

Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill: Second Reading (Lords)

Briefing Paper No.3 for Peers – Assisted Dying and Early Support

British Association of Social Workers. September 2025

Introduction

The multi-disciplinary panel is central to the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill. Social workers are part of this panel.

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) represents some 20,000 social workers. While BASW has no 'in principle' view on the Bill, it is the role of the association to ensure that the Bill takes into account the existing legal responsibilities of social workers, and if the Bill becomes law, it can be implemented in practice.

This is one of three related briefings on the Bill and key social work responsibilities. The briefing covers the topic of what BASW describes as 'early support' (other briefings cover adult safeguarding and mental capacity). The case for early support and resulting recommendation for the legislation are set out below.

The Case for Early Support

Death is not just a clinical event, the death of an individual involves a whole range of people with often profound implications for their lives: socially, emotionally and financially. These future impacts affect the person dying, well before they die.

There will be individuals who receive a diagnosis of a terminal illness alongside a prognosis of six months of life, will determine that an assisted death is for them, will be supported by their family and friends in this decision and will follow this decision through with purpose, determination and at pace.

BASW thinks it just as likely that there will be individuals who:

- Have a terminal diagnosis alongside a six-month life expectancy prognosis but are debating with themselves and their family whether an assisted death is for them. Their view on this will change as their condition eases on some days and worsens on others. Family and friends will have different views on what is best. Their journey through the assisted dying process will be characterised by pauses, breaks and reversals rather than a linear journey from start to finish.
- Have been diagnosed with a condition that is often seen as terminal, or may become terminal, but where life expectancy is measured in years rather than in months and consequently may think that an assisted death might be right for them at some point in the future.

Many individuals, their families and friends will be able to negotiate these challenges without any professional inputs, but a proportion will not, and they and their family

will need professional support. This paper refers to these services of support and guidance as 'Early Support'.

BASW is open to a range of professionals providing this type of support and guidance. Indeed, it may come from medical professionals already involved in the patient's care. However, it is important that such provision is not left for existing professionals to 'pick up' on top of all their other duties.

Social workers have long had, and continue to have, an established role in health care settings.ⁱ This reflects the reality that good health care is not just about clinical interventions but can also be about social outcomes: considering the wider social context in which a person lives their life, including their wishes, beliefs, values and relationships.ⁱⁱ This is particularly pertinent with assisted dying.ⁱⁱⁱ

BASW believes that in addition to being on the multi-disciplinary panel, social workers have an important role in providing advice and support to individuals and their families which must be reflected in the Bill. This includes grief counselling and bereavement support.

The timing of this advice and support is crucial. The Bill envisages that consideration of assisted dying can be made up to six months before the assisted death. It is acknowledged that for some individuals and their families the progression of the illness might mean this the only option. There will be others who have longer than six months to consider the option of assisted death. Those people should have the right to access professional advice and support prior to the six-month period.

The Bill needs to be amended to reflect this reality.

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ⁱ Recent research has shown that in England there are 171 local authorities employing 2,461 social workers, while 49 NHS Trusts employ 450 social workers. Phillips C, Deacon L, Burrows D (2024) *Social Work in NHS Hospitals: Opportunities and Challenges*. Birmingham: BASW.

ⁱⁱ The day-to-day work of social workers involves promoting communication, building relationships, upholding rights, assessing needs, and supporting people and their families in often complex or sensitive situations. They may also provide bereavement care to both individuals and families in instances where the person they are supporting is approaching their end of life. This makes them well suited to offering similar care and support to individuals considering or requesting assisted dying or to signpost to other professionals who can also provide assistance.

ⁱⁱⁱ In Canada, social workers provide psychosocial support to individuals considering assisted dying. Their role is not to counsel or advise an individual, but to ensure they have access to appropriate information, resources and additional support. They can also provide therapeutic support to the person's family throughout the process. See for example, [Guidelines for Social Workers on Medical Assistance in Dying, Nova Scotia College of Social Workers](#).