

Report to BHSCT Trust Board: Progress with Social Work Recruitment and Retention 5th December 2025

1. Introduction

The deficit in supply of social workers regionally has created significant challenges for all HSCTs and in July 2025 the BHSCT performance in relation to the children's workforce deficit was aligned to the new SPPG Support Intervention Framework with targets agreed to reduce vacancies and this is also monitored in the Trust statutory functions action plan.

The BHSCT has undertaken significant targeted initiatives to effectively address workforce challenges in social work. Recruitment efforts, professional development initiatives, and wellbeing programs are starting to deliver measurable improvements.

The Trust Social Work Recruitment and Retention strategic group is chaired by the Deputy EDSW and oversees 3 workstreams which span across all social care directorates in the Trust. The workstreams are chaired by Divisional SW/Senior Managers in Workforce, Learning & Development and HR. The focus is on workforce capacity initiatives, leadership development and workforce wellbeing.

Due to the particular deficits in Children's Community Services (CCS) there is also a CCS recruitment and retention steering group Chaired by DSW for CCS and a Children's Service Workforce Planning Group was also established in May 2025 chaired by the Director for finance and aimed at the progression of a business case to SPPG to ensure workforce capacity meets demand.

Undoubtedly key challenges remain (particularly within Family Support and Looked After Children's services), however a more positive trajectory is beginning to emerge, with clear evidence of increased staffing, enhanced support structures, and strengthened retention strategies.

This report sets out some of the initiatives that have been progressed and the outcomes achieved.

2. Workforce Overview

The Trust provides the SPPG with an annual workforce report based on the position as of 31st December each year. The number of permanent social work vacancies in BHSCT reported to the SPPG in Data 7 shows vacancies are reducing.

Table 1 - Band 6 reported permanent vacancies (Data 7)

Data 7 Reports as of 31 st December	Band 6 reported vacancies		
	2022	2023	2024
ACOPS	16	14	13
ACOPS Social Care	7	10	3
CCS	61	67	52
LD	10	10	6
MH	14	11	3
Totals:	108	112	77

These are vacancies as reported by operational areas. This data will be collected again for SPPG as of 31st December 2025.

There is always a variation between reported vacancies and live requisitions as recruitment processes are worked through. Live requisitions are a measure of permanent vacancies with an active recruitment process.

Table 2 shows the number of live requisitions raised for vacancies and indicates that the number of Band 6 requisitions being recruited to is improving over time.

Table 2 – Band 6 live requisitions (Manager’s Requisition Dashboard)

	Live requisitions at 31.12.23	Live requisitions at 31.12.24	Live requisitions at 03.12.25
Band 6	55	63	44

The significant reduction in Band 6 front line requisitions (an almost 30% drop) can largely be attributed to the successful graduate recruitment this year. The limited supply of social workers in NI has driven the Trust to extend recruitment efforts to include universities in GB. This broader approach resulted in a high level of interest in Band 5 AYE posts – the Trust had 114 expressions of interest in coming to work in the Trust. The Trust seen a higher number of GB and Ireland-qualified social workers (57) expressing an interest in working in the Trust. To date, 32 of these applicants have been matched to post.

Table 2 shows the increase in the number of graduates starting in an AYE post in BHSCT from 2022-25

Table 3- BHSCT Graduate Recruitment Outcomes 2022-2025

	2022	2023	2024	2025*
Total no AYE recruited	53	55	55	60*
Children’s	34	35	33	36*
Adults	19	20	22	24*

*matching for 2025 ongoing

Of the 114 expressions of interest, 60 are in post and 15 are due to start this month with a further 9 going through pre-employment checks the total number of new recruits then is anticipated to be **84**. The higher number of newly qualified social workers (NQSW) joining the workforce presents challenges for teams, particularly in Children’s Services

where vacancies and limited senior staff exist. Work has been completed to strengthen induction programmes, recruit practice advisors, and provide targeted support to NQSW. A number (23 – 21 in CCS and 2 in Adults) of the GB graduates were originally from non-EEA countries and additional measures, including assistance with visas, sponsorship and relocation have been implemented to welcome and support these new recruits.

3. Initiatives to increase supply

Even with very successful graduate recruitment 44 live requisitions need to be filled for front line posts (23 of these positions are within Children’s services). A number of initiatives are ongoing to address the deficit in supply.

