Assessing the moral and fiscal costs and impact of workforce instability in children's social work

Child protection | Workforce turnover | Government expenditure

McFadden, P., MacLochlainn, J., Mallett, J., McColgan, M., McGinnis, E., Martin, G., McGrory, S., & Naylor, R. (2026). *Assessing the moral and fiscal costs and impact of workforce instability in children's social work from an economic, administrative data, and service user perspective*. Ulster University.

Context: The effective delivery of statutory child protection services relies fundamentally on stable, trusting, and skilled professional relationships. This study evaluates the moral, relational, and fiscal impacts of workforce instability across children's social care services in Northern Ireland.

To capture system-wide dynamics, the study combines three complementary research strands: a qualitative examination of lived experiences involving 18 semi-structured interviews (with care leavers, parents, and foster carers) and three focus groups (advocacy group representatives), an empirical analysis of administrative data covering nearly 3000 children; and an economic cost estimation model based on workforce census data. The report evaluates how chronic staff churn intersects with service quality, care continuity, and public expenditure.

Key findings

£7.13 Million
Annual fiscal cost
(Child & Family Social Workers)

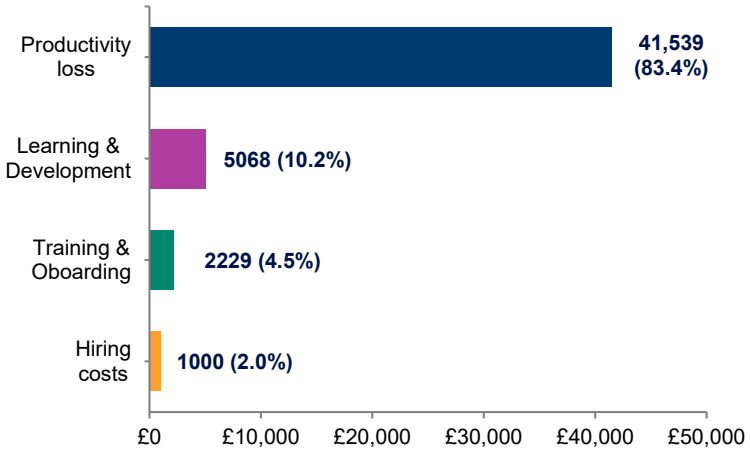
£49,836
Cost per departing social worker

6.6%
Annual turnover rate (143 leavers)

Economic and fiscal costs of turnover:

- **Direct fiscal burden**: During 2024-25, Child and Family Social Worker turnover cost Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland an estimated £7.13 million.
- **Per-worker cost**: Based on a workforce of 2168 child/family social workers and an annual leaving rate of 6.6 per cent (143 departing workers during the year), the average cost per departing social worker was £49,836.
- **Cost drivers** (*Figure 1*): The per-worker cost includes recruitment advertising and HR processing (£1000), induction and onboarding (£2,229), post-qualification professional development (£5,068), and lost productivity during role vacancies (£41,539).
- **Reinvestment potential**: Across all 4909 social workers employed across, total annual turnover costs reach £14.7 million. Achieving a 20 per cent reduction in turnover would generate £1.43 million in annual savings.

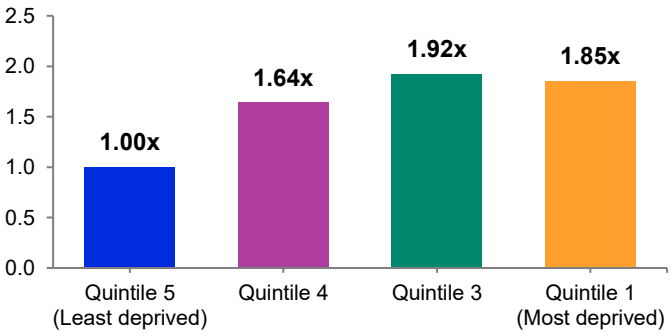
Figure 1: Breakdown of cost per departing worker (£ GBP)



Administrative findings:

- Analysis of administrative data (between 2023-25) revealed that 61.4 per cent of children in the system experienced between two and four key workers, while 16.4 per cent experienced five or more key workers.
- Figure 2 shows that children in the most socioeconomically deprived communities (Quintile 1) faced 85 per cent higher odds (OR = 1.85) of experiencing multiple key worker changes (2 to 5 previous workers) compared to children in the least deprived areas (Quintile 5)

Figure 2: Odds of two to five worker changes by Deprivation Quintile (vs Q5)



Summary: Workforce stability is not merely an operational objective or employee wellbeing concern, but a safeguarding priority that is fundamental for safe, ethical, and effective child protection practice. Chronically high social worker turnover carries substantial moral harm to vulnerable children by disrupting protective relationships, while simultaneously spending millions in public funds through recruitment, training, and lost productivity.