

IASW Strategic Plan

2025 - 2027

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Introduction

The Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) celebrated its 53rd year in operation in 2024. In that time it has grown its numbers to represent more than 1,800 Social Workers across Ireland, in addition to including Associate Members in Northern Ireland thanks to a reciprocal agreement with BASW-NI.

The IASW promotes Social Work as a profession that is both practice-based and academic. It celebrates Social Workers as a professional network advocating and working with and on behalf of the marginalised and vulnerable in society, operating from a Human Rights perspective.

This strategic plan for 2025 to 2027 encompasses inclusivity, diversity and an aspiration to grow the Association in membership and voice. It builds upon and supersedes the work already completed in the 2022 to 2024 plan and endeavours to ensure a positive and uplifting voice for Social Workers and Social Work.

Social Work has long been recognised for its essential work with the marginalised in our society and the IASW welcomed the appointment of the first Chief Social Worker to the HSE in 2024. This move along with the existing Chief Social Workers in Tusla, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and in the Probation Service, reflects the essential breadth of the work and the strategic structure of the profession across government policy and services.

Background and Context

The 2022-2024 strategic plan set out, among other worthwhile objectives, to expand the team in the IASW staff. This goal has been progressed significantly in the appointment of the Association's first Chief Operations Officer (COO). This development has been welcomed by the membership of the IASW, the Board of Directors and the wider stakeholder group.

The Objectives set out in this plan will be prioritised, however, the Association is aware of the very organic and changeable nature of the local, national and global context. With this in mind the Association will continue to work to react as appropriate and within the parameters of its resources to situations and developments that require its attention.

Review of the 2021-2024 Strategic Plan

In reviewing the previous plan the Board of Directors and the IASW team were asked the question: “what went well?”.

It was clear that a significant volume of work occurred within the IASW as a company. Following a mandate for a full governance review, the Associations policies, terms of reference, succession planning and SIG network structure were overhauled.

This has led to clearer pathways for members, and allows the staff team in the IASW to advise in a consistent manner how SIGs operate, the supports available from within the IASW and the expectations on the Chairs and secretaries of both the Board and the SIG committees. The expectation is that this is an organic process and will be under constant review as we navigate a new and more streamlined and effective way of working with and on behalf of our members.

Of significant note in the 2021-2024 Strategic plan was the objective of increasing the staff resource within the IASW. This involved securing the resources to employ a full time COO in the IASW to oversee the day to day operations of the Association. This appointment will significantly reduce the required volunteer time on the Chair of the IASW Board and will assist in growing the Association with the established team in place.

Consideration will continue to be given to further enhancing the team over the term of this new plan, continuing the work already done.

The IASW has also seen an increase in membership over the course of the current plan. The subsequent engagement across the membership has been fruitful with a number of submissions, publications, research articles, guidelines and calls for actions coming through the members and informing current practices, for example.

The Process of Developing this Plan

The IASW team compiled a member survey which was approved by the Chairperson of the IASW Board. This was disseminated among all IASW members and 131 responses were received. Questions were both open and close-ended or multiple-choice in nature. The responses of the members contributed significantly to the formation of the new plan.

The COO also reached out to the chairs of the IASW Special Interest Group (SIG) Network and Board Committees to ensure their valuable experience, voice and input was specifically included in the formation of this plan.

The IASW Board and staff team met for a day long strategic planning session in the midlands in late 2024. The process involved an evaluation of the previous IASW strategic plan including elements to be enhanced, closed off or carried into the current strategic plan, as well emerging issues to be taken into account.

Throughout the process consideration was given to the various stakeholders connected to the IASW including Association members, employers, educators, and most importantly the individuals, families and communities with whom Social Workers engage on a daily basis.

Defining Social Work in 2025

Now, more than ever, Social Work, as an internationally recognised profession, with strong international connections, has the potential to drive policy change and address issues of mutual concern that transcend borders, and that are based in human rights that are universal and do not discriminate. According to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW):

“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. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels.”

