

BASW

The professional association for
social work and social workers



A Vision for Social Work: Children and Families

A vision for social work

A vision for social work helps the profession to aspire, work and campaign for social work in the UK that achieves the global purpose in all settings, at all times, for all people.

Starting in 2020, we have experienced the Covid-19 pandemic. This, along with other national and global events, is a catalyst to review how social work is delivered. There is an opportunity to learn, recover and re-form social work following the pandemic.

BASW is the professional association for social work and social workers. As the largest membership organisation for social workers and the only independent body for social work in the UK, we are taking a lead in expressing publicly what social work is and what it can be for the future.

This vision – for children and for adults – consolidates our views drawn on our experience and expertise as social workers. The vision should and does emerge from what people with lived experience of social work say they want from social work. It should be developed and clarified in discussion with people with lived experience.

It aims to inspire discussion and partnership to help social work fulfil its potential so that we can work with children, adults and families to improve lives.



Preface

This document is a companion piece to *A Vision for Social Work: Adults*.

Both documents share the same preface, reflecting the reality that social work is one profession despite being practiced in a variety of settings.

These documents are primarily written for those outside of social work. For that reason, they avoid a level of detail about social work which can be found elsewhere. For the same reason, while England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales each have their own legislation and policies that relate to social work, this document does not describe how social work services are delivered differently across the four countries.

As a Vision document' it does not describe 'the how', that is for other documents. What it does do is set out the key areas that need to be addressed.

What do we mean by 'social work'?

In the UK social workers enact a range of legal powers that relate to keeping children safe, mental health, adult care and many other responsibilities. Many (but not all) of these legal responsibilities are undertaken through local government (in England, Scotland and Wales) and through Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland. In the UK the majority of social workers work for a government funded agency.

However, social work is not just the statutory responsibilities allocated by government. The term 'profession' can mean many things, but just as 'medicine' is bigger than a doctor's hospital of employment or 'law' is bigger than the firm the solicitor happens to work for, so 'social work', as a profession, is more than the statutory responsibilities it has acquired, and being a social worker is more than just being an employee of a government agency - vitally important though these roles and responsibilities are.

Social work is a significant endeavour – there are just over 120,000 registered social workers across the UK. Social workers work in a wide range of settings, with different groups, and are employed by public sector agencies,



by voluntary and private agencies or can be self-employed. But all social workers are one profession.

Social work is one profession

Professionals take responsibility for coming together to improve their practice, to improve their services and to ensure that their voice is heard. Social workers as professionals are no exception, and BASW is the professional association for social work and social workers. There have been several attempts (especially in England) to separate social work into two: services for children and families and services for adults. This can make operational sense. It can also make sense to specialise. Social workers undertake a generic social work degree before going down the path of a particular social work specialism. This reality is recognised in the decision to produce both *A Vision for Social Work: Children and Families* and *A Vision for Social Work: Adults*. But there is also a risk that a separation of social work becomes a split, and social work is no longer able to function as one profession. In this scenario, social work would be weakened, and social workers and people with lived experience of using social work services would be the losers.

Social work with children and adults overlaps. This is not just in shared services, for example, transition between childhood and adulthood, or young carers supporting adults. Families, friends, and communities consist of both children and adults. Social workers consider a person's whole life so must have an understanding of all ages.

For ease of communication, this document addresses social work with Children and Families but for the reasons above, it should not be forgotten that social work is one profession and social workers share common values, ethics and methods, whether in one of the four countries of the UK or as part of the international community.

The importance of social work

Social work hasn't always had the best public image in the UK. The reality is that social work plays a vital role in society and the contribution of social work and social workers need to be fully recognised.

Social work is an international profession

Social work, like other professions, is recognised across the world. The global definition of social work is:

“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 knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.”¹

Over a long history, social workers have demonstrated that part of their role is to try and change society for the better through working with the most at risk or marginalised.

Inherent then within the social worker's ethics and value base is a commitment to social justice and human rights² at an individual, group and societal level. This commitment may not always be warmly welcomed by government or other powerful agencies.

A note on terminology

All professionals use specialist language ('jargon') and acronyms. Social work is no different. Further, there are also significant differences in professional social work terminology between the four nations of the UK. For example, in England the term used is 'child safeguarding' in Scotland it is 'child protection'. As with all professional groups, the effect of specialist language can be to exclude those outside the profession.

