

DA Board Member report 2024

Board member name: Tom Frawley

Devolved administration: Northern Ireland

Summary of stakeholder engagement activities in 2024

Meetings with HSC Trusts.

Meetings with NICON.

Meetings with Patient & Client Council Representatives.

Other Devolved Administration activities in 2024

Represented PSA at NICON Annual Conference.

Suggestions for PSA work priorities in relation to the Devolved Administration in 2025

As my term ends in December 2024, the new member is best placed to decide what priorities she will have for the incoming year, however I have advised that I am happy to meet with her following our recent update if that would be helpful to discuss the above.

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The past year has presented many challenges for health and social care in Northern Ireland and those challenges continue particularly as the service is currently dealing with intense winter pressure which is most evident in Emergency Departments and in Primary Care. However, there have also been a number of significant improvements reflected in important progress in the reduction of recourse to agency and locum staff in medicine, nursing and social care.

- One of the most significant challenges faced by health and social care has been the disruptive impact of industrial action on services however a positive development was the return of the NI Assembly and Executive in February. The restoration of government has offered some prospect of stability and continuity going forward however the issue of pay parity remains a matter of ongoing concern with the further potential for industrial action in the New Year if it is not addressed. Particularly important in the area of politics has been the appointment of a Health Minister by the Executive. In February, Mr R Swann resumed his role as Minister following the suspension of the institutions however, in July having been elected to Westminster to represent the North Antrim Constituency, Mr Swann was replaced by his colleague by Mr Mike Nesbitt who is also the leader of the Official Unionist Party of Northern Ireland.
- The fragility of primary care across the UK has been well documented and this has been a particular challenge in the West of Northern Ireland where the relevant health & social care Trust has been required to take on the contracts for 5 separate GP Practices. The Western Trust is a Secondary Care provider and is now being required to go beyond its current statutory responsibilities. It is clear that an urgent challenge for the health system in particular is to examine alternative models for the provision of Primary Care.
- In June 2024 the Chairs of the Trusts in Northern Ireland jointly published a letter to the Northern Ireland Executive regarding the health budget. In their letter they highlighted their concern that the health & social care system and those who depend on it, that the funding crisis faced by health & social care needs to be addressed urgently. Health & social care services have endured a prolonged period of instability and pressure, and the escalating budgetary situation represents yet another destabilising factor undermining initiatives to rebuild services post covid.
- During the civil unrest that followed the tragic events that occurred in Southport during the summer, leadership in health & social Care in Northern Ireland expressed its concern during July & August regarding the violence directed against ethnic minorities that understandably had an adverse effect on health & social care staff from overseas who had come to Northern Ireland to provide critical health and care services to the community. Thankfully the instability and tensions of the summer has now dissipated, and the overall atmosphere is settled and stable. The experience of the summer however has reminded us

that EDI particularly in relation to providing assurance to our staff is something we need to proactively engage with.

- By the spring of 2025 all Trusts in Northern Ireland will have implemented encompass a groundbreaking digital health & social care system. This system will allow all patients who log into the system to access their personal health & social care records. The system provides a crucial platform from which Northern Ireland can now implement one of the Labour Governments' 3 key shifts – from Analogue to Digital.
- 2024 has been a year where Statutory Inquiries into health & social care services failures have continued. The Urology Inquiry into services in the Southern Trust has been completed and the Inquiry report will be published in the spring of 2025. The Inquiry convened to examine the treatment of vulnerable patients in Muckamore Hospital is continuing and is projected to report in 2026.
- During the year the Health & Social Care (HSC) system introduced a new framework to protect whistleblowing with the objective of ensuring great accountability and transparency within health and social care services. The HSC is currently concluding its consultation on the introduction of a duty of candour, a key recommendation which has included in the Hyponatraemia report.
- In September the Department of Health launched a Health & Wellbeing Framework for the workforce. The focus of the framework is on mental health and long-term staff retention.
- In November the Northern Ireland Executive published its programme for government, it's first for a number of years due to the suspension of the Assembly triggered by the withdrawal of the Assembly by one or other of the largest political parties. The programme for government was underpinned by a wellbeing framework which outlined long term priorities for improving health, housing and social care. The framework emphasises a whole of government approach to improving the health & wellbeing of the entire population.
- In December the Department of Health published a comprehensive 3 year plan for health, focusing on service improvement, workforce development and addressing patient waiting times.
- Also in December the Department of Health launched a Social Care Workforce Strategy. The focus of this strategy is to support the growth and development of the social care workforce with a particular emphasis on addressing the recruitment and retention challenges in this sector.