

BASW England Scoping Review for Children and Families Social Work



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The professional association for
social work and social workers

Scope & Purpose

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) is the professional association for social work in the UK with offices in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. With over 22,000 members, we exist to promote the best possible social work services for all people who may need them while also securing the well-being of social workers working in all health and social care settings.

The following BASW England scoping paper is a policy document compiled by the Children and Families thematic group. It is intended that this will be a resource for mid-career social workers in children's services, their managers and policymakers. It highlights and reaffirms some over-arching approaches that the BASW England considers central to the day-to-day practice of children and families social workers. Legislation, particularly the Children Act 1989, demonstrates the need for these approaches to England's children and families social work practice. However, the approaches mentioned in this document are also relevant for the other UK countries.

This document complements BASW's [A Vision for Social Work: Children and Families](#), which is a UK vision, and [The context, roles and tasks of the child and family social worker](#) explicitly produced by the BASW England Children and Families Group. Both of these clearly define the roles and aims of children and families social workers and the different contexts in which they provide social work services to children, families and carers. They mainly describe the 'what' by reflecting the reality of practice, and they are primarily aimed at those who are not themselves social workers. This scoping paper seeks to explore the 'how' further, especially for early-career social workers or those moving into this area of practice.

Central to this document is recognition that children and families social work is grounded in legislative duties, powers, social justice, social work theory, and professional ethics and approaches. The first part of this scoping paper explores some of the key complexities within children and families social work and demonstrates that our work is grounded in children's and human rights. The second part explores some of the current social work theory, which draws on the wide range of relevant research, theory and practice publications available at qualifying, post-qualifying and more specialist career stages. It is not intended as a definitive list. Instead, it should encourage further reading and critical reflection. The scoping paper illustrates just some of the key resources, theories, and approaches that can assist children and families social workers in traversing the complex spaces and continuums inherent in the profession. It is also recognised that whilst there has been a lot of focus on social work responses to child maltreatment in much of the recent children and families social work literature, the approaches are also relevant to other areas. These include but are not limited to children with disabilities, community group work, and support for children that do not live with their birth parents and their carers.

PART 1: Context

Practice within the complexities of children and families social work practice

The importance of both/and rather than either/ or ways of understanding

Overall, social work history and literature indicate that safeguarding and support seldom function from fixed positions between the individual versus societal, 'child rescue' versus 'prevention', care versus control, or supportive versus coercive stances. Social work literature and history make clear that it is neither viable nor practical to separate practice in such ways. Instead, social work practice must operate on the continuum – the 'both/and', rather than versus or the 'either/or'.

Children and families social workers must also take a particular reflexive and ethical stance regarding power, advocacy, and rights. BASW England's ['Professional Capabilities Framework \(PCF\)'](#) echoes this. The PCF includes the need for critical reflection whilst acknowledging rights and social justice. Furthermore, the PCF highlights that this stance should permeate practice, whether as a newly qualified or advanced practitioner, practice supervisor, manager, or educator. The PCF explicitly highlights ways that this must be maintained whilst social workers progress in their careers.

Another ongoing contention for social work is that whilst children's services and adults services are often seen as separate entities, social work remains one profession. For example, issues and difficulties for adults, such as parental substance misuse, will directly impact a child's well-being.

Social workers need a broad understanding of a range of needs, problem areas and different approaches to practice. This

enables them to work systematically but also flexibly in responding to individual and community needs. An ecological or systems understanding underpins the range of approaches and specific methods. The need for a broad understanding is reiterated by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work's (IASSW) global definition of social work.

"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 well-being" (IFSW, 2014)

The global definition is explicit that social workers must contribute to change on the individual and societal levels. As can be seen throughout this scoping paper, this is often a cause of tension between whether to take individual or collectivist actions. Throughout social work's history, there have been ongoing debates about whether to mainly focus on empowering individuals to change behaviours that may cause harm, or take more radical and critical approaches. BASW England is unequivocal that social work must address both individual reform and social revolution in social policy.