To stop language getting in the way, this report deliberately seeks to avoid technical language and instead uses plain English. We hope that by not relying on technical professional language the report can be accessed by the widest possible audience.

This document acknowledges there are different terms for those who access social work services e.g. 'clients', 'experts by experience', 'people with lived experience' and 'service users'³. This document uses the term 'people with lived experience of social work services', or simply 'people with lived experience'.

The document also acknowledges that use of the acronym BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) is increasingly problematic, however until there is an agreed wording to replace the term, the document uses this terminology.

The four nations of the UK

Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England have distinct legislation, policies and procedures. Agencies across the four countries are also organised differently. While different countries experience different pressures and there are different pressures in different areas within countries, there is also much in common: a common understanding of the problems, a common understanding of the challenges and hopefully a common vision of the future.

Social work systems (that is, organisations, legislation, procedures, education and training) have a long history in each of the four countries. Over time, these systems, and parts of these systems, have changed, and sometimes changed frequently. This might be a sign of hope, for if the systems have evolved in the past, they can change again in the future.

A VISION FOR SOCIAL WORK: CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Context

Social work with children and families has been sorely tested by the outbreak of Covid-19. Social workers and their managers have gone above and beyond to undertake their existing duties under the impact of Covid. However, if truth be told, the systems were already under unsustainable pressure well before Covid arrived. If there is to be a 'new normal', social workers want it to be different to the 'old normal' for themselves, for the children and families they work with and for the contribution they and their colleagues make to creating a fairer society.

This document sets out the background, the current situation and the centrality of human rights before setting out 12 actions for change and how they might be achieved.

The challenges

Working with at risk and marginalised children and families is a multi-disciplinary, multi-professional task. It needs community support, teachers and schools, police and health professionals. But social workers are at the heart of this work and this is recognised in their specific legal duties and responsibilities.

Challenges that are common to social workers of all four countries include:

- A series of child abuse scandals that have shaken practice and cast a long shadow over how social work front line staff, managers and senior managers view risk.



- The increasing use of procedures to shape social work practice and growing bureaucracy that prevents social workers undertaking more direct work with service users.
- Increasing gaps in the provision of family support services whether family support, or community-based specialist intervention services.
- Growing holes in the safety net provided by the state. Universal Credit, the Benefit Cap, reductions in disability benefit, the shrinking stock of social housing, No Recourse to Public Funds, the 'rape

clause' and many others have all weakened the support provided by the safety net of welfare benefits. All are products of the UK government in Westminster.

- Poverty is part of the everyday context of social work. Despite protestations to the contrary, poverty is growing. The impact of poverty on parenting has been clearly evidenced, from Bebbington and Miles in 1989⁴ to Bywaters in 2018⁵ Children who are in poverty are significantly more likely to be in the care of the state. The huge majority of parents in poverty parent well, but for those parents who are struggling, poverty makes their task of parenting much, much harder.
- An increasing number of children who are in care or who are looked after across the four countries of the UK.





There will always need to be some provision for parenting provided by the state, or parenting provided through adoption, however, acknowledging this is not the same as accepting that there has to be a relentless rise year on year in the numbers of children who cannot be looked after by their parents. Across the four nations, both at a national level, and at a local level, initiatives are underway to tackle this; however, so far, collectively they have had insufficient impact.

The current situation

The effect of Covid-19 has been to stretch services to breaking point. Social work responses to dealing with this have been heroic.

However, the fear is that much of the damage has yet to be revealed. There is widespread concern that once schools fully reopen there will be a large rise of unmet need from children and their families. This need will, somehow, have to be met, and as has already been indicated, the resources available are often already stretched beyond breaking point.

Once the pandemic is over, there are essentially two options:

- Option one is try and go back to the 'old normal'. An 'old normal' defined by rising numbers of children in state care, increasing procedures to manage risk, decreasing community resources, increasing thresholds and a safety net which is increasingly inadequate.
- Option two is to work towards creating a 'new normal', a 'new normal' which is about supporting families so fewer children need to be parented by the state. A 'normal' where social work professionals and managers can adhere to the spirit of the legislation, use effective procedures but can also innovate, a normal where the safety net functions effectively and where practice can genuinely put human rights first, foremost and always.

What is proposed below is not new. It is not new for many who have thought and reflected (sometimes in writing) about how society could do better for children and families. Nor is it new to BASW, since this document brings together members views and wisdom, evidence and existing policy positions into one proposed narrative of change. (The most relevant of these are listed in the section 'Related Resources') But before turning to the proposed actions it is necessary to consider the issue of human rights.

