

BASW

The professional association for
social work and social workers



A Vision for Social Work: Adults

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 adults and for children – 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: Children and Families*

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 social 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 Adults 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 those 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. 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 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: ADULTS

Context

This vision, by the UK professional association for social work, draws on our work over the last 50 years to set out the current situation and potential future for social work with adults.

The vision relates to all people over 18 in the UK who may come into contact with social work. This includes people who may need social work support for themselves or because they are caring for someone else.

Adults' social workers have a range of roles within the United Kingdom. Their overarching role is to enable people to live well and thrive, drawing on their own strengths and connections, overcoming barriers and accessing support. This can include enabling

people to access universal services, income and social security and other essential support. They play a significant part in helping people access social care, for example when they need additional help because of illness or disability or near the end of life. They also support carers, family and friends, who provide day-to-day care to adults. Social workers take a lead in enabling people to make decisions, including when they may not have capacity to make a particular decision, in helping people be protected from abuse and neglect, and in assessment for people who have mental health problems. These roles include making judgements about whether someone has need of state-funded social care, what sort of care and support is appropriate for them, what would help protect someone from harm, and what would be in someone's best interests. In particular, social workers uphold human rights for people, who need to be detained in hospital because of their mental health problems, or who need to have particular care that they cannot consent to because they lack capacity to do this at that time.



Social work has broad expertise in providing therapeutic support to those who are experiencing change, struggle or loss in their lives, and in preventing or delaying future issues by supporting carers, families, communities and individuals to plan ahead or to recover from difficult situations.

Social workers work closely with other social care staff and with health and other agencies in undertaking this work:

*'Social care is much broader than social work. It includes all the support that enables people to live well when they are struggling, for example because of illness, having a disability, being a carer or a sudden life event that undermines their ability to manage'*⁴

However, social workers have a distinctive and unique contribution in looking at the social context and the whole story of someone's situation and working with them and those who are important to them to uphold their human rights in day-to-day life. This is reflected in many of the legal powers that social workers can enact e.g. in mental health and 'best interest' assessments.

Adults who have care and support needs, carers, families and communities have experienced increased challenges during Covid-19. Social workers have faced difficulties in working with people to support them and have made great efforts and used creativity to adapt.

However, social work with adults was already under pressure well before Covid-19 arrived. If there is to be a 'new normal', social workers want it to be different to the 'old normal', for people with lived experience of social work, and for the contribution they and their colleagues make to creating a fairer society.

This document sets out the current situation and the aims of social work with adults, before setting out actions for change and how they might be achieved.

The current situation – an opportunity for change for the better

The effect of Covid-19 has been to cause greater struggles for adults, carers, families and neighbourhoods, and greater difficulty in delivering social work. The pandemic has exposed significant disparities in the risks and outcomes people face. Adult social care, and social work within this, already faced challenges including: lack of overall funding; inconsistency in resources in different areas;

issues with accessing support; confusion and overlap between social care and health; stigma and discrimination faced by people in different situations; and inequality in life chances across the UK.

It is also expected that additional need will arise as the pandemic proceeds due to a range of issues including the disparities in risk and impact; social isolation; loss of occupation and incomes; and the impact of a recession on public, voluntary and private sector support.



Social work already faced unacceptable and unsustainable levels of stress at work, with limited support. Many social workers planned to leave the profession⁵. This vision requires a reform of how social workers are supported. Their health and wellbeing must be attended to, so that they are able to support others.

However, the pandemic has also raised awareness of the importance of social care and highlighted the social work role within this. It has created learning and opportunities for different ways of working. And it has brought communities together to support one another. This gives a basis for making important progress in how social work with adults happens.

A 'new normal' could look like social work in support of the lives that adults, carers and their loved ones really want: social work support that is consistently funded and resourced; social workers having time and opportunity to work with communities; working in partnership with people with lived experience and those they love; practice that promotes social change, provides support and therapeutic input; and action to prevent social and individual struggles.

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 adults. 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 aims.

The vision

*"We all want to live in the place we call home with the people and things that we love, in communities where we look out for one another, doing the things that matter to us."*⁶



All adults, and the people who care about them, should have access to quality and effective social work support when they need it. So that all adults have the opportunity to live a life of dignity and fulfilment, regardless of the barriers to this.

Some adults, for some of the time, need additional resources and support to manage their lives. This can happen for many reasons and can happen to anyone, either because of their own situation or because they are caring for someone else. Without support, people can struggle to have essential needs met, such as being able to eat, and can struggle to uphold their human rights. Human rights include the right to live with dignity, to have family life and not to be deprived of liberty (for example being detained in a hospital for mental health treatment unless this is necessary for your own or others' protection).

Social workers help people to identify what will enable them to have essential needs met and to promote their wellbeing. Social workers look at all the factors that stop people who face such challenges from living well and how to overcome these. This includes using the law and legal rights to access care and support or to protect people. Legal literacy is important here; the ability to connect legislation with professional priorities and ethics. It also includes helping people recover from difficult experiences (e.g. acquiring a disability mid-life) and to identify new opportunities.

Social workers have particular expertise in:

- Providing advocacy and enabling people to speak up for and access their legal rights and entitlements;
- Building relationships and understanding what matters to people and what would support them to live well;
- Considering the whole life story and context of someone's life and using this in
 - Planning and coordinating care and support;
 - Enabling carers, family and friends to sustain their caring role, their relationships with people they are supporting and their own wellbeing;
 - Working with people to keep them safe from abuse or neglect;
 - Understanding and planning for what is in someone's best interests when they are not able to make a decision;
 - Offering therapeutic support to help people overcome trauma or difficult circumstances; and,
 - Helping communities to find ways to thrive and overcome issues like poverty.



Social workers use their professional training, knowledge and skills to do this. They must follow a code of ethics that balances the power they have to make judgements that affect people's lives with the requirement to always uphold human rights, challenge discrimination and promote equality. Often, people who need support do not have much choice and control. Social workers have to uphold people's rights to make their own decisions or to make these in their best interests and be accountable for their professional practice.

Social workers may be employed by local government, the NHS, or voluntary or private sectors, or may work independently. In every case, they must be able to apply the law in relation to their professional ethics and expertise, use their capabilities to make good judgements, and have clear pathways to take action with and for adults who are at risk or struggling to thrive.

All adults in our society, whatever their situation, background or history, with social care needs, need to be able to access essential social work support as a right. There needs to be more certainty about how social work, social care and support that enables people to thrive are funded. There must be equity and transparency in what is available.

This requires social work law, policy and practice that upholds the dignity and worth of all adults. It requires consistency of quality and impact of social work across the United Kingdom.

ACTIONS FOR CHANGE

The actions that are required to make this possible are as follows:

1. Adults in our society need to have a safety net to avoid destitution and to access the basic building blocks of a good life. Everyone should have social security to meet their fundamental needs such as nutrition, shelter and family life. **Social workers' role should include enabling people to access this.**
2. When adults need additional support, there must be sustainable and adequate funding for adult social care and for social work within this. Delivery should be based on what is needed to enable people to have choices equal to others and to be included. Quality social care should be available to all and the same high standard of care should be provided whether people are eligible for public funding or not. **Social workers must be able to make transparent judgements about what someone needs and what can be provided. Social workers must be able to apply the same ethics and expertise, and help people achieve the same outcomes wherever they live. Access to social work should not be unaffordable or discriminatory.**
3. Adults, with their loved ones and communities, must be able to identify their wishes, advocate for themselves, or have support to advocate, and create the best option for their life in partnership with social workers and others. **Social workers need the time and resource to build relationships and tailor their support.**
4. Adults must have the right support at the right time to maximise their wellbeing, minimise intervention in their lives and be able to continue living *'in the place we call home with the people and things that we love, in communities where we look out for one another, doing the things that matter to us.'* **Social workers need to be able to carry out their roles in preventative work, therapeutic work, responses to complex situations and safeguarding. They must be supported by their employers and not be hampered by bureaucracy, lack of technology, poor working conditions or other barriers.**
5. Adults should be able to access what they need in the place that works for them. This is likely to include locally tailored solutions. Wherever possible, adults should not have to leave their home or community to access support, and they should be able to maintain links with the people and places important to them. Adults should have the maximum control possible over the care and support they receive. They should have recourse to locally accountable people if things are not working for them. **Social workers need to be able to understand their local communities, local needs and solutions, and have a quick and accessible response to their professional recommendations.**
6. Adults should be able to access the social care and health support they need in a joined-up way that makes sense and is straightforward. **Social workers' expertise should be recognised, included in planning and they should be deployed appropriately. Policy and planning should take account of the social work role and enable joint work that is clear, effective and efficient.**
7. 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. **Social work with adults (including technology in accommodation and TECS – Technology Enabled Care Systems) must explicitly address digital issues for service improvement.**
8. Adults should be empowered to address social barriers to their wellbeing, including structures that discriminate, poverty, poor housing, and disparities in education, income and health. There should be a society-wide focus on challenging oppression and a political will to reduce inequality. **Social workers should be able to use evidence and experience to empower adults and communities to address barriers they face.**

Support for social workers

Social workers need support at all levels to enable this to happen:

- Local and national partnership between social workers and people with lived experience;
- Public awareness and recognition of the importance of social work;
- National and local government support for good ways of working;
- Good working conditions and support from employers;
- Mutual respect and collaboration with other professions, agencies and organisations; and,
- Wide-ranging, evidence-informed and principled initial education and continuing professional development and career development.



Social workers are themselves often carers, people with lived experience of social care support or with lived experience of oppression. They should have personal and professional support to thrive and do their work well, and to stay in the profession that they love.

Social work is pre-dominantly a female workforce and an employer of a high percentage of workers from Black and Minority Ethnic communities⁷. Support and working conditions must take account of inequalities in opportunity and of structural discrimination, in order to ensure all social workers thrive and the profession provides the best possible practice.

Social workers cannot do their work without partnership with people in other essential roles. All social care workers and others in the helping professions need equivalent recognition and support.

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.

We will work with social workers, people with lived experience and our allies to improve this vision and make what adults need a reality.

References

1. IFSW (2014) The International Definition of Social Work. www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work Accessed 7 September 2020.
2. Smith L and Martinez-Herrero LI with Arnell P, Bolger J, Butler-Warke A, Cook W, Downie M, Farmer N, Nicholls J and MacDermott D (2019) *Social Work and Human Rights: A Practice Guide*. Birmingham: BASW
3. See for example: McLaughlin H and Tan JP (2009) *What's in a name: 'Client', 'Patient', 'Customer', 'Consumer', 'Expert by Experience', 'Service User' – What's Next?* British Journal of Social Work (2009) 39, 1101-17.
4. The Kings Fund (2020) *What is Social Care* www.kingsfund.org.uk/projects/what-is-social-care Accessed 10 September 2020.
5. Ravalier J and Boichat (2018) *UK Social Workers: Working Conditions and Wellbeing*. Birmingham: BASW.
6. <https://socialcarefuture.blog>
7. For example, 86% of the children's social work workforce in England is female and 22% identify as Black, Asian or of Dual Heritage. DfE (2020) Children and Family Social Work Workforce in England. London: DfE.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/868384/CSWW_2018-19_Text.pdf
Accessed 10 September 2020.

Related BASW Resources

Human Rights practice

www.basw.co.uk/resources/social-work-and-human-rights-practice-guide

Human Rights statement

www.basw.co.uk/media/news/2020/jun/upholding-human-rights-during-covid-19#:~:text=%20There%20are%20some%20specific%20areas%20of%20urgent,other%20social%20care%20settings%20%E2%80%93%20BASW...%20More%20

Anti-poverty

www.basw.co.uk/media/news/2020/jun/upholding-human-rights-during-covid-19#:~:text=%20There%20are%20some%20specific%20areas%20of%20urgent,other%20social%20care%20settings%20%E2%80%93%20BASW...%20More%20

Capabilities statements

www.basw.co.uk/social-work-training/professional-capabilities-framework-pcf

Working conditions research

www.basw.co.uk/what-we-do/campaigns/professional-working-conditions

Social Work and Human Rights: A Practice Guide. BASW: Birmingham'

www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/Social%20Work%20and%20Human%20Rights%20A%20Practice%20Guide.%20DEC%202019.pdf

Methodology

This document was initially written by Gerry Nosowska, BASW UK Chair in discussion with our Head of Policy and Research, lead members of BASW Council and our executive managers. It was written with reference to user-led statements, previous BASW resources and current position statements.

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