3.1 Non-Car Driver Pilot

The Trust identified a potential barrier to recruitment affecting newly qualified social workers – many were unable to meet the essential car-user criteria due to the cost-of-living crisis and the associated costs of obtaining a driving licence. To address this a pilot scheme was introduced within Children’s Services, providing financial support for an intensive driving course, repayable through monthly instalments once the individual commences their post. This approach enables new social workers to begin employment while completing their driving test within six months, successfully removing a key recruitment barrier. Fifteen newly qualified social workers having benefited from the initiative and an evaluation will be completed to determine the value of adopting this initiative longer-term.

3.2 Recruitment Drives

Regional and bespoke recruitment initiatives have been progressed with additional investment in bespoke campaigns using the agency ASG, and the Recruitment Retention Coordinator has also attended job fairs in UK and RO, however these efforts are hampered by supply and have provided only marginal gains in critical teams such as Family Support and LAC. A number of vacancies remain at front line (Band 6 requisitions = 43 as of 25.11.25). The continued vacancies impacts considerably on the Trust compliance with statutory functions and in providing vital social work services to the those in need and at risk.

3.3 Social Work Bank

The Social Work Bank was established following the cessation of recruitment agencies use in social work (June 2023). Bank capacity has increased steadily through a number of direct recruitment processes and migration of ‘local bank workers from operational HRPTS structures to the central Social Work Bank. There are now 158 social workers on the Bank and 44 of these have worked in a bank role in November. A limitation of the Bank is that Bank social workers have limited availability for a number of reasons: those who retire and return tend to work fewer hours, some have substantive posts with other employers and are not available during normal working hours (M-F, 9-5pm). The next phase of the Social Work Bank is to open it to all substantive postholders within the Trust which should further increase capacity.

3.4 Open University SW Degree Pathway

In recognition of the structural shortage of social workers in the region, the Trust has taken proactive steps to increase the future workforce supply.

Consideration has been given to how the Trust can increase training places on the social work degree and a scoping of potential routes including apprenticeships was undertaken. The Children's Service Workforce Planning Group agreed funding additional places on the Open University (OU) Social Work Degree was agreed to be the most efficient approach. These places are provided over and above those funded by the DoH, as outlined in the table below. For 2026, the Trust Executive Team has agreed to fund additional places, specifically in response to the significant recruitment challenges within children's services bringing to 16 the number of OU places funded by the Trust.

3.5 International Recruitment

The reality that the local supply is constrained to the annual graduation cycle, means that the Trust has been reliant on enhanced recruitment strategies outside of NI including the investment in recruitment from social workers overseas. In November 2024 the Trust Executive Team approved a business case for international recruitment of social workers and this project is now at an advanced stage with interviews planned by December 2025 and the first cohort of 10 social workers to be recruited to posts in Children's Community services by 1st April 2026.

A further dimension of this project focuses on engaging internationally qualified social workers (IQSW) who are already living in NI but not using their social work qualification. The Trust partnered with the NISCC and Slack Press to produce a recording featuring IQSW sharing their experiences of becoming registered with NISCC as International social workers. The Trust have successfully supported a number of IQSWs through this process and the recording aims to increase awareness, showcase the supports available and encourage others to return to social work practice in NI. The recording can be viewed here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSx-QEmbjaQ>

3.6 Promotion of Social Work as Career

The NISCC have a statutory responsibility to promote social work as a study and career pathway. Trusts have supported this regionally and Belfast Trust have attended a number of events in schools (Lagan college, Hunter house, Belfast Royal Academy) and Belfast Met Regional College over the past 2 years and have also ran a virtual event which was attended by a number of schools across the region.

WLD have a pathway for Work Experience Placements (WEPs) for school aged pupils to gain an insight into the role of a social worker. Whilst the Trust had not had any WEPs to date, a pathway in is now available and promotional material has been created.

The ratio of applicants to places for the social work degree places in NI remains positive, 3 applicants for every social work degree training place and in 2023 and 2024 more than 600 applications came from Belfast/Antrim which is the highest number in the region.



