

Consultation on the Review of Registration Fees

Consultation opens: Monday 14 September 2026

Consultation Closes: Monday 9 November 2026

Contents

Forward by the Chief Executive	3
Background to the Northern Ireland Social Care Council	5
About this consultation	8
Summary of proposals	9
Why do we need to review fee levels?	9
What we are proposing	13
Principles underpinning a registration fee structure	14
How will we do this and how long would it take?	15
Our consultation process	16
Guidance to inform your response	17
Consultation questions	18
About you	24

Foreword by the Chief Executive

The Northern Ireland Social Care Council (the Council) is responsible for the regulation and registration of the social work and social care workforce in Northern Ireland. It is also responsible for regulating standards in the workforce and setting standards for social work education and training. There are almost 50,000 people registered with the Council, which includes over 42,000 social care practitioners, 6,900 social workers and around 700 students studying for the Degree in Social Work.

The number of people registered with the Council has grown significantly over the last ten years. Since 2016, the Register has increased by 102% rising from 24,478 to 49,597. There has also been a proportionate growth in the number of fitness to practise referrals to the Council. Whilst the number of registrants referred to the Council continues to represent a small percentage of the total number of registered social work or social care practitioners, nonetheless there has been a 40% increase in these type of referrals over the last five years.

Currently the largest part of the Council's funding comes from the Department of Health (DoH), with a third of this raised through registration fee income. Unlike other UK regulators in health and social care, the Council's funding sits within the health and social care (HSC) system in Northern Ireland and is therefore subject to the same savings targets as the rest of the HSC. So, at a time when other social care and social work regulators have experienced additional central government funding, the Council has had a 24% reduction in funding over the last six years, with a further 5% savings required this year. In addition, there has been no increase to social work and social care registrant fees since 2016.

Whilst the Council has adjusted to these challenges, through the realignment of resources, this is no longer sufficient to continue to meet the demands of regulating the workforce. For the first time, the Council now has growing waiting lists for Fitness to Practise referrals and Committee Hearings. This is not a tenable situation nor one that we wish to be in as a regulator. A priority function for the Council is supporting public safety by ensuring that everyone who is on our Register is fit to practise and registrants are meeting the required standards. It is important that the Council has in place a sustainable funding model, to enable us to continue to meet our statutory and regulatory duties.

Therefore, the Council is bringing forward this consultation on current registration fee levels, proposing an increase to registration fees for both social workers and social care practitioners. I accept that consulting on any increase in fees will not be welcomed. However, it is my responsibility to ensure that the Council is able to continue to deliver its functions safely, to protect both registrants and the public, and to do so, these proposals are necessary.

Given the length of time that has passed since the Council last reviewed fees, our fee levels are no longer in line with other regulators and professions, and that gap is widening. This consultation is about redressing this and we have outlined options for consideration in this consultation document.

I would like to reassure registrants that the Council is continuing to do everything it can to review internal processes, systems and operating arrangements, to ensure they are as efficient as possible. We have also developed business cases for new technology to increase efficiency and improve registrant experience.

Within this consultation, the Council is also proposing change in the way we manage fees, considering the range of job roles for both social work and social care, including a proportionality approach for those who are on the lower and higher ends of the salary scale.

The Council also wants to ensure that fees are kept under more regular review and are proposing that they are linked to inflationary rises, thus preventing a similar situation arising again, where over a decade has passed before fees have been reviewed.

The Council wants to hear your views, and I would encourage you to complete the questions set out in this consultation, which are at the back of this document. We will also send the consultation questions out to all registrants through a survey and will be arranging online events to inform the consultation.

I would like to thank you for your engagement and considerations in relation to this consultation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Tracy Reid'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Tracy Reid
Chief Executive
14 September 2026

Background to the Social Care Council

The Social Care Council was established by the Department of Health on 1 October 2001 under the *Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2001*. The Council's statutory purpose is to regulate the social work and social care workforce. It does this through the application of regulatory functions which support safety, quality and improvement in social work and social care.