IFSW General Assembly, July 2014

IASW Vision

Our Vision is for the IASW to be the strong, ethical and independent voice of Social Work and Social Workers in Ireland. We strive to ensure that the full potential and positive impact of Social Work is delivered, helping to create a better society, through the promotion of excellence in practice, social justice and human rights.

IASW Values

The work of the IASW is underpinned by the social work ethics, values and principles outlined in our Code of Ethics ¹ and Code of Practice for social work ², both of which are available on the IASW website, and which include the following (summarised and paraphrased from the IASW Code of Ethics):

1. Primary focus on the needs of those using social work services,
2. Promote social justice, challenging discrimination, respecting diversity, and advocating with and on behalf of those who use social work services.
3. Use professional power appropriately and emphasise consideration of and promotion of service users' views,
4. Be cognisant of tensions between support and control that arise particularly in systems with a regulatory function and strive towards service users maximising their own decision making,
5. Adhere to the CORU Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics ³,
6. Work to achieve high professional standards, including engaging in Continuing Personal and Professional Development (CPD),
7. Social workers must undertake professional supervision to help maintain high quality social work practice,
8. Social workers involved in social work education, training and supervision will seek to ensure that their professional relationships in these areas are constructive and non-exploitative,
9. In responding to the needs of individuals, families, groups and communities, social workers will seek to involve other professionals as appropriate,
10. Taking into account the rights of others, social workers will support those who use social work services to access full information, including to records of work on their behalf,
11. Respect service users' rights to confidentiality, within appropriate limits, in professional practice,
12. These principles apply to all contexts of social work practice, education, and research.

¹ IASW Code of Ethics, 2020.

² IASW Code of Practice, 2020

³ The Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics for Social Workers (Social Workers Registration Board, CORU 2019)

The IASW is respectful, caring, inclusive and celebrates diversity. What this means

- We embrace and live the ethics and values of social work in all we do.
- We work to actively include different perspectives in our work.
- We oppose racism and all forms of discrimination.
- We incorporate environmental considerations, as well as respect for the global environment and the need for climate justice in our work.

The IASW is collaborative and supportive. What this means

- We encourage members to share their ideas, energy, skills, experience, and resources, for collective benefit.
- Realising that we cannot achieve all our goals alone, we value and actively work in partnership to achieve professional and organisational goals.

The IASW believes in the unique value of social work and what the profession and its members bring to society. What this means

- We represent social work in various fora, including in the policy-making process, as well as in the communications and social media.
- We advocate for the place of social work in our society's services and institutions. We seek to influence social policy, bringing the unique voice of social work to this element of our work.

The IASW is committed to excellence. What this means

- We strive to keep up to date with evolving practice knowledge.
- We respond to members' CPD needs.
- We work with employers and colleges to contribute to ongoing practice developments that improve and strengthen social work practice and support those working in it.

The IASW works with integrity and accountability. What this means

- We are open and accountable.
- We are solution focused.
- We do our best in everything we do.
- We deliver on our commitments.
- We focus on what matters.

The IASW makes a positive contribution to society, including through advocacy on behalf of social work service users. What this means

- We stand for social justice and human rights.
- We advocate for the rights of those who are excluded or marginalised.
- We have a local, national, and international perspective.

Mission Statement

Our mission, as the representative body of social work in Ireland, is to advance the interests of our members, the profession and service users; working with our members and partner bodies for enhanced wellbeing, human rights, social justice, and equality for all.

Focus Areas

In the coming three years the IASW plans to prioritise the following areas of focus on behalf of its members:

CPD

The IASW will endeavour to create a platform and events to promote excellence in Social Work. Through our member survey, we heard you loud and clear- CPD was the top response in terms of member benefits for both when Social Workers joined the Association and now.

Membership and Governance

The IASW is the professional body for Social Workers in Ireland. It aims to grow its membership by 20% in the life of this strategic plan. A strong member base will allow the Association to speak from a wider and more diverse professional network. We will also continue to build on the work already started on improving governance and processes within the association.