Human Rights

The most basic human instinct is to raise your own children. This human instinct is enshrined in Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998:

The right to respect for private and family life

But children have rights too. For example, they have a right not be physically abused, not to be neglected, not to be denied medical help and not to have to work for economic gain. The state gives authority to certain job holders, in their official role, to intervene in families if necessary, and this is done through law, policy and the expectations of good, or ideally, best practice. Across the four nations of the UK, this crucial role, and resulting powers, have been given to social work. As social workers know, getting the balance right between prevention, support and intervention for families is crucial.

However, the legal duties and powers of social workers are, rightly, not unlimited. The courts (and in Scotland, Children's Hearings) provide a check and balance. Compulsorily removing a child into the care of the state is such a major decision that it is something that ultimately can only be done with independent legal approval and this was historically recognised long before the introduction of the Human Rights Act.

For a family to have a legal right such as Article 8, it has limited meaning if, that right cannot be actually used. For a right such as Article 8 to be exercised families need access to appropriate support (e.g. adequate income, housing and access to appropriate services and, where needed, state-funded legal advice) and has already been shown those mechanisms of support have been increasingly eroded.



12 ACTIONS FOR CHANGE

A clear focus on human rights allows lofty rhetoric to be translated into specific practical action for the most marginal and at risk in society. The 12 actions set out below are not ranked, each is as important as the others. All the actions identified below need to be acknowledged, adopted and developed. 'Cherry picking' – selecting some actions but not others – will continue to provide a service that falls short of our aspirations.

- 1. Family support services that support and prevent escalation to the level of statutory intervention.** The availability of such services varies between geographical areas, even within local authority areas. Often, such services are provided by the voluntary sector (a sector which includes many social work practitioners). Local support services have been ravaged by ten years of cuts, and more specialist services provided by the national children's charities have been reduced as contracts with local authorities have ended and not been renewed.
- 2. Understanding what interventions are best for whom, when and in what circumstances.** While the knowledge base of social work continues to expand, further important work has yet to be undertaken. Models of intervention for family support services vary significantly – the best-known ones include Family Group Conferencing and Signs of Safety, but there are also others that are less well known. Sometimes models of intervention are closely controlled with prescribed methods of delivery, trainers and accredited practitioners. At other times what is promoted as a specific model is understood (and applied) by different practitioners differently. In terms of preventative family support services there is little literature (and even less training) on which interventions and support are best for whom, when and in what circumstances. This needs to change.
- 3. Domestic Abuse** remains both a major societal wrong in itself, and in the specific professional domain of children and families. Resources for abused partners need to be supported and developed - not cut. The discourse in some areas of practice whereby mothers are labelled with a badge of 'failure to protect' needs to end and be replaced by training and development to front line staff delivered by appropriate agencies and the resulting interventions systematically supported by employing organisations. Understanding and applying how domestic abuse intersects with, for example, race, sex and poverty is also key.
- 4. Alcohol and other Drugs.** Alcohol and other drugs are often at the centre of the problems that many families face: use may be the source of the problem or exacerbate or maintain other problems (e.g. domestic abuse, mental health issues). Service users need access to specialist support and social workers need access to education, training and specialist resources in this field.
- 5. The perspectives of people with lived experience and their involvement in co-production.** Families have a right to participate in decision making about their lives. People with lived experience of social work services – which includes families at all points of the spectrum of intervention and support – need to be routinely included in the delivery, review and development of services. Examples would include Family Group Conferencing and other 'family-centric' models of support. Similarly, the involvement of children and young people who are placed in foster or residential care, and those who have left care, need their voice better heard and their active involvement in services further promoted.

6. **Anti-poverty practice.** Poverty remains both a major societal wrong in itself, and in the specific professional domain of children and families. Poverty and inadequate housing both initiates, and exacerbates, many of the problems that families face and undermines Article 8 of the Human Rights Act – the right to family life. Social workers need to practice with an awareness of poverty, be supported by their employers in this work, and both engage with, and be involved in, the wider fight against poverty and its evidenced impact on child and family rights and children's and families goals and aspirations.
7. **Anti-oppressive practice.** Certain groups in society face both direct and indirect discrimination and, as a result of this, poor or non-existent services. As the movement Black Lives Matter has reminded us, members of Black and other Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities people carry a disproportionate weight of poverty and other societal wrongs. Social workers need to practice with an awareness of the systemic discrimination many individuals, families and communities face, work actively to redress this, and be actively supported by their employers in this work.
8. **Community Resources.** Community resources (e.g. under-fives groups, drop-ins, clubs, youth facilities, and food banks) provide a vital layer of support between the family and state intervention. All have been under acute pressure under Covid and have suffered from on-going cuts to funding. Often run exclusively by volunteers the financial costs of such services are low, but the impact is high. We encourage national and local governments to support such activities through investment and other tangible resources. Whilst accepting that food banks have become necessary for some families as austerity has bitten into incomes, and that has increased with COVID, as a society we should move back to a position that these are only used exceptionally and not incorporated into the routine social security system.
9. **The use of digital.** While many people with lived experience do not have access to digital services, the impact of Covid has accelerated the use of digital in social work. There are real problems here – both for social workers and people with lived experience of social work – but also real opportunities too. Any attempt to achieve a 'new normal' must specifically address digital issues in the change plan.
10. **Supervision.** The social work supervision process has become overly focussed on performance management. There is an important role for performance management, but the supervision task is much wider and involves reflective dialogue, learning and development, feedback from people with lived experience, emotional intelligence and social worker well-being. These features are not simply 'nice-to-haves' but create the conditions for the best professional decisions while minimising risk. Social worker employers need to reflect on whether and how their supervision processes might be improved.
11. **Effective management and leadership.** Management and leadership involve a distinct set of skills. These skills can be learnt by experience and experimentation. Many self-taught managers are excellent and many social workers fund their own management education and development. However, to have what is a major service (staff, budgets, working with the most at risk people in the most complex of circumstances) depending, on the whole, on people 'learning by doing' is not good. The most important management and leadership skills are people skills. Social workers are 'people people', but translating this into issues such as motivation, deployment, staff development, organisational systems and budgets is rather different. Without training, feedback and opportunities for reflection and development poor management and leadership translates into high sickness and stress levels, staff churn and an over-reliance on agency staff. Procedures rather than professionalism becomes dominant, and while there is a role for procedures, they are not sufficient for an effective organisation.

12. Work force planning and staff support.

The social work workforce was already struggling considerably before Covid-19 with difficulties around recruitment, retention and high stress levels being regularly reported by social workers and managers⁶. Overwhelmingly social workers relate these difficulties not to direct work or the stress of practice but instead to working conditions and organisational stressors. Child and family social workers have been particularly critical of these aspects of their work⁷. This was not an optimal position for the workforce to respond to the challenges of the pandemic and unsurprisingly many social workers have struggled with the new challenges and risks as a result. We cannot have a return to 'business as usual' following the pandemic and the heroic efforts of social workers during this time need to be recognised through improved working conditions and actions to address the long-term recruitment and retention issues in the profession.

Making it happen

Change happens when groups of people come together in a sustained and focussed way around a common cause. Delivering a sea-change such as the 12 Actions needs an enduring commitment, discipline and sustained engagement from individuals, professions, agencies and governments.

The safety net of society that protects people from poverty, homelessness, illness and the impact of disability has had great holes torn in it. This has been acknowledged for some time, but Covid -19 is shining a light on just how major these holes are.

A Vision for Social Work: Children and Families requires a culture of support where parents are not required to use foodbanks, struggle with homelessness, or face poverty because of unemployment, low wages or disability. We invite social workers in practice, social work managers, current and future leaders, and social work academics to come together in making this Vision a reality.

BASW's commitment

The professional association for social work and social workers will:

- Advocate for this vision
- Gain public and political support to achieve it
- Develop, share and embed ways of delivering good social work across the UK.



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Related BASW Resources

Featherstone B, Gupta A, Mills S (2018) ***The role of the social worker in adoption – ethics and human rights: An enquiry***. Birmingham: BASW

BASW UK – A Social Work Manifesto (2019) Birmingham: BASW

The Anti-Poverty Practice Guide for Social Work (2019) Birmingham: BASW

The context, roles and tasks of the child and family social worker (2018) approved by the (BASW England) Children and Families Group. Birmingham: BASW

Digital Capabilities: Statement for Social Work Practice (2020) Birmingham: BASW/SCIE

Domestic Abuse and Child Welfare. A Practice Guide for Social Workers (2020) Birmingham: SASW

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Cite as: BASW (Jan 2021) *A Vision for Social Work: Children and Families*. Birmingham: BASW.

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