Figure 1: Social Care Council regulatory approach



The Council's function is to improve the quality of social work and social care practice in Northern Ireland. They do this by maintaining a Public Facing Register (the Register) of social workers and social care practitioners, setting standards for conduct and practice, and setting standards for social work education and training.

The Council delivers an extensive range of services to support both its statutory functions and its ambitions. These are published each year in the Council's Annual Reports which can be found at: nisc.info/annual-reports. An overview of some of these outcomes during 2025-26 is set out below.

Figure 2: A Snapshot of what we do – 2025-26 outcomes

A snapshot of what we do – 2025-26 outcomes

What registration fees delivered over the year, from maintaining the Register to protecting the public through Fitness to Practise.



To support the workforce, the work of the Council reaches beyond only that which it is statutorily required to do. Through its [Strategic Plan 2023-2027](#) the Council sets out its wider ambitions set out in Figure 3, to support the social work and social care sectors to continuously improve.

Through its continued partnership working and systems leadership, the Council continues to work with the Department of Health, registrants and stakeholders to deliver on these.

Figure 3: Social Care Council ambitions

Social Care Council ambitions

Four ambitions for the social work and social care workforce, and the areas of focus that will deliver them.

Ambition	Areas of focus	
Enabler for social care transformation	Supporting a sustainable workforce	Upskilling the workforce
Sector leader for data analysis and intelligence	A complete workforce dataset	Informs workforce planning and policy development
Agile and innovative regulator	Digital learning	Standards assurance
Centre of excellence for social work and social care	Standards and qualifications	Research informed practice

About this consultation

This consultation document sets out proposals to increase registration fees, to ensure the Council can maintain delivery of its statutory duties and further develop the services it provides to registrants and employers; balanced with considerations about how to do this in a way that is fair, equitable, and proportionate.

Registration for social workers, social care managers, social care practitioners and students studying for the Degree in Social Work is mandatory. There are currently almost 50,000 people registered with the Council, in either a social work or social care role. Regulation of this workforce is at the heart of providing assurance to the public that those delivering care and support in these roles are effectively registered, have access to high standards of learning and development and are held to standards of conduct and practice. This helps ensure the delivery of safe and effective services and interventions to those individuals who receive support.

It is essential that the Council review its fee structure now to support the demands and costs of delivering effective regulation and the full range of statutory functions for which it has responsibility.

This consultation opens on Monday 14 September 2026 and closes on Monday 9 November 2026.

It is based on three operating principles of:

- 1) having a fee structure that is fair, proportionate and sustainable
- 2) having a fee structure that reflects the separate parts of the Register, and
- 3) ensuring that fee levels are regularly reviewed.

To inform this consultation, we will send out a survey to all registrants and employers. We will set up online consultation events to engage with our wider stakeholders. This is to ensure that we reach and engage with as many interested individuals and groups as possible.

Summary of proposals

The Council is consulting on the following proposals

- An increase in fees over a phased two-year period (see table below).
- In the second year, introducing a different fee for social work practitioners and senior leader - social worker.
- Linking the fee level to inflation, so the fee automatically increases in line with inflation.
- No increase in fees for students studying for the Degree in Social Work in years one or two.

Subject to the outcome of the consultation and Ministerial approval, we are also interested to hear from you about how we introduce the changes (timing).

The proposed fee level increases are:

Part of Register	Current fee level	Proposed Fee First year (2027)	Proposed Fee Second year (2028)
Social worker	£65	£120	£127
Senior leader - social worker	£65	£120	£150
Social care manager	£65	£120	£127
Social care practitioner	£30	£40	£40 (no change)
Social work student	£20	£20 (no change)	£20 (no change)

1. The proposal is to have a new part of the Register 'Senior leader - social worker' introduced in the second year – the role equates to those on the HSC Agenda for Change pay band of 8a¹ and above or equivalent in other sectors.
2. It is proposed that there is only one increase (year 1) for social care practitioners in this period.
3. It is proposed that there is no change to the fee for students in years one or two.
4. It is proposed that all future increases across all roles will be automatically linked to inflation.