Representing Social Work

Social work as a profession is rarely given the opportunity to celebrate its positive outcomes openly. In the life of this strategic plan the IASW will endeavour to seek out those positive messages and reinforce the motivations and reasons Social Workers chose this rewarding profession. Promoting the profile of social work as a profession was the second most popular response in our member survey.

Communication and Policy

The IASW will encourage members to collaborate and communicate clearly the messages from the front line services. Both the positive and the challenges and seek from within the member and stakeholder network proposed solutions that are evidence based, practical and human rights based.

Strategic Objectives

Continuous Professional development

In consultation with the IASW Special Interest Groups and wider membership respond to members and stakeholder needs in the delivery of our CPD programme.

Membership and Governance

Continue to develop and increase membership numbers, including specific focus on student and early career social workers.

Representing Social Work

Strengthen the IASW position as the recognised and ethical voice of social work in Ireland, including showcasing the work of members and ensuring the association supports social workers and promotes social work.

Communication and Policy

As the professional representative body for Social Workers, to ensure the sustainable development of the IASW and develop a comprehensive communications and public affairs strategy.

Objective 1

Continuous Professional development

Action plan:

Devise and Implement a Strategic Plan for the ongoing delivery and development of our CPD Programme.

3.1 Provide (in collaboration with members, Special Interest Groups and relevant partners) CPD opportunities for Social Workers and the wider community of practice, particularly in the form of appropriate events, conferences and other activities (book reviews, journal article submission, research opportunities etc)

3.1 Provide an online repository of CPD-related information on the IASW website for members.

3.2 To Generate, produce, and make available appropriate IASW CPD policy resources including updated documentation on professional development, CPD requirements for registration and professional supervision in online and in person formats.

3.3 Network with other professions, employers, educators and organisations in order to strengthen the IASW offering and contribute to wider professional CPD.

Objective 2

Membership and Governance

Action plan:

Agree an action plan to grow to Associations membership base in order to ensure the IASW has the necessary financial, human and skills resources to achieve its goals.

1.1 Maintain and develop as appropriate, administrative structures and systems to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of the Association.

1.2 Implement the action plan with the aim of growing the membership between 15% to 20% over the life of the present plan.

1.3 Identify and include specific goals and actions to increase engagement with social work students and early career social workers, as well as more experienced and retired social workers.

1.4 Maintain and review a high standard of governance in line with our relevant legal and moral obligations as a company and association.

1.5 Work to strengthen the Special Interest group supports and coordination, encourage more inter- SIG working and CPD planning.

Objective 3

Representing Social Work (influencing policy and International Representation)

Action plan:

Ensure the sustainable development of the IASW as the professional body representing, supporting and protecting the Social Work profession to ensure best practice throughout our communities.

3.1 The IASW will advocate for Social Work related National and International policy introduction and improvement through its Board and SIG Network.

3.2 Work with BASW (NI) on projects of mutual interest, including the exploration and implementation, where feasible, of initiatives to strengthen the identity and practice of social work on the island or Ireland.

3.3 Continue to work effectively in collaboration with networks and communities that are aligned with the values of the IASW on projects of mutual interest particularly in relation to the migration of people and protecting their human rights between and within nations.

Objective 4

Communication and Policy

Action Plan:

Ensure the sustainable development of the IASW and develop a comprehensive communications and public affairs strategy

4.1 In consultation with our Special interest Group Network, develop, agree and implement a general communications strategy - internal and external - based on the identified needs of the Association.

4.2 In consultation with our Special interest Groups to develop internal tools and pathways of content creation and dissemination.

4.3 In consultation with our members to ensure the IASW has the appropriate funding streams to safeguard a sustainable maintenance and expansion of the IASW team.

4.4 To create and deliver a robust communications workplan including public affairs and Social Media to highlight and promote the work of the Association and its SIG group.

4.5 To utilise the vast experience and resources to influence the development of local and International policy and practice underpinned by human rights principles.