



## TRUST BOARD COVER SHEET

	<p>The cover sheet purpose is to provide the Trust Board/Committee with a clear summary of the paper being presented, how it impacts on the people we serve, key matters for attention and the ask of the Trust Board/Committee</p> <p>The Accountable Director must satisfy themselves that the cover sheet is accurate and fully reflects the paper. The expectation is that the Accountable Director has read and agreed the content of both the cover sheet and paper.</p>	
<b>Meeting and Date of meeting</b>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Trust Board</b> <b>26 June 2025</b></p>	
<b>Title of paper</b>	<p style="text-align: center;">EDSW report to Trust Board in respect of Statutory Functions report to SPPG May 2025</p>	
<b>Accountable Director</b>	<b>Name</b>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Colm McCafferty</i></p>
	<b>Position</b>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Executive Director of Social Work</i></p>
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<b>This paper sits within the Trust Board role of:</b>	<p style="text-align: center;">Accountability</p>	
<b>This paper is presented for:</b>	<p style="text-align: center;">Approval</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>(Notes on completion at end of document)</i></p>	
<b>Links to Trust Strategic Priorities</b>  	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Collaborative Working
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Learning Organisation
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Safety, Quality & Experience
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Community First
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Whole-Life Approach

## 1. Reason for Presentation of Paper / Report

The Statutory Functions report, Corporate Parenting report and related papers specify the powers and duties, which the SPPG has delegated to the Trust. The report outlines how the Trust has discharged the relevant functions across all Directorates and service performance.

This report will outline achievements to date and considers where the organisation is challenged in respect of the delivery of some elements of statutory functions and identify associated reasons.

## 2. Detailed summary of paper contents:

The Trust, in the majority, continues to deliver effective and efficient statutory social work services, despite the increasing demands on services and staff across all areas of service delivery. During 2024/25 there have been sustained workforce shortages and challenges across all Directorates. Significant efforts have been made internally to manage these challenges, both in terms of recruitment and retention of staff. All Directorates are impacted upon by workforce challenges which is manifesting in unallocated cases and increasing waiting times to access services

The Directorate of Mental Health and Disability's staffing challenges have impacted on the increased number of unallocated cases within Learning Disability and increased waiting times for Primary Mental Health appointments. There are governance arrangements in place to ensure oversight of these cases.

Delayed discharges from both Acute and Mental Health inpatient beds remains challenging, including securing suitable placement options to meet the needs of patients. Physical Disability Services continue to be challenged with increasing numbers of outstanding packages of care. Challenges remain in relation to adequate resources to facilitate effective transitions from Children's services.

Quality Improvement initiatives within Adult Community Services have supported increased compliance with annual reviews and reduction in the numbers of unallocated cases, although these remain areas requiring further improvements. The demand for domiciliary care packages continues to outweigh capacity and there are high numbers of outstanding Domiciliary Care Packages impacting on Acute flow.

Adult Community Services and Mental Health and Disability Governance Leads are working collaboratively with the Social Work and Social Care Governance service to review and progress a model to enhance a skills mix approach across Adult Services. This work aims to improve areas of current challenge in terms of workforce deficits and improving compliance with statutory functions.

Within the Children and Young People's Directorate, there are ongoing staffing pressures within Family Support and Safeguarding Services and Corporate Parenting Division. In response to the pressures the Directorate Business Continuity Plan has been enacted and the CYPS SW Improvement Forum continues to progress to oversee the reform of the SW service delivery model, taking account of the Children's Social Care Service Review recommendations.

Despite the workforce challenges the CYPS Directorate, on the whole has managed to ensure a comprehensive social work service in respect of both, child protection and children in care services. A Social Work led skills mix approach has been implemented across Family Intervention services, with considerable success reflected in reduced number of Family Support unallocated cases.

Within Children with Disabilities services, the increasing volume of referrals and workforce capacity has resulted in increasing numbers of unallocated cases. Service developments are being progressed in lieu of new investments which will result in reduction of unallocated cases in addition to other supports to families.

Corporate Parenting Services have continued to report unallocated Children in Care cases throughout 2024/25. A governance and assurance framework is in place to ensure oversight of unallocated cases, ensuring effective risk managing and escalation processes. The Directorate is committed to exiting this as soon as staffing levels permit. The service is progressing a skills mix initiative with the objective of reducing unallocated LAC and eventual elimination of same.

### **3. Areas of improvement/achievement:**

- The Executive Director of Social Work and Social Care has established robust governance arrangement in line with the Assurance and Accountability Framework for Social Work and Social Care, which documents the governance requirements under Statutory Functions and Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) Standards of Conduct.
- A total of 42 newly qualified social workers will take up posts within the Trust between July and September 2025.
- The Trust will provide 95 practice learning opportunities to social work students, comprising of 87 commissioned social work places and an additional 8 places through the Open University programme.
- The Trust continues to upscale social work Open University training of our Social Care Staff. (30 SW graduates in the past 5 years)
- Staff support and well being initiatives, consistent with the Trust's 'Our People Plan', are a key priority across all Directorates.

While the workforce difficulties have had an impact on the delivery of services and statutory functions, there is evidence of the ongoing commitment across Directorates to responding to service users and families in greatest need, and ensuring a constant focus on responding innovatively to presenting challenges.

### **4. Areas of concern/risk/challenge:**

- Sustained workforce shortages have impacted all Directorates' ability to fulfil statutory functions as required.
- Unallocated Looked after children
- Outstanding annual reviews
- Sustained pressures on core staff in services most impacted up by vacancies, ie Gateway service

- Available workforce to recruit
- Service dependence on newly qualified staff
- Increasing demand for services across all specialities and associated risk

**5. Impact on Statutory Duties: Provide details on the impact of the following and how.**

<i>Financial Impact</i>	<i>Safety and Quality Impact</i>
Yes, there are Financial Impacts	Yes, there are Quality, Safety or Experience Impacts

**6. Risk Assessment (Risk level and state if a risk assessment be completed)**

On Corporate Risk Register

**7. Other Business Intelligence/data (If appropriate)**

**8. Impact: Provide details on the impact of the following and how. If this is N/A you should explain why this is an appropriate response.**

<b>Corporate Risk Register</b>	Social work staff vacancies and associated unallocated social work cases
<b>Board Assurance Framework</b>	Yes. Board awareness of existing service challenges linked to Statutory social work functions.
<b>Equality and Human Rights</b>	No

**Trust Board Role Fulfilment**

<b>Strategy</b>	<i>Papers in this category should address forward-looking priorities, long-term objectives, or service transformation. These are typically focused on shaping the future of the organisation and will often involve decisions on direction, investment, or innovation.</i>
<b>Culture</b>	<i>These papers aim to influence or reflect the values, behaviours, and staff or patient experiences within HSC. They may relate to leadership development, equality, diversity and inclusion, staff engagement, or initiatives intended to reinforce our organisational ethos.</i>

<b>Accountability</b>	<i>Papers falling into this area relate to governance, assurance, performance monitoring, compliance, and risk. They provide evidence that responsibilities are being fulfilled, standards are being met, and corrective actions are being taken where necessary.</i>
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### **Reasons for Paper Presentation**

<b>Approval</b>	<i>Used when an item requires a formal agreement or endorsement by the meeting / committee members. Examples are approving minutes, budgets, proposals or policies.</i>
<b>Assurance</b>	<i>Used when an item can be measured against a certain criteria / standard. Examples are a project is on course with delivery or financial targets are being met.</i>
<b>Information</b>	<i>Used when an item is presented for the purpose of updating or informing the attendees without requiring a decision or action, such as reports, updates, or announcements.</i>
<b>Discussion</b>	<i>Used when an item is listed primarily for open discussion, brainstorming or gathering input from the members without requiring an immediate decision.</i>

## **Executive Director of Social Work Report for Trust Board 26 June 2025**

This report will focus on the Southern Trust’s Performance and Assurance report to SPPG in relation to Statutory Functions for year end March 2025. The report will outline achievements to date and consider where the organisation is challenged in respect of the delivery of some elements of statutory functions and identify associated reasons.

### **Executive Director of Social Work (EDSW) Statement of the Governance arrangements**

The Southern Trust’s Assurance and Accountability Framework for Social Work and Social Care documents the governance requirements under Statutory Functions and Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) Standards of Conduct. The Framework stipulates the roles and responsibilities of all registered staff and their line managers.

In line with the governance frameworks, the Executive Director of Social Work (EDSW) has established quarterly accountability meetings in each Operational Directorate relevant to social work and social care. This is a key accountability and assurance process whereby governance issues in the operational Directorates, relating to statutory functions and performance are reviewed with Operational Directors and Directorate Social Work Leads. This also provides a line of accountability and provision of professional advice within Directorates.

The Trust has a Professional Social Work and Social Care Governance Forum which is chaired by the EDSW. Its purpose is to promote continuous professional education, learning and development, provide opportunities to share learning and highlight the requirement that professional standards are in place and adhered to, including the discharge of statutory functions.

The EDSW presents an overview report to Trust Board 3 times per year detailing assurance processes and where there are deficits in relation to statutory functions.

### **Social Work Workforce**

The Trust, in the majority, continues to deliver effective and efficient statutory services, despite the increasing demands on services and staff across all areas of service delivery. During 2024/25 there have been sustained and longstanding workforce shortages across all Directorates. Significant efforts have been made internally within the Directorates to manage these challenges, with specific focus on

attraction, recruitment and retention of staff. A cross directorate workforce group has been established and a comprehensive plan has been developed to respond to the presenting challenges. In addition, the Trust is supportive of, and engages in work occurring at a regional level in relation to supporting recruitment of newly qualified Social Work staff into Trusts, and the drive to increase student places on University and Open University programmes.

A total of 42 students have accepted vacant social work posts within the Trust and will commence as Band 5 social workers (Assessed Year in Employment) between July and September 2025. The Trust will provide 95 practice learning opportunities to social work students, comprising of 87 commissioned social work places and an additional 8 places through the Open University programme.

The Department of Health (DOH) have committed to increasing the number of social worker training places, In 2024/25 an additional 40 places were funded by DOH and there is a commitment to the same number in 2025/26. Whilst this increase in supply is welcome, a growth in social work posts is anticipated due to the expansion of general practice multi-disciplinary teams and forthcoming legislation such as the Adult Protection Bill and the Adoption Act.

Staff support and wellbeing initiatives, consistent with the Trust's 'Our People Plan', are a key priority across all Directorates, including links with U Matter Staff Support Service, encouraging teams to have a health and wellbeing plan, team link ups, higher visibility of Senior Management, blended approach to office/home working, regional recruitment approach, flexible working, staff recognition and support and promotion of the Social Work Leadership Framework.

Within 2024/25 a comprehensive training plan was delivered to social workers and social care workers aimed at strengthening confidence and competence in role. This included enhanced supports for newly qualified social workers, strengthening skills of assessment, review and recording and shaping learning linked to Case Management Reviews and Serious Adverse Incidents. In addition, social work staff have engaged in formalised training programmes through the Professional in Practice (PiP) Framework. Many of these programmes are focussed on the discharge of statutory functions, eg approved social workers and practice teachers. Other PiP programmes have supported staff to develop specialist skills, such as strengthening the use of community development approaches, developing skills in adult safeguarding, palliative care, systemic practice and the use of psychological based therapies. Safeguarding training was delivered to staff across a range of professional settings in line with their role and responsibilities. Vocational qualifications were delivered to a range of social care staff.

## **Statutory Functions update**

### **Directorate of Mental Health & Disability**

- **Learning Disability Division**

Within the reporting period the Learning Disability Division has maintained a focus on improving compliance with completion of annual reviews. Overall compliance has improved from 65% in 2024 to 77% in March 2025, with 2 teams achieving 85% compliance. Overall compliance is impacted by significant workforce vacancies in one team.

The uptake for carers assessments remains high within the Division, however there is further work required to ensure that all carers have a recorded carers assessment or an offer of a carers assessment. Further work in this area will be ongoing.

Carer Cash Grants increased from 289 in 2023/24 to 335 in 2024/25 (16% increase), and Direct Payments increased from 333 to 389 in the same period (17% increase).

### **Challenges/risks re statutory functions**

Workforce vacancies and pressures across Learning Disability has impacted on compliance with Statutory Functions. Recruitment and retention of social work staff remains an ongoing challenge. The Division has welcomed a number of AYE social workers into the service, however their AYE status means that they have limited experience in relation to Mental Capacity Act and Adult Safeguarding Investigation Officer roles.

There are currently 150 unallocated cases within the Learning Disability Division, with governance arrangements in place to manage these cases. Work is underway in relation to the role of the Social Work Assistant and the introduction of skills mix and the potential for allocation of appropriate cases. Proactive Social Work recruitment and supporting the retention of staff is ongoing.

Day care services are experiencing challenges in relation to staffing and responding to the increased complexity of service users in transition from Children's Services. Challenges also relate to limited resources available for service users transitioning from Children's to Adult services. The Trust has established a Transitions Forum in response to the findings of "The Inbetweeners - a review of the transition from CYP into adult services" (June 2023), with a focus on all transitions between Children and Adult Services, including Disability. This forum is chaired by the EDSW. It is important to note that recent and welcome investments in children's services will increase challenges in respect of transitions without a similar investment and service expansion in Adult Disability services.

There continues to be challenges in relation to the lack of short break availability for service users with complex health care and behavioural needs. Key workers and Short Breaks team continue to work closely with families to secure appropriate short breaks in a timely manner.