Why do we need to review fee levels?

Demand and Capacity

The regulatory environment has changed substantially since the original fee structure was developed in 2005 and last increased in 2016. The Register has grown significantly from 24,478 registrants in 2016 to 49,597 in 2026 – representing a 102% increase. The registered workforce of almost 50,000 people working in social work or social care represents 6% of the

¹ Band 8a AFC Current Northern Ireland Pay Scale, see: [NHS Pay Scales 2025/26 — Agenda for Change AfC Bands](#).

working population in Northern Ireland² and is the largest workforce in health and social care in Northern Ireland.

At the same time, Fitness to Practise referrals have increased by 40% over the last five years and with evidence of increasing complexity. Alongside this, in the same period, there has been a corresponding 40% growth in the number of Interim Suspension Orders (High Level Public Protection Risk) being imposed. These trends are similar to demand increases being experienced across other health and social care regulators in the UK and Ireland, and the predicted trajectory is that these will continue to increase.

The Council is unable to sustain this increased demand within its current financial and resourcing structure. This has resulted in waiting lists for both medium risk Fitness to Practise referrals and Interim Suspension Orders (ISOs). The Council acknowledges that this can lead to an unsatisfactory experience for both registrants and employers and presents a real risk and challenge for the Council in its role as a regulator.

There has also been a significant increase in activity in registration. For example, the Council processes approximately 1,000 new applications to join the Register each month, with around 300 people leaving the Register in the same period. Council staff also manage around 75,000 phone call and emails every year supporting registrants and employers. The Council is seeking ways in which it can better manage these demands, including the development of a new registration system as well as improving the registrant's experience when using the online Portal or accessing resources. However, this is a long-term project and will not address the capacity demands in this area in the immediate or medium-term environment.

These increases in demand have coincided with a 30% decrease in departmental funding in the last decade. While managing these challenges, the Council also has responsibilities in supporting the social work and social care workforces. For social care this has included focusing on recruitment and retention, career pathways and qualifications and supporting system and workforce reform. For social work, this includes oversight of the degree in Social Work, promotion of the Professional in Practice Framework (PiP Framework) and research agendas for social work and supporting the workforce and system reform.

Resources

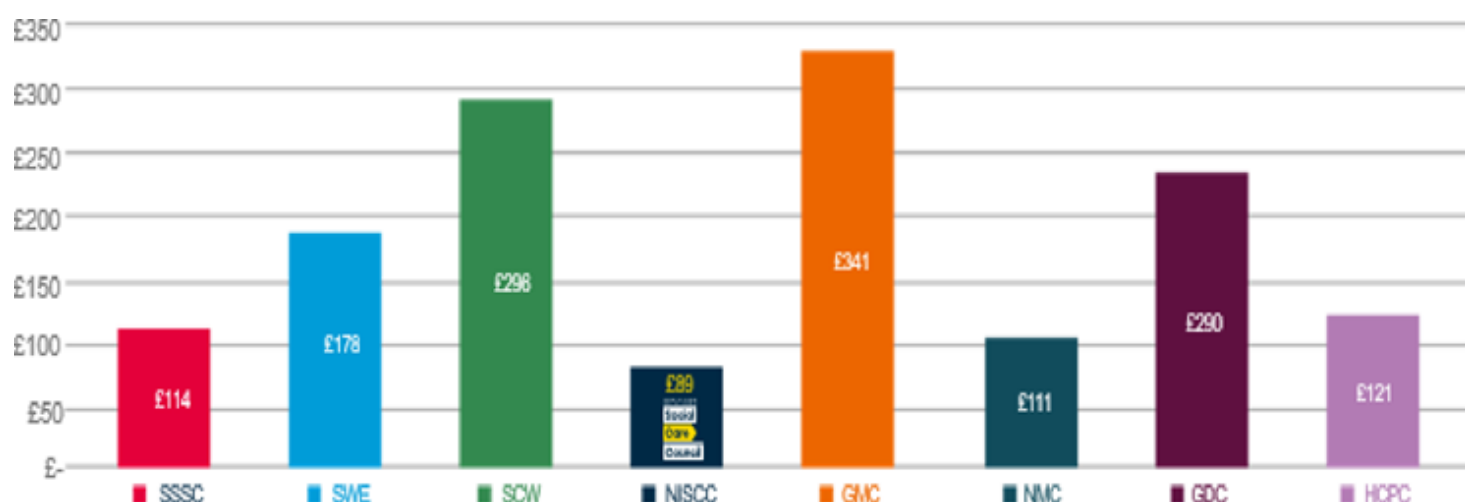
Similar to other public bodies, the Council must ensure that its funding model is sustainable, proportionate and transparent. Fee levels should be understood in the context of the cost of delivering statutory functions, and the need to maintain public protection responsibilities, whilst supporting the development and recognition of the social work and social care workforce. However, the Council is also mindful of the impact of fee increases on registrants and its responsibility to ensure that fees are proportionate and reasonable.