Children's rights, family life and protection

BASW England ensures its work is explicitly grounded in human rights. For example, in [A Vision for Social Work: Children and Families](#), the '12 Actions for Change' states that "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". Another example is in BASW England's [10 Priorities for the Review of Children's Social Care](#). The 5th priority states that the "review should be grounded in a children's rights perspective".

The following children's rights are especially vital for ethical social work practice:

A child's welfare must be paramount. All children and families social work must be centred on the rights of the child. This is enshrined as a principle of the Children Act 1989 (CA 1989) and in Article 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Children should, first and foremost, stay in the care of their families (CA 1989, s.17(1)(b)). Children should only be removed from their families if they are likely to suffer significant harm, and remaining in their family's care is not consistent with their welfare (CA 1989, s.31). This is reiterated in Article 9 of the UNCRC. It states that a child has a right to remain in the care of their family unless separation is necessary for the child's best interests. Additionally, the 2014 Care Act (requiring local authorities to promote welfare when carrying out their care and support functions with respect to adults) asks specifically for parenting roles (whether of birth or adoptive parents or kinship carers) to be given consideration when deciding on service provision.

Children have the right to protection, as stated in Article 19 of the UNCRC. Also, under section 47 of the CA 1989, local authorities have a duty to investigate if they suspect a child is at risk of significant harm. This includes physical and sexual abuse or treatment likely to damage a child's health and development.

If a child cannot remain in their family environment, they are entitled to protection and assistance provided by the state. Article 20 of the UNCRC states and underpins the statutory duties found in the CA 1989. If care away from the family home is needed, every effort should be made to maintain meaningful and safe links with their family and community (CA 1989, s.34).

Children have a right to express their views and have those views taken seriously for matters affecting them. This is highlighted in Article 12 of the UNRC and throughout the CA1989 (e.g. s. 22(4)). Therefore child participation, co-production and ascertaining wishes and feelings are central to children and families social work.

Article 27 of the UNCRC states that **every child has the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and social needs and support their development.** Governments must help families who cannot provide this. Section 17 of the CA1989 makes this a statutory duty. Under this legislation, local authorities must safeguard and promote the welfare of children who are "in need".

This is further articulated and defined in the Children and Families Act 2014, especially for children with special education needs and disabilities who are automatically considered in need. The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations state that support and assistance must start at initial referral, whether or not the child is subject to a child protection investigation. Other guidance, such as Working Together to Safeguard Children, also make these statutory duties and powers explicit. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the 2009 Guidance on Safeguarding Disabled children are also useful starting points regarding the rights of children with disabilities.

PART 2: Approaches that ground best children and families social work practice

This scoping paper builds on and makes no attempt to summarise the many excellent practice texts that contribute to the qualifying and post-qualifying social work studies curricula. It focuses on the principles that underpin ethical and effective child and family social work that permeate the approaches and methods that inform social work practice in the various child and family social work settings.

Relationship-based practice

BASW England is unequivocal that relationship-based practice is the cornerstone of social work. Relationship-based practice is more than just a method. It is an approach and ethical endeavour which helps move social work away from the increase in the technical/rational approach that became apparent in the 1990s. Relationship-based approaches go beyond psychosocial models of practice. Practitioners must engage with families through a relational approach that directly

“attempts to reach an integrated understanding of individual and structural factors as they interact with each other” (Ferguson, 2011: 8)

Relationship-based practice is bi-directional and involves mutuality. This links in closely with the ethics of care and trauma-informed approaches.

Overall, relationship-based practice highlights the need for social workers to engage in emotional labour and ask for a professional relationship rather than a professionalised one. As highlighted in BASW's [PCF](#), this means that workers must have the means to reconcile boundaries between their personal and professional selves. Relationship-based practice must be

placed within relationship-based systems and organisations that encourage, amongst other things, reflection and positive supervisory relationships and collaborative ('team around the family') approaches. For example, [BASW England's 80/20 campaign](#) requests more time spent with families but also more effective recording, right-based advocacy, supervision, cross-agency and inter-professional communication, reflective spaces, and more focused family-centred and co-produced assessment writing.