- **Physical & Sensory Disability**

Physical and Sensory Disability services have seen a 7% increase in adults who are in receipt of social work or social care services. The Division increased Carers Cash Grants by 30% to 113 made within the reporting period.

In Sensory Disability there are increased waiting times for initial assessment and an internal service review has been undertaken with a recommendation that referrals are appropriately triaged and allocated to most appropriate professional to best meet the need.

### **Challenges/risks re statutory functions**

The Physical Disability Service continues to be challenged with increasing numbers of outstanding packages of care, with 32 service users currently waiting on a package of care.

As reported in previous years, there are limited placement options for adults with complex care needs and mental illness, resulting in delayed hospital discharges. Nursing homes with Physical Disability registered beds are often not equipped to manage the level of mental illness experienced by the service users and nursing homes with mental health beds are not willing to accept those with complex physical disabilities. There are currently 6 delayed discharges with timeframes ranging from 3 – 6 months.

- **Mental Health Division**

There has been significant focus across Mental Health teams in relation to compliance with Carers' Assessments and Annual Reviews. Annual Reviews continue to be monitored closely and Community Mental Health Teams have maintained an average of 90% compliance during the year. Carer Assessments offered decreased from 609 in 2023/24 to 344 in 2024/25, however uptake increased from 47% to 52%. Work has been undertaken with the Teams to ensure only identified carers are offered an assessment. Community Mental Health Service reform and encompass readiness has impacted on the number of Carer Assessments offered.

The recent merger of Support and Recovery services and Primary Mental Health has resulted in a move away from Mental Health Practitioner roles to defined professional Social Work / Nursing and AHP roles. Social Work now has an agreed number of posts in each locality area ensuring that social work issues, including adult safeguarding and Think Family, can be prioritised. All Social work vacancies have now been appointed to and it is envisaged that there will be capacity to increase the number of trained adult safeguarding investigating officers and focus on embedding the Think Family approach to working with parental mental illness. The Steps to Wellness Service has reduced waiting times for mental health appointments, although waiting times remain a concern and are an area for further improvement.

The Southern Trust have continued to evidence improvement of ASW staff available to fulfil the statutory requirements. There are currently 48 ASWs appointed by the Southern Trust.

### **Challenges/risks re statutory functions**

The Mental Health Division continues to experience challenges in relation to recruitment to SW posts and will welcome 6 AYE social workers into the service in June/September 2025. Waiting lists for new assessments have remained consistently high over the past year, impacted by vacancies, sick / maternity leave and Encompass. Urgent assessments are prioritised, waiting lists and activity is reviewed on a weekly basis.

Delayed discharges from both Acute and Mental Health inpatient beds remain challenging in terms of sourcing placements for service users with complex needs. Professionals continue to work closely with families and care home facilities to agree the best possible option for service users.

Reduced bed capacity in Bluestone, in addition to NIPSA health and safety directives for RESWS staff, has resulted in significant challenges with handovers and protracted waits. Senior Management are currently working through options to mitigate against the impact of protracted waits and the use of other appropriately qualified staff to support same.

Concerns exist in relation to the spread of ASW cover across Directorates in line with DOH recommended quality standards for ASW, whereby there is a requirement to have ASW cover across all relevant Directorates. There are also significant challenges in relation to the interface with the ASW service and Regional Emergency Social Work Service which is managed by the Belfast Trust on behalf of the region. This is primarily related to Acute admission conveyancing delays and expectations on Day time services who are not responsible for out of hours service delivery.

### **Adult Community Services**

Adult Community Services have engaged in quality improvement initiatives to improve compliance with annual reviews and to reduce the numbers of unallocated cases. Progress is being made despite the ongoing workforce challenges.

Adult Community Services and Mental Health and Disability Governance Leads are working collaboratively with the Social Work and Social Care Governance service to review and progress a model to enhance a skills mix approach across Adult Services. This work aims to improve areas of current challenge in terms of workforce deficits and improving compliance with statutory functions.

### **Challenges/risks re statutory functions**

Adult Community Services continue to be challenged in relation to achieving the performance target of 80% compliance for completion of annual reviews. There has been a reduction in outstanding annual reviews from 1967 in March 2024 to 1550 in March 2025. Overall compliance is 74.2% (increased from 62.9%): Domiciliary Care

69.6% (increased from 60.3%); Nursing Home 87.2% (increased from 70.8%); Residential Home 85.3% (increased from 71.8%).

