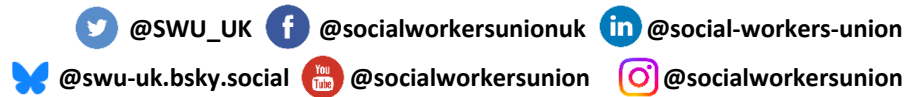




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13 May 2025

Mike Nesbitt MLA,
Department of Health Information Office,
C5.20,
Castle Buildings,
Stormont,
Belfast,
BT4 3SQ

Adult mental healthcare in Northern Ireland

Dear Mike Nesbitt MLA,

Demand for adult mental healthcare in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales is growing, yet the sector faces a multitude of challenges, including significant unfilled vacancies, a high turnover of staff, under-resourced community care services, and a shortage of suitable hospital beds.

Frontline professionals supported by the Social Workers Union are writing to you to demand action to help address these challenges.

Latest figures across all four nations show that the percentage of unfilled vacancies in social work remains high compared to the wider economy. In addition, the sector continues to experience a high turnover of staff, with thousands leaving every year.

According to the [NHS Confederation](#), neglect of community mental health services and lack of suitable hospital beds is fuelling A&E waits of up to 80 hours for some mental health patients, leading to a growing crisis with profound effects on patients and the wider NHS.

Social workers are committed and hardworking people who just want to make a positive contribution to the lives and communities which they serve. They also have a hugely important role in safeguarding the rights of people in a vulnerable situation. Unfortunately, years of scapegoating and a negative portrayal of the profession has made it even more difficult to recruit and retain social workers.

In some parts of the UK, vacancies can sometimes go unfilled for more than 12 months and many of us are now heavily reliant on agencies to fill posts.

We are therefore asking you to consider the following:

1) It is time that we did more to recognise their value and to ensure that our profession is an attractive career opportunity for the UK workforce. We urge you to work with us to launch a campaign that aims to recognise this hard work and promotes the profession as a viable career.

By investing in community care and frontloading the adult mental healthcare workforce, we can save the NHS time and money and help to reduce pressure on our already stretched A&E departments.

2) We also urge you to discuss adopting a common framework for all four nations, which covers practices, pay and conditions (including housing).

By investing in these areas, we can help to reduce pressure on hospital beds at a time when demand is increasing.

We appreciate there is no quick fix, but we do need all UK governments to recognise that these problems exist, and they have to be resolved before anything can change.

We hope that by bringing all four nations together, we can find ways to bring about positive changes in government policies that benefit the people we support and make the system fairer and workable for everyone.

We urge you to meet us as soon as possible and we look forward to working with you to come up with the solutions urgently needed in response to this mental health crisis.

Yours sincerely,

John McGowan
General Secretary, Social Workers Union