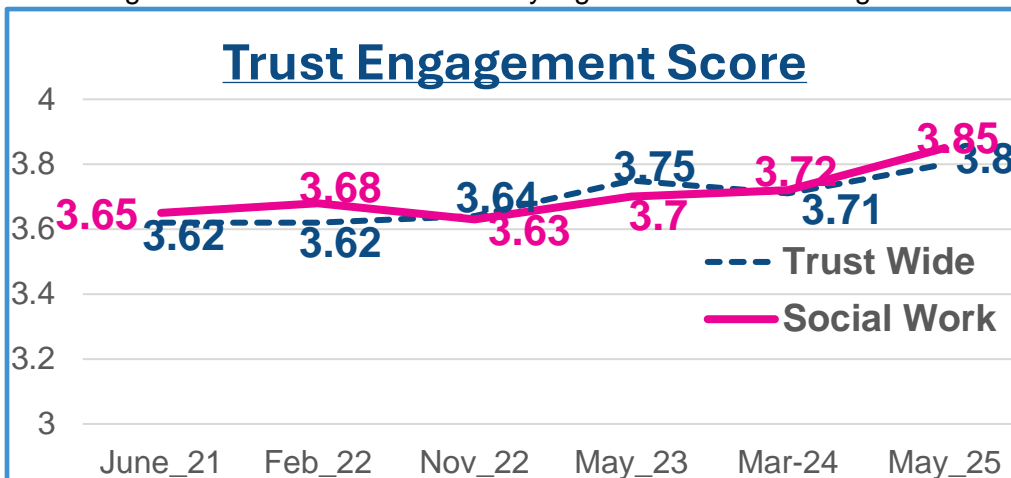
4. A Focus on Retention

4.1 Stay and Exit Interviews

The EDSW Recruitment Retention Strategic Group have sought to understand the factors impacting retention by undertaking Stay Interviews and Exit Interviews. Workload pressures and lack of support are among the reasons that social workers leave the Trust whilst Stay Interviews have highlighted that staff remain in roles where they feel valued and supportive and where their work has meaning. The Staff Experience work stream has also undertaken interviews with 'High Performing Teams' which were identified as teams with high staff retention and low staff absenteeism. Common to these teams were high levels of trust, strong collaboration, leadership and alignment to Trust Values. Staff highlighted the importance of psychological safety, supportive management, flexible working and feeling valued. These findings were shared at a series of webinars and are being used by the workstreams to continue to improve staff experience and retention. One example of this is the introduction of a 'buddy system' for all new staff at the front-line.

4.2 People and Culture Survey Results

The results of the People and Culture survey are an important measure for the EDSW Recruitment Retention Strategic Group and while the numbers participating in the last survey were slightly reduced there were still 282 social workers who returned (26.1%) of the social work workforce. The level of engagement evidenced in the results is steadily increasing for social work and is currently higher than Trust average.



The results show a steady increase in staff Motivation (2023) 3.85 / (2024) 3.84 / (2025) 3.97 and improved scores in all areas of wellness and resilience. The only question not to improve /return a lower score was experiencing harassment and bullying – decrease of 1.3 (71.2 to 69.9). This is an issue that the Recruitment Retention Group will give focus to and monitor in future surveys and align any actions to the wider Trust work on respect and civility.

Other Metrics

A total of 43 questions were asked - responses analysed and a Mean Rating Score (MRS) calculated for each (max 100):

- Improvement in 40 of 41 questions
- 2 new questions (unwanted sexual behaviour)

Responses are grouped into 8 themes:

- ALL 8 themes have improved across Social Work when compared to previous survey responses
- 6 themes have scored higher when compared to the trust scores, 2 themes are lower than Trust average scores.

Themes Higher when compared to Trust Scores

- Reward and Recognition
- Participative Management
- Camaraderie and Teamwork
- Innovation and Improvement
- Physical and Psychological Safety
- Wellness & Resilience

