



# **ADVANCED SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN ADULT MENTAL HEALTH**

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Briefing Paper

*“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 knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. (IFSW, 2014).”*

**April 2024**

# Introduction

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## The Irish Association of Social Workers

The Irish Association of Social Workers is the national body representing social workers in Ireland.

## Social work in Ireland

Social workers are regulated and registered by the Health and Social Care Professionals body (CORU). As of October 2023, there were 5,243 social workers registered in Ireland (CORU, 2023)<sup>1</sup>. Social workers practice in a broad range of areas including but not limited to; children and families, mental health, addiction, probation, older persons, disabilities, primary care, adoption, international protection, hospitals, policy, academia, NGO's, government, private practice.

## Note from the IASW Chair

I welcome and endorse this paper on behalf of IASW. While the paper deals with a specific area of social work practice, it has been generated in the broader context of ongoing challenges confronting our profession. The recruitment and retention crisis persists as a most serious existential challenge for social work and results in widespread pressure on social workers, individually and collectively, as well as putting huge strain on services. In addition, the lack of visibility of social work in certain settings, including health services, is identified – anecdotally at least – as contributing to a perceived “brain drain” to other agencies who may be seen to invest more positively in social work and relevant career development, and where the importance of social approaches, and the leadership capabilities of social work are better recognised. The HSE's *Advanced Practice Framework*<sup>2</sup> has been the source of another challenge, as well as a unique opportunity for social work, providing a clear mandate for our professional association to generate pointers towards appropriate action, as reflected in this briefing paper. Social workers in mental health have grasped this opportunity to “be the change they want to see,” by showing leadership in the advanced practice process. I warmly commend and congratulate all our colleagues who have contributed to the production of this important paper, which I consider in many respects to be an early milestone on this developmental journey. While there is more to do, I am confident that the present paper will serve as a practical guide to social workers, not only in the field of adult mental health, but as an example for colleagues in other areas, contributing to the wider development of Advanced Social Work Practice and of quality social work practice more generally.



**Vivian Geiran, Chairperson, IASW**

**April 2024**

# Executive Summary

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This briefing paper provides context for Advanced Social Work Practice in the area of adult mental health in Ireland and advocates for focused effort to address this issue by providing concrete suggestions for consideration and action.

This briefing paper highlights the following in particular:

1. The role of advanced social work practice needs to be formally acknowledged across health and social care settings.
2. There needs to be opportunities for social workers in adult mental health services to formally engage in the development of advanced practice level capabilities.
3. Systems-level investment is required to ensure – consistent high standards, and quality, safe and effective services in advanced social work practice.
4. Think Social Work, Think Advanced Practice, for better continuity of care, improved service user outcomes and a holistic approach to societal health and wellbeing.

# Context

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## Advanced social work practice

Within a rapidly changing and evolving health and social care climate, investment in the further development of the vital role of social work<sup>3</sup> across Irish social and health services should be a key priority for government departments, employers and the public. Recent reports have highlighted the need for reform of health and social care professionals' roles in the area of advanced practice<sup>4</sup> and the priorities of the Chief HSCP Office include developing advanced practice roles across health and social care professions in Ireland<sup>5</sup>. In social work, advanced practice can cultivate and advance the quality of social work practice and that of the broader social work profession. At departmental level, a Health and Social Care Workforce Planning Strategy, Action Plan and Planning Projection Model is being developed with technical support provided by the European Commission. A key outcome of this project is the production of rolling health and social care workforce planning action plans with targeted policy measures for health and social care workforce reform.

## Advanced social work practice in mental health

Across adult mental health services there are many opportunities and scope for the development of advanced social work practice, for example, through enhancement of clinical care programmes such as *National Clinical Programme for Self-Harm and Suicide related ideation*, *National Clinical Programme for Eating Disorders*, *Early Intervention in Psychosis*, *ADHD in Adults*; through family-focused practice and further enhancement of specialist services such as Rehabilitation, Older Persons Mental Health Services and out of hours services. The area of adult safeguarding also provides scope for advanced social work practice roles. Social work is widely acknowledged as the lead profession in safeguarding<sup>6,7</sup> within a multi-discipline environment that promotes integrated care and “one universal health service for all, providing the right care, in the right place, at the right time”<sup>8</sup>. Advanced safeguarding social work practice posts across adult mental health services would support a culture of safeguarding in these settings, similar to those recently introduced within acute services.

