

Dr Andrew Murrison MP
Chair
Northern Ireland Affairs Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

07/09/2018

Dear Dr Murrison

I listened with interest to the oral evidence provided to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on Wednesday 5 September by Valerie Watts, Chief Executive of the Health and Social Care Board and Interim Chief Executive of the Public Health Agency. During the session Ms Watts explained there are approximately 1,800 vacant posts in the Northern Ireland Health and Social Care system.

The British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI) contends this figure most likely underestimates the number of vacancies in the social work sector. I publicly raised this point during a radio interview on BBC Radio Ulster's Good Morning Ulster Programme on Thursday 6 September.

The social work workforce in Northern Ireland is overwhelmingly female—eighty-two percent of all social workers registered with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council are women. Understandably, the composition of the workforce results in high rates of maternity leave. When posts become vacant due to maternity leave, they are not in all instances filled on a whole-time equivalent basis. The same situation applies in cases of long-term sickness absence.

A post is not officially considered vacant if it is filled on a part-time basis while a full-time employee is on an extended period of leave. However, given other members of staff are required to cover the additional workload, from the point of view of front line practitioners, and in terms of consequences for service delivery, the post is in effect vacant.

In September 2016 BASW NI published research which found that fifty per cent of social workers report at least one vacancy in their team. The research also presented the need for an additional three hundred and thirty social work posts in the statutory sector and fifty in the voluntary sector to address the problem of nine out of ten of social workers routinely working additional unpaid hours.

Since the publication of this research the Department of Health Workforce Census indicates the whole-time equivalent number of social work posts in the statutory sector has increased by one hundred and ninety-two. However, during this time our members report that demand on services has also continued to increase.

This, and other workforce challenges faced by social workers in Northern Ireland are presented in our written evidence submitted to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. If it would benefit the inquiry, I and a colleague would be pleased to provide oral evidence to the Committee on this, or any other issue of relevance.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Carolyn Ewart".

Carolyn Ewart
National Director, BASW NI