Themes Lower when compared to Trust Scores

- Choice and Autonomy*
- Meaning and Purpose

Wellness & Resilience

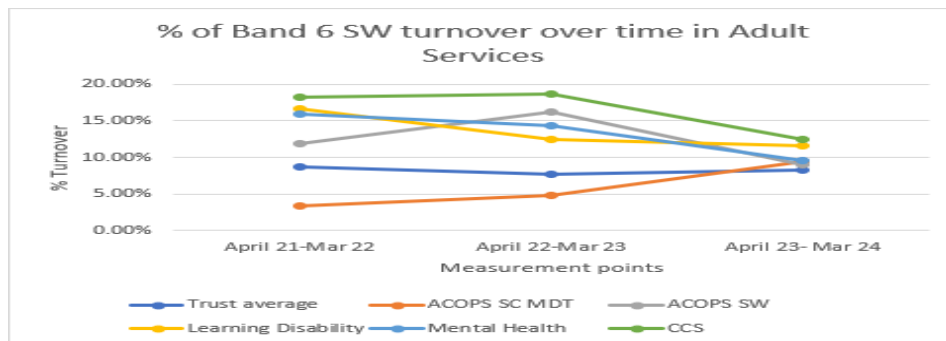
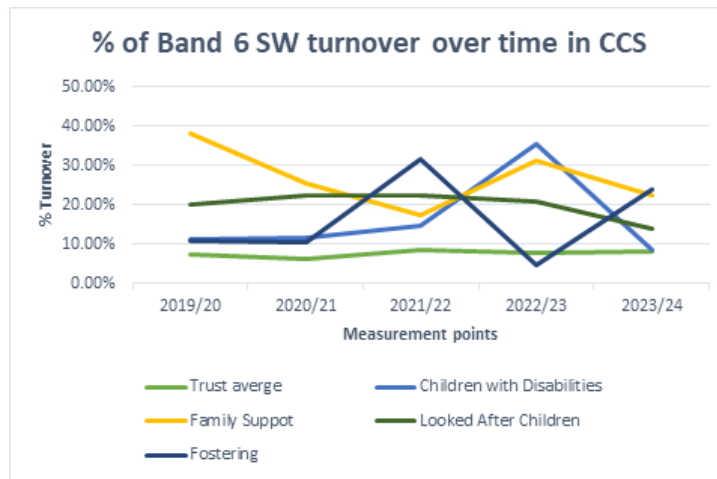
	Social Work March 2024	Social Work May 2025	Difference (+/-)
My team willingly provides support for each other	80.4	84.4	+ 4.0
I am able to handle the challenges of my job effectively	68.2	70.9	+ 2.7
I generally feel happy at work	66.2	72.3	+ 6.1
The Trust supports my health and wellbeing	54.5	61.3	+ 6.8
I look forward to going to work	62.6	67.6	+ 5.0
I am enthusiastic about my job	70.9	75.0	+ 4.1
Time passes quickly when I am working	79.4	80.1	+ 0.7
Wellness & Resilience	68.9	73.1	+ 4.2

4.3 Reducing Turnover at the Frontline

The charts below indicate overall Band 6 turnover across adults is improving and becoming more closely aligned to Trust average. In contrast CCS continue to experience higher fluctuations indicative of the workforce pressures in these services and highlighting the need for further investment in retention strategies in CCS.

*Turnover data is based on HRPTS & does not include moves across the Trust only leavers.

*updated reports for 2025 not yet available from HR.



The regional agreement with DOH Office of Social Services and the Trusts to have a singular point of recruitment for new graduates has contributed to the stabilisation of staff in the Assessed Year in Employment (AYE). A report of the (55) graduates recruited last year found a positive experience overall with structured induction, supervision, and peer support as key retention drivers. While 10 left during AYE (Two cited workforce pressures, other reasons- geographical, personal, more suitable employment) 31 of 38 AYE staff report their intention to stay, and being largely very happy in post, recognising workforce pressures but committed to team/work. The remaining 7 advised of intention to apply to regional recruitment (reasons for wanting to move; Geographical -1; Workforce pressures– 5; Wants a different service area–1).

4.4 Transfer Policy

The Workforce Organisation Capacity Workstream has developed a Transfer Policy for implementation in early 2026. Its purpose is to strengthen retention by enabling band 6 SW who want a change to move between service areas without having to leave the Trust, thereby reducing overall turnover.

To maintain workforce stability, the policy requires manager approval for any transfer and considers the operational needs of the service. This safeguard protects teams with high vacancies from further staffing pressures.

4.5 Supervision and Professional Development Opportunities

The provision of frequent, high-quality supervision has also been linked to greater professional confidence and job-engagement which may reduce social workers’ intention to leave. (Manthorpe et al., 2015; London Innovation and Improvement Alliance, 2022). Compliance with the DOH Supervision is monitored quarterly by the EDSW office. The heat maps below indicate high levels of compliance in adults’ services with further work required in CCS to fill band 7 team leader posts to improve supervision compliance (see heat maps below). This continues to be a key area of focus for CCS.