# Key Issues to Consider

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## The role of Advanced Social Work Practice in adult mental health needs to be formally acknowledged

Social workers across mental health services currently may work to advanced practice level without formal recognition. They do this to meet increasing demand for health and social care for service users across the lifecycle and to ensure the provision of high-quality, effective, safe services to the public. Through their dedication to exemplary practice, social workers support the implementation of Sláintecare. Across adult mental health services, social workers deliver new integrated models and pathways of care. These are focused on early interventions to prevent avoidable emergency presentations and admissions, reduce waiting lists and increasing senior decision-making capacity. Recognising the vital contribution of social workers' knowledge, skills and credentials through advanced practice is necessary to support retention and expansion of vital social work provision across mental health services and by providing a career pathway to enable development and progression in the profession.

There are multiple benefits to the redesign of health and social care services which maximises the effort and input of social workers and the wider health and social care professions (HSCP) workforce through the introduction of advanced practice roles; for example – practitioners working to their full scope of practice; sustainable models of care; career development opportunities; new service configurations; increased service efficiency; reducing service costs; increasing service accessibility, public satisfaction and staff satisfaction<sup>9</sup>.

- *Actions for policy-makers:* set targets and monitor growth of social workers in advanced practice across adult mental health. Establish baseline figures of social work workforce and use available levers to increase the supply of registered social workers and to support the availability of advanced social work practice roles in adult mental health.
- *Action for employers:* introduce advanced social work practice roles across adult mental health and ensure that they are open to all social workers that have the right capabilities; also increase social work staffing numbers across adult mental health to address recruitment and retention issues.

## There needs to be opportunities for social workers in adult mental health to develop advanced practice level capabilities

Social work is a regulated profession under the Health and Social Care Professions Act, 2005. The Act allows for advanced practice, where designated professionals 'must act within the limits of your knowledge, skills, competence and experience.'<sup>10</sup> Social workers engaging in advanced practice in a formal capacity should have the opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities for working at the level of advanced practice. Social workers seeking to work in advanced practice roles should have a recognised award (e.g. NQF minimum level 9) and evidence of learning that encompasses the four general pillars of advanced practice: (i) clinical practice; (ii) leadership and management; (iii) education and facilitation of clinical learning, and; (iv) evidence, research and development.<sup>11</sup> There should also be scope to develop social work specific advanced practice competencies that align to the core values, ethics and principles of the profession.

- *Actions for employers:* encourage social workers in adult mental health to develop advanced practice capabilities and actively support quality workplace learning and formal advanced practice opportunities. Influence Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to ensure advanced social work practice postgraduate provision is developed for social workers.
- *Actions for workforce planners and policy makers:* increase opportunities for social workers to develop advanced practice capabilities across adult mental health through deployment of appropriate continuing professional development (CPD) budgets and job planning.
- *Actions for HEIs:* develop opportunities for social workers to gain advanced practice level capabilities for their roles via flexible and appropriate routes.
- *Actions for the professional association:* to lead the development of a recommended advanced social work practice framework, which provides a clear route towards advanced social work practice. This should be co-designed with social workers, unions, relevant alliances, governmental departments and HEIs.

## A systems approach is required to ensure consistent high-standards, quality, safe and effective services in Advanced Social Work Practice

There should be a common *capabilities framework* developed, which is applicable to different areas of advanced social work practice. This framework should set out a definition of advanced social work practice across all care and practice areas and the capabilities required for advanced social work practice. These can align with existing overarching Health and Social Care Professionals (HSCPs) advanced practice requirements but be targeted to the unique professional knowledge and skills of social work across core practice pillars. This common capabilities framework should also outline education support requirements for advanced social work practice and include advice for employers with regard to planning and implementation of advanced social work practice across all health and social care domains.

There should be a shared definition for advanced practice roles in social work. SWAMH also suggest the use of the term 'Advanced Social Work Practitioner,' as and where applicable.

There is a requirement at governmental and departmental level to facilitate the addressing of any challenges to the introduction of advanced social work practice roles, through, for example: providing the necessary leadership to get the process started and implemented; adapting legislative and regulatory frameworks as required to allow social workers to perform new roles; providing proper financial incentives for services to introduce advanced social work practice posts; helping to finance new education and training programmes to prepare social workers to fill these more advanced positions.

- *Action for Chief HSCP Office, government departments and health and social care organisations:* work with professional bodies to adopt a single shared definition, an accepted means for recognition of advanced practice capabilities and consistency across advanced practice frameworks, including specifically for social workers.
- *Action for government:* convene a multi-stakeholder process that sets out the strategic vision for the development of advanced social work practice services in the context of Sláintecare. Work to maximise the social work response to current and emerging health service challenges. Provide a model to support the development of newly qualified social workers through to advanced social work practice, that will create a critical mass of social workers working at advanced practice level to address population health needs.
- *Action for employers:* include advanced social work practice posts in projected budgets and estimates processes for mental health services; seek development funding for advanced social work practice posts in mental health services.