² Northern Ireland Labour Market Statistics - June 2026

The largest part of the Council's funding comes from the Department of Health, with a third raised through registration fee income (33%). As with the rest of the health and social care system, but unlike any other health and social care workforce regulator, the Council has had a 24% reduction in funding over the last six years, with a further 5% savings required this year. In addition, the current fee levels have remained unchanged since 2016 and are amongst the lowest in the UK across health and social care workforce regulators.

As part of a benchmarking exercise conducted by the Scottish social care regulator in 2022, the Social Care Council was identified as having the lowest running costs per registrant across the UK health and social care regulators at £89 (see graph 1 below). Whilst this highlights the efficiency of the Council, it represents a widening funding deficit that is now impacting on the delivery of regulatory function.

Graph 1 – Operating expenditure per registrant – comparison with other regulators³



Fee levels and comparison

When the Social Care Council was established in 2001, it was intended that registrants would contribute towards the cost of registration and regulation through a fee payment to the Council. It was also the view that there should be proportionality with a sliding scale of fees to reflect the different categories within the Register.

Registrants who are eligible taxpayers, are entitled to claim tax relief on their registration fee. HM Revenue and Customs has agreed that the registrant fee payable to the Social Care Council is tax deductible. Standard rate taxpayers may normally claim 20% of their annual fee or renewal fee as a tax deduction.

³ Source: *Scottish Social Care Council Regulator Benchmarking Survey 2022*.

As with other regulated professions, social work and social care registrants incur an annual fee that contributes to the cost of regulation.

The Council's current registration fee structure is:

Part of Register	Annual registration / renewal fee
Social work student	£20
Social care practitioner	£30
Social worker	£65
Social care manager	£65

This is compared below to fee levels across other UK regulators (table 2) and fees for other regulated professions (table 3).

Table 2: Fee level comparisons across other UK regulators

Regulator	Annual registration / renewal fee applicable from 1 April 2027
Scottish Social Services Council – Social care practitioner	£43
Scottish Social Services Council – Social worker	£104
Social Work England – Social worker	£122 rising to £127 from 1 st December 2028
Social Care Wales – Social worker	£80
Social Care Wales – Social care manager	£80
Social Care Wales – Social care practitioner	£30
Social Care Wales – Social work student	£15

Table 3: Fee level comparisons with other regulated professions

Role	Annual registration / renewal fee applicable from 1 April 2027
Registered nurse	£143
Physiotherapist	£123.34 * under review
Pharmacist	£477
Occupational Therapist	£123.34 * under review
Dietician	£123.34 * under review
Psychologist	£123.34 * under review
Doctor	£446
Dentist	£698
Solicitor	£396

On the basis of this comparison, current fees for social workers remain lower than all social work regulators listed in Table 2 and are the lowest of those comparable professional regulators listed in Table 3 above.

What we are proposing

This consultation is proposing an increase in registration fees for social workers and social care practitioners – staged over a two-year period, with an increase in year 1 and a further increase in year 2. With some differences:

- The Council is proposing that the fee for social care practitioner in year 1 is not further increased in year 2.
- The Council is proposing that there is no increase for students studying for the Degree in Social Work in years 1 or 2.

The proposed fee level increases are:

Part of Register	Current fee level	Proposed fee Year 1 (2027)	Proposed fee Year 2 (2028)
Social worker	£65	£120	£127
Senior leader - social worker	£65	£120	£150
Social care manager	£65	£120	£127
Social care practitioner	£30	£40	£40 (no change)
Social work student	£20	£20 (no change)	£20 (no change)

In the same way that there has always been a different fee level for social care managers and social care practitioners, the Council is proposing (in year 2) that they make a distinction between social workers and 'senior leader - social workers'. Someone eligible for this category does not need to be in a designated social work role but is undertaking a senior management or leadership role across the system whilst maintaining part 1 registration. The new part of the Register (for 'Senior leader - social worker') is defined as a role at Band 8a or above under Agenda for Change or equivalent in other sectors.

Where a registrant is undertaking more than one role, the fee category applies to their primary substantive role.

In addition to hearing your views on the above proposals, the Council is also proposing that: fees are kept under more regular review and are proposing that they are linked to inflationary rises, thus preventing a similar situation arising again, where over a decade has passed before fees have been reviewed.

The consultation also considers if there are alternative methods to pay the registration fee that would assist registrants, including, for example by Direct Debit. While the Council does not have this facility within its current system, the Council is interested in finding out if this would be beneficial. Following the outcome of the consultation and Ministerial consideration, if there is sufficient interest the Council will explore these options considering the impact, cost, and security of such options.

Principles underpinning a registration fee structure

This consultation document sets out the reasons for reviewing registration fees for registrants. Information comparing this with other regulators of similar professions is shared, and the difference in fees charged by the Council and other professional regulators is considered.

When making these proposals for consultation on registration fee levels, the Council has applied the following principles:

Principle 1

The fee structure should be fair, proportionate and sustainable.

Principle 2

The fee structure should reflect the separate parts of the Register, with fees proportionate to the differing levels of accountability and responsibility associated with registered roles.

Principle 3

Fee levels and payment methods should be reviewed regularly, and should support delivery of efficient and effective regulation.

Principle 1 – The fee structure should be fair, proportionate and sustainable

This principle is based on the following factors:

- Fee levels for registrants should be considered alongside comparable regulated professions in health and social care, while recognising the employment context of social work and social care in Northern Ireland.
- Fee levels should be reasonable and proportionate to the cost of registration and regulation.

Principle 2 – Different fee levels should be maintained to reflect the separate parts of the Register

Currently the separate parts of the Register are:

- social workers
- social care managers, including managers in regulated social care settings
- social care practitioners, and
- social work students.

It is proposed that an additional tier of ‘Senior leader- social worker’ is introduced in year two to better reflect the difference in roles, responsibility and accountability between social work practitioners and those in senior social work positions.

Principle 3 - Fee levels and payment methods should be reviewed regularly

A periodic review should take account of inflation (including indexation), changes in the size and composition of the Register, the costs of registration and regulation, resource to support recognition of the social work and social care workforce, efficiencies achieved through digital systems and business process improvement, public protection requirements, Department of Health funding and the financial impact on registrants.

It is proposed that fee levels should increase in line with inflation⁴. This approach would avoid long periods without review and reduce the likelihood of larger future increases and provide greater transparency for registrants.