	Quarter 1 % compliance	July 2025	August 2025	September 2025	Quarter 2 % compliance	Professional SW Quarter 1 % compliance
Learning Disability	87.1%	86%	89%	93%	89%	91%
Mental Health	95.6%	94%	94.5%	95%	94.5%	96%
ACOPS MDT/PSD	77%	91%	75%	81%	82%	83%
ACOPS CSW/HSW	92%	88%	92%	91%	90%	100%
WLD & RGI	94%	93%	100%	100%	97%	100%
Total SW % compliance	89%	90%	90%	92%	90.5%	

	Quarter 1 compliance	Jul-25	Aug-25	Sep-25	Quarter 2 compliance
Gateway	82%	91%	83%	90%	86%
Family Support	78%	80%	76%	63%	73%
LAC	70%	72%	67%	82%	73%
LCAC	94%	80%	80%	80%	73%
Contact Centre	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Children with Disabilities	71%	72%	66%	77%	72%
Early Intervention/Early Years	98%	89%	75%	100%	86%
Fostering	70%	83%	80%	75%	79%
Adoption	91%	100%	93%	80%	91%
Residential	87%	89%	90%	87%	87%
RESWS	90%	94%	84%	94%	91%
% Compliance for CCS	81%	84.5%	82%	83%	83%

4.6 Self-Care & Wellbeing

Over a 4-year period the Trust has established an enhanced focus on staff well-being for social work and social care which is supported by a structured annual programme of well-being activities. This program features the Mile in May initiative promoting movement, outdoor breaks and connection with colleagues and a November program of self care events offering alternative therapies, mindfulness, healthy eating advice and vaccinations delivered through four accessible drop-in sessions. The self-care events

are resourced by charitable funds and the impact of these events on retention is reflected in the evaluation data outlined below.

During 2025 the Staff Experience Workstream have made use of Charitable funds to deliver a range of training programs designed to improve staff well-being (see slide below for outcomes).



Mile in May Evaluation
64% Events like this add to sense of Community

73% impt for retention

64% agree contributes to physical & mental wellness

I really enjoyed meeting SW colleagues from other services when out for a walk

More needs done to free up frontline social work staff who are extremely stretched to be able to engage in things like this. It could really be beneficial for staff

The Staff Experience group Workstream has also started a Social Work Newsletter to enhance communication and connect social workers across services to create a sense of belonging and support retention.



MOVING SOCIAL WORK TRAINING
 59 staff attended the training and 100% reported increased awareness of movement's importance in care.
Appreciation of Research
 Participants valued research highlighting physical activity benefits for both service users and staff wellbeing.
Shift in Practice Approach
 Staff adopted a proactive approach to promote physical activity beyond traditional functional movement and social stimulation

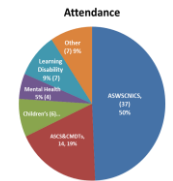


TALKING TEAM RESILIENCE WORKSHOPS
 93 Band 5/6 social work staff over five sessions focused on workplace resilience.

POSITIVE PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK
 75 participants provided feedback with **100%** satisfaction on workshop delivery, content relevance, reflection, and resources.

TEAM RESILIENCE SNAPSHOT
 Participants assessed themselves and their teams on resilience, revealing valuable insights into team wellbeing

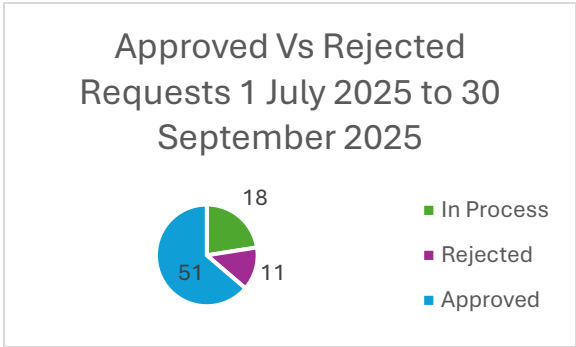
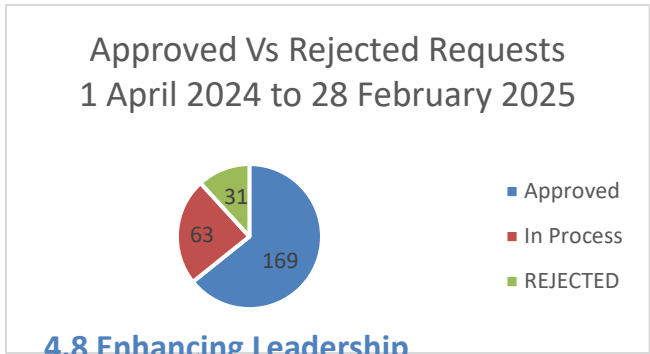
FOLLOW-UP SURVEY AND IMPACT
 A November 2025 follow-up survey evaluated the long-term impact and learning outcomes from the workshops.



