional identity

12. Are you a member of a professional association?

Tick all that apply.

- [ ] No
- [ ] Yes, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW)
- [ ] Yes, the Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW)
- [ ] Yes – Other (please specify)

13. How many years have you been qualified as a social worker?

- ( ) Less than 1 year
- ( ) 1 – 5 years
- ( ) 6 – 10 years
- ( ) 11 – 15 years
- ( ) 16 – 20 years
- ( ) More than 20 years

14. Where did you obtain your primary social work qualification?

- ( ) Northern Ireland
- ( ) The Republic of Ireland
- ( ) Great Britain
- ( ) Elsewhere in Europe
- ( ) Outside Europe

15. Please name the university or college where you obtained your primary social work qualification

16. What sector do you work in?

- ◯ Statutory health and social care
- ◯ Third / voluntary sector
- ◯ Criminal justice
- ◯ Youth Justice
- ◯ Education
- ◯ Academic Institution
- ◯ Independent social worker
- ◯ Not currently in employment
- ◯ Other (please specify)

17. What area of practice do you work in?

- ◯ Children and family services
- ◯ Mental Health (adults)
- ◯ Mental health services (children and adolescents)
- ◯ Criminal Justice
- ◯ Youth Justice
- ◯ Older People's services
- ◯ Physical disability services
- ◯ Learning disability services
- ◯ Hospital social work
- ◯ Other (please specify)
- ◯ Carers services
- ◯ Addiction services
- ◯ Adoption / fostering services
- ◯ Regulation / Inspection / Governance
- ◯ Refugee and asylum seeker services
- ◯ Housing
- ◯ Training
- ◯ Education welfare
- ◯ Community development

18. Do you work in a multi-disciplinary team with professional colleagues who are not social workers?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

19. Which jurisdiction do you work in?

- ☐ Northern Ireland
- ☐ The Republic of Ireland

20. Which jurisdiction did you most recently work in?

- ☐ Northern Ireland
- ☐ The Republic of Ireland

21. What best describes your gender?

- ◯ Female
- ◯ Male
- ◯ Prefer not to say
- ◯ Prefer to self-describe

22. We appreciate you taking the time to complete this survey. Are you willing to be contacted to participate in a focus group to further explore the issues in this questionnaire?

If you answer “Yes” you will be redirected to a separate form to provide your name and contact details. Your responses to this questionnaire will remain anonymous and cannot be linked to the name and contacts details provided.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Appendix B

Social work specific factors	Factors generally applicable to any profession
Improving life opportunities for service users	
Working to professional standards of conduct and practice	
Being committed to continuous professional development	
Empowering service users and working in partnership with them	Meeting the expectations of my employer
Promoting social work values, for example, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, and respect for diversity	Being empowered to make decisions
Having a social work qualification	Acting within legislation
Using reflective practice	Engaging in supervision to develop my practice
Promoting social justice	Practising in an evidence informed manner
Being a member of a regulated profession	Adhering to policy and procedures
Having protection of the 'Social Worker' job title	Keeping accurate records
Being a member of a professional association	
Engaging with social work research	
Participating in political causes to improve the lives of service users	

Appendix C

Bureaucracy
Workload pressure
Insufficient time to spend in direct engagement with service users
Media portrayal of social work
Insufficient time or opportunities to keep up to date with relevant knowledge and research
Views of other professions
Views of the public
Working environment
Views of service users

Acknowledgment

This research was funded through BASW's International Development Fund. The Fund exists to place 'international exchange and development in a more accessible place than currently is possible and ensure support to BASW members in the international exchange of skills, knowledge and expertise'.

To cite this document: BASW NI / IASW / Northern Ireland Social Care Council / Coru (2020). ***Shaping Social Workers' Identity: An All-Ireland Study***. Belfast: BASW NI / IASW / Northern Ireland Social Care Council / Coru.

Users are welcome to quote from this study so long as the source is correctly cited as above. Unattributed quotes are forbidden under copyright protection.