How will we do this and how long will it take?

This consultation document contains proposals to review the fee levels payable by Social Care Council registrants. The consultation will last eight weeks from Monday 14 September 2026 and will close on Monday 9 November 2026.

The Council will send a survey out to every registrant and to employers – with the questions set out in this paper at page 18.

The Council will also share dates for online consultation events and is open to engaging directly with groups if that will assist. It is important that the reach of the consultation and the feedback informs the outcome and next steps.

Following the consultation, the Council will analyse all the findings and submit these to the Minister of Health for approval – that will include a report on the consultation and responses. The Council will also publish the outcomes and findings on its website.

The Council would hope to introduce a new fee structure during 2027, subject to the consultation outcome and Ministerial consideration.

⁴ A cap of 5% would apply in the event of inflation exceeding this value.

Our consultation process

The proposals in this consultation document are relevant to those already registered with the Council, those eligible to apply for registration, people who use services and their carers, employers, representative bodies such as Trade Unions and professional bodies, further and higher educational institutions providing social work education and training, and other respondents with an interest in social work and social care regulation in Northern Ireland.

Online responses

Where possible, we would ask respondents to submit their responses to this consultation using the online survey provided.

If you are unable to do so, or need the consultation information in an alternative format, please email us. Our contact details can be found at page 17 of this document.

The consultation is set out in sections with accompanying questions. If you wish to make any further comments, these can be added at the end. Each paragraph has been numbered to help you refer to specific points.

The questions we are asking start on page 18 of this document. They are the same questions as in the online form.

If you need any help to take part in this consultation and/or would like to discuss the content of these proposals with us before responding, please contact us by email at:
businesssupport@niscc.hscni.net.

The consultation opens on 14 September 2026 and closes on 9 November 2026.

Guidance to inform your response

Your data

Before you submit your response please read the paragraphs below on the confidentiality of consultations. They explain the legal position in relation to any information given by you in respect of this consultation.

The *Freedom of Information Act (2000)* gives the public a right of access to information held by a public authority, including the Social Care Council. This right of access can include information provided in response to a consultation. We cannot automatically treat information supplied in response to a consultation as confidential. However, it has a responsibility to decide whether information provided by you, including information about your identity, should be made public, withheld, or treated as confidential.

If you want information that you provide to remain confidential, please explain clearly why this is the case. A request for confidentiality will be considered but cannot be guaranteed. We will consider each request in line with our statutory obligations, including the public interest test where applicable.

All consultation responses will be retained for three years from the date of consultation closing and will then be destroyed.

We will only accept information from third parties in confidence if it is necessary to obtain that information in connection with the exercise of our functions, and it would not otherwise be provided.

- The Social Care Council will not agree to hold information received from third parties in confidence where the information is not confidential in nature.
- Any acceptance of confidentiality provisions must be for good reasons and capable of being justified to the Information Commissioner.

Contact us:

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Belfast BT7 2JA

Tel: 028 9536 2600

Web: www.niscc.info

Email: businesssupport@niscc.hscni.net

Consultation questions

Question 1

It is proposed that the fee structure should be based on regulatory costs, equity and proportionality that is comparable with other regulated professions across the UK.

Please share your views on the fee structure being comparable with other regulated professions:

Question 2

Do you agree that different fee levels should be retained for different parts of the Register?

Yes		No	
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Please give reasons for your response and provide alternative suggestions if appropriate:

Question 3

Do you consider the proposed fee levels for your registration category to be fair and proportionate?

Please tell us about any impact the proposed changes would have on you or your organisation, and suggest any alternative levels you would consider more appropriate?

Question 4

Should fee increases be introduced in a single year or phased over more than one year?

Single year		Phased over two years		Other	
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Please give reasons for your response and provide alternative suggestions if appropriate:

Question 5

What are your views on the introduction of a different fee level for practitioner social work and ‘senior leader - social worker’?