4.7 Flexible working

The EDSW Recruitment Retention Strategic Group have worked with HR colleagues to promote and accommodate flexible working for social workers. Between 1 April 2024 and February 2025, a substantial 169 flexible working requests were approved, with a further 63 in process and only 31 rejected—demonstrating both high demand and a high

approval rate over a long reporting period. In the most recent HR report from 1 July to 30 September 2025 there were 51 approvals, 18 in process, and just 11 rejections. When viewed alongside the earlier longer dataset, this suggests that the Trust continues to receive and approve significant numbers of requests, maintaining a pattern of supporting flexible working as a key workforce measure. The consistently higher approval rates relative to rejections across both periods indicate that Social Work services are actively enabling flexible arrangements, aligning with broader efforts to enhance staff wellbeing, retention, and progressive workforce practices.



4.8 Enhancing Leadership

Effective Leadership is a critical factor in supporting retention. The Trust has introduced a new bespoke leadership development programme for Band 7 social work team leaders, designed to strengthen their ability to create secure, supportive team environments and improve staff retention. Building on evidence from regional DOH-funded retention initiatives and research by Cook et al. (2022) and Biggart et al. (2017), the programme focuses on maximising ‘pull factors’ that encourage social workers to stay—such as strong organisational culture, effective supervision, meaningful peer and team support, and access to CPD tailored to different career stages. This initiative forms part of the Trust’s wider commitment to implementing the DOH Leadership Framework for Social Work and is aligned with the Trust Leadership Academy, where the School of Social Work is the first professional group to go live. Through this combined approach, 42 Band 7 managers have now enrolled in the new ‘Step Up Stand Strong’ leadership programme, with the aim of strengthening leadership capability and supporting a stable, well-supported social work workforce.

This programme is in addition to the regional Leadership Centre programmes ‘Stronger Together’ which the Trust have 5 places on each year for band 8a and up and the Leaders in Practice Programme for Band 7.

4.9 Professional Development

Offering staff a wide range of professional development opportunities is a key factor in retention, as it enables social workers to specialise, build confidence, and feel equipped to carry out complex roles. Research consistently shows that access to meaningful CPD and career progression pathways strengthens professional identity and increases workforce stability (Cook et al., 2022; Biggart et al., 2017). The Workforce Learning Development Staff are currently supporting 154 staff undertaking post-qualifying study at Masters level and in September 2025 34 social workers received NISCC Professional in Practice Awards.

4.10 Profiling BHSCT social work 'brand'

The Trust has invested significantly in strengthening the social work brand to attract and retain a skilled workforce. Building on the 'Being Belfast' approach, the branding highlights the strengths, values, and identity of the social work community through wellbeing initiatives, staff recognition events, and positive messaging across social media.

Staff remain the strongest ambassadors; positive experiences shared by them continue to be one of the most effective recruitment tools. To support authenticity, Workforce Workstreams focus on staff experience, prioritising high-quality supervision, training, and development. An annual wellbeing calendar fosters professional identity and connection, with events such as Mile in May and Valuing Social Work gaining regional recognition.

Children's Services have developed bespoke recruitment packs featuring staff testimonials. Research from the Irish Association of Social Workers (2020) and Professor Laura Cook (2024) links strong social work identity to improved retention, underpinning the branding strategy. A dedicated Belfast Trust Social Work logo reinforces a clear, recognisable identity.

Brand development will continue through the 'Being Open' and 'Respect and Civility' initiatives, engagement with schools, employer events, and prospective social workers. Ongoing profiling of achievements across social media ensures the brand remains visible, credible, and attractive.

5.0 Conclusion and next steps

Although significant progress has been made in strengthening recruitment and retention with leadership development, professional pathways, and wellbeing initiatives, the Trust continues to face critical vacancies, particularly within Children's Services. The Recruitment and Retention workstreams will therefore maintain their focused efforts, with particular attention to preparing for the new Safe Staffing Guidance due in 2026 and working closely with the Department of Health on the development of the 10-year workforce plan. Recent increases in Social Work degree places are not yet supported by a long-term commitment which is especially concerning given forthcoming adult and children's legislation that necessitate additional social work capacity for effective implementation and planned expansion of multi-disciplinary teams in primary care. Ensuring that social work staffing levels are reviewed and appropriately funded across the Trust will be a priority to ensure services meet escalating demands. The CCS Workforce Group chaired by the Finance Codirector are working on a projections paper which identifies the projected workforce required to meet demand and will bring proposals to the Executive Team, Trust Board and SPPG in early 2026. The recruitment and retention workstreams will also continue with their drive to ensuring that Belfast Trust strengthens its workforce, fills outstanding vacancies, retains skilled practitioners, and continues its ambition to be the employer of choice for social workers.

05.12.2025