# Think Social Work, Think Advanced Practice

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1. Introduction of advanced social work practice roles will result in a more holistic approach, better continuity of care, and improved service user outcomes. Advanced social work practitioners can lead practice guidelines development, new initiatives in care, education of staff, audit and policy development.<sup>12</sup>
2. Advanced social work practitioners engage in work that is recognised as exemplary and provide leadership and professional wisdom to their colleagues and other professionals for work in situations of high complexity.
3. Advanced social work practitioners in mental health services<sup>13</sup>:
  - work directly with people who use services, and those who support them, as well as families and communities. They provide constructive leadership to enhance practice, procedures and policies, promote innovation, and introduce new ways of working;
  - contribute to the development of knowledge and promotion of excellence in their field using evidence-informed practice. They make use of sophisticated, critical reasoning and both model and facilitate reflective and evidence-informed practice;
  - engage effectively with situations requiring complex and challenging multi-agency input, complex family organisational dynamics, multiple problems/disadvantages, multiple significant risk factors, and taking into account the public interest;
  - provide/offer expert opinion within and across organisations as a result of developing expertise in mental health practice;
  - embed a culture that recognises every adult's right to respect, dignity, honesty and compassion in every aspect of their life, increasing the potential for people to be safe from harm and free from abuse; and
  - produce high quality assessments, accurately assessing and managing the highest levels of risk and complexity.



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- <sup>1</sup> CORU, (2023), Registration Statistics, online: <https://coru.ie/news/news-for-health-social-care-professionals/coru-registration-statistics-october-2023.html>
- <sup>2</sup> HSCP Advanced Practice Framework, HSE, 2023.
- <sup>3</sup> Shaping Social Workers' Identity: An All-Ireland Study, October 2020 – [https://www.iasw.ie/ShapingSocialWorkersIdentity\\_AnAllIrelandStudy\\_October2020](https://www.iasw.ie/ShapingSocialWorkersIdentity_AnAllIrelandStudy_October2020) .
- <sup>4</sup> HSCP Advanced Practice Framework, HSE, 2023.
- <sup>5</sup> Appointment of Fiona Steed as Chief Health and Social Care Professional (HSCP) Officer in the Department of Health [https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/12958-appointment-of-fiona-steen-as-chief-health-and-social-care-professional-hscp-officer-in-the-department-of-health/#:~:text=News-,Appointment%20of%20Fiona%20Steed%20as%20Chief%20Health%20and%20Social%20Care,in%20the%20Department%20of%20Health&text=The%20Department%20of%20Health%20is,Care%20Professional%20\(HSCP\)%20Officer.](https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/12958-appointment-of-fiona-steen-as-chief-health-and-social-care-professional-hscp-officer-in-the-department-of-health/#:~:text=News-,Appointment%20of%20Fiona%20Steed%20as%20Chief%20Health%20and%20Social%20Care,in%20the%20Department%20of%20Health&text=The%20Department%20of%20Health%20is,Care%20Professional%20(HSCP)%20Officer.)
- <sup>6</sup> Report of the Working Group on the Role of Social Workers in Adult Safeguarding (2019) Joint FÓRSA Trade Union and Health Service Executive (HSE) Working Group.
- <sup>7</sup> IASW Position Paper on Adult Safeguarding <https://www.iasw.ie/download/1076/IASW%20Adult%20Safeguarding%20Position%20Paper%202022%20%282%29.pdf>
- <sup>8</sup> Sláintecare – our strategy for improving Ireland's healthcare system – <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/slaintecare-implementation-strategy/#:~:text=The%20aim%20is%20to%20deliver,place%2C%20at%20the%20right%20time.>
- <sup>9</sup> Nancarrow, S.A., Roots, A., Grace, S. *et al.* Implementing large-scale workforce change: learning from 55 pilot sites of allied health workforce redesign in Queensland, Australia. *Hum Resour Health* 11, 66 (2013). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1478-4491-11-66>.
- <sup>10</sup> Health and Social Care Professions Act 2005, rev. 2021, p. 29.
- <sup>11</sup> HSCP Advanced Practice Framework, HSE, 2023.
- <sup>12</sup> Begley, C. & Murphy, K. (2012) Policymakers' views on impact of specialist and advanced practitioner roles in Ireland: the SCAPE study,' *Journal of Nursing Management*, Vol.22, 4 – <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jonm.12018>
- <sup>13</sup> This list is not exhaustive but is suggested as a sample of the depth and breadth of skills and knowledge offered by advanced practice social workers in adult mental health.

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# IASW

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Social Workers