Please give reasons for your response and provide alternative suggestions if appropriate:

Question 6

Do you agree on the principle that fee levels should increase annually in line with inflation?

Please give reasons for your response and suggest any alternative approach you would consider more appropriate.

Yes		No	
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Please give reasons for your response and suggest any alternative approach you would consider more appropriate:

Question 7

Do you have any comments on the principle that a formal review of fees should take place regularly?

Yes		No	
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Please give reasons for your response and suggest any alternative approach you would consider more appropriate.

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Question 8

Who currently pays your registration fee?

I pay the fee		My employer		Part contribution from employer	
Other (Please describe)					

Question 9

While the Council is currently unable to offer alternative methods for the payment of fees, if you pay your own registration fee, in whole or in part, would the option to pay by annual Direct Debit assist?

Yes		No	
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Please give reasons for your response and provide alternative suggestions if appropriate:

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Question 10

If you are an employer, what impact would the proposed fee changes have on your organisation?

Question 11

What period of reasonable advance notice do you consider necessary between the announcement of any change to fee levels and the date on which those new fees take effect?

Please give reasons for your response:

Question 12

Are there any alternative approaches to revising the registration fees that have not been considered in this consultation document that we should explore?

Please be as specific as possible.

Yes		No	
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If yes, please give comments:

Equality and human rights considerations

Identifying the likely impact of these proposals on different groups

We recognise that the principles of equality, diversity, inclusion and fairness must be embedded in revisions made to the structure of registration fees. We are keen to receive views in response to this consultation paper on the likely impact of these proposals.

Equality and Human Rights

Section 75 of the *Northern Ireland Act 1998* requires public authorities, in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between:

- persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation
- men and women generally
- persons with a disability and persons without, and
- persons with dependents and persons without.

In addition, without prejudice to the above obligation, public authorities must also, in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland, have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group. Public authorities must also act compatibly *with Convention rights under the Human Rights Act 1998*.

We have completed an equality impact assessment (EQIA) on the proposals set out in this document. The assessment considers potential impacts across each of the Section 75 groups. We have attached a copy of our *Equality Impact Assessment* with our consultation document.

Question 13

Are there any adverse impacts in relation to any of the Section 75 equality groups that have not been identified in the EQIA Consultation document?

Yes		No	
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If you answered yes, please tell us which groups and why, and provide any evidence or information that supports your view:

Question 14

Please state what action you think could be taken to reduce or eliminate any adverse impacts in revising the registration fees?

Question 15

Are there any other comments you would like to make in regard to this EQIA or the consultation process generally?

Please outline below and be as specific as possible.

About you

To help with our analysis of the consultation responses, please provide as much information as possible about yourself, or the group you represent. You are not compelled to provide contact information if you do not wish to do so. Any personal data provided will be processed in accordance with our [Privacy Notice](#) and relevant data protection legislation.

Question 16

I am responding as (please select):

- an individual, or
- a representative of an organisation.

Question 17

I am (please select all those that apply):

- a service user or carer
- a registered social worker
- a registered social care practitioner
- a registered social care manager
- a social work student
- a person working in, managing, commissioning or providing social care services
- an employer or representative body
- a member of the public, or
- other (please specify)

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Question 18

If you are a registrant, do you primarily work in:

The statutory sector	
Health and Social Care Trust	
Education sector	
Justice sector	
Independent sector (private provider)	
Voluntary or community sector	
Other (please specify)	

Question 19

Which role would you fall into below?

Part of Register	
Social work practitioner	
Senior social work manager	
Social care manager	
Social care practitioner	
Social work student	

Question 20

My contact details are (please note this is optional):

Name	
Job title / organisation	
Address 1	
Address 2	
City / town	
Post code / country	
Email address	
Daytime phone number	

Want to connect with us? Here's how

You can stay up to date on all our news and events by visiting the Social Care Council's website,



or you can follow us across our social channels.