The Directorate continues to focus on the reduction of unallocated cases, from 2843 in March 2024 to 2426 in March 2025. It is anticipated that the enhancement of a skills mix approach across teams will support the continued reduction in unallocated cases. The cross Directorate working group will oversee the development of the Social Work Assistant role to undertake key worker responsibility for non complex cases. This is in line with DOH guidance issued in March 2025 and this approach is welcomed as it enhances flexibility through the development of skills mix and enhanced skills of Social Work Assistants. Governance arrangements are being developed to include professional oversight and governance to support the role out, including a clear escalation process, supervision, training and development.

The demand for domiciliary care packages continues to outweigh capacity and there are high numbers of outstanding Domiciliary Care Packages impacting on Acute flow (670 outstanding packages in March 2025).

Domiciliary Care is a key priority across the Trust. There is significant work underway under the 'Timely Care' Strategy to maximise domiciliary care capacity. The service has undertaken several quality improvement projects, including the introduction of a Live Monitoring System, which aims to ensure the most efficient use of resources. The Directorate has also introduced an Early Review Team Service to monitor and review new and increased packages of care. The focus of the review will take an enabling ethos, maximising self-independence where possible.

### **Children and Young People's Service (CYPS)**

CYPS have seen continued demand for services, with 6122 children in need in Southern Trust area. There are 498 children on the Child Protection Register, with 412 Child Protection Case Conferences held during the 6 month reporting period. 93% of case conferences were held within statutory timeframes.

At 31 March 2025 there were 689 Looked After Children (LAC), an increase of 12 from the previous 6 months. 564 LAC reviews were held during 6 month reporting period, with 94% LAC reviews held within statutory timeframes.

The Trust has 331 Trust Foster Carers and 241 Kinship Carers, reflecting a continued increase in Trust Foster Care capacity. 17 Adoption Orders were obtained in the 6 month reporting period.

100% (183) of Early Years Annual Inspections were undertaken in the 6 month reporting period. There are 583 registered services within the Southern area, with 11,236 child care places.

### **Challenges/risks re statutory functions**

In response to the staffing pressures within CYPS, the Directorate Business Continuity Plan has been enacted and the CYPS SW Improvement Forum continues to progress to oversee the reform of the SW service delivery model, taking account

of the Children's Social Care Service Review recommendations. The Forum is accountable to CYPS Senior Leadership Team.

While the workforce difficulties have had an impact on the delivery of services and statutory functions, the Directorate has managed, on the whole, to ensure a comprehensive social work service in respect of both, child protection and children in care cases. However, due to continuing staffing shortages, there continues to be a number of unallocated children's social work cases in Family Support Division. A Social Work led skills mix approach has been implemented across Family Intervention services, with considerable success reflected in reduced number of Family Support unallocated cases.

Within Children with Disabilities (CWD) services the increasing volume of referrals and workforce capacity has resulted in increasing numbers of unallocated cases in Children with Disability services. Service developments are being progressed in lieu of new investments which will result in reduction of unallocated cases in addition to provision of other supports to families.

Despite these challenges the CWD service continues to upscale overnight short breaks to children and families and during the past year delivered in excess of 2.200 overnight short breaks away from the family home. In addition the service has upscaled day opportunities and associated supports to children with disabilities and their families and will further upscale this in lieu of new investments announced by the minister last Autumn.

Corporate Parenting Services have continued to report unallocated Looked After Children cases throughout 2024/25. A governance and assurance framework is in place for unallocated Children in Care cases, to manage the associated risk, including escalation processes. The Directorate is committed to exiting this as soon as staffing levels permit. The service is progressing a skills mix initiative with the objective of reducing unallocated LAC and eventual elimination of same.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the extensive workforce challenges across Directorates, I can confirm that the Trust has managed to deliver compliance in respect of the statutory functions in the vast majority of areas and can evidence a continuous focus on service improvement and the delivery of safe and effective care to those in need. Social Work staff have been industrious and committed in their response to meeting the complex challenges identified within the Statutory Functions action plan, particularly in the context of rebuilding and the significant levels of professional social work staff vacancies.

I personally want to acknowledge the commitment of our Social Work and Social Care staff and managers across each Directorate, and thank them for their dedication and compassion in delivering services in such challenging circumstances.

The Trust is committed to ongoing improvements, however as Executive Director of Social Work, I am concerned about the continued impact of austerity and increasing poverty on vulnerable children, adults, families and communities, and the associated limitations experienced by key services in meeting demand.

This situation is significantly exacerbated to the long standing challenges associated with social work workforce supply, and underlines the urgency associated with workforce planning by the Department of Health supported by Trusts.