Community-based social work, social model approaches to child protection and contextual safeguarding

Community-based social work is another generic term for multiple approaches. Such approaches propose that individual casework models can only have a limited impact unless they also fully acknowledge the social and economic determinants of needs and harms. Therefore, community-based approaches typically argue for both small and large state partnerships with family members, colleagues, community members and policymakers. Services need to promote co-production of services by talking and listening to children and adults of diverse intersectionalities in various community settings. There is a focus on relationships between statutory services, community groups and neighbourhood residents. A

community-based rather than a 'functional' approach to service delivery also avoids unnecessary changes of social workers with families being 'stepped up' and 'stepped down' again between social work teams. Above all, BASW England recommends that children's social workers be closely located within their local communities, socially and physically, to understand children's experiences better and use social work approaches that recognise community strengths and what matters to them. For example, Family Group Conferencing can ensure that families are central experts in their own lives and lead decision-making.

There is evidence that such approaches, if adequately funded, will help push back against the increased preoccupation with risk in later modern society. It allows for a broader intersectional vision and collective, co-produced, inter-agency responsibility regarding helping families and safeguarding children. This envisages a social model of child and family social work that pays attention to the structural inequalities that impact people's lives.

Contextual safeguarding has recently been developed and fits with a community-based approach. It is particularly helpful when responding to young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families (online and offline). These can include but are not limited to county lines, trafficking, criminal and child sexual exploitation. It is designed to identify, assess and intervene with the social conditions of abuse rather than just individuals affected by them. Contextual safeguarding builds partnerships with sectors and individuals in extra-familial settings where young people spend their time.

Individualistic approaches go alongside instigating societal change

Child development and socialisation theories are crucial to the task of children and families social work. However, in recent years this focus on the individual has been used to support policies based on individualism, especially those based on neoliberalism and new managerialism. BASW England argues that an excessive focus on individual change, and the efficiency and effectiveness of

services to promote it, may neglect using structural or macro approaches to change oppressive social systems and unjust social policies. It can lead to an unhealthy dependency on process-driven social work. Using individualist approaches alone may also gloss over cultural diversity and miss vital learning from countries, particularly in the Global South, where social work includes more community-oriented activities.

Alongside these theories focusing on individual development and relationships, BASW England endorses the more encompassing approaches which have consistently permeated social work literature. These include the need for early help to reduce the likelihood of harm, whether from material deficits or individual and relationship problems, community-based and social model approaches of children protection and well-being, and embed approaches rooted in anti-oppressive practice and social justice.

It is crucial to note that no approach should be viewed uncritically. In accordance with BASW England's PCF, BASW code of ethics and relevant social work research and peer-reviewed practice texts, social workers must continuously reflect upon and challenge over-arching narratives. They must ensure that they place any social work theory and practice approach in their socio-historical and political context.

Early help, preventative services, early intervention and family support

Early help, preventative services, early intervention and family support are often ill-defined and used interchangeably. They all have different theoretical and contextual underpinnings.

Early help, as used by the Working Together document, has become the favoured term. In later years its methods have shifted towards individualised and targeted approaches and, with pressure on resources, are sometimes seen as synonymous with 'edge of care' services.

Preventative services emphasise a more structural approach. The question 'preventing what' has to be asked. It may refer to

preventing maltreatment, exploitation, youth offending, coming into care, or prevention of harm resulting from poverty or homelessness. Resultant services may include housing support, welfare rights advice, anti-poverty policies, or manualised programmes such as domestic violence to reduce family violence.

Early intervention can refer to 'early in the child's life' or 'an early stage of problem development. The first of these has a history rooted in neuroscience and child development. It has come to be characterised by an individualised focus on the child's early life, and parenting deficits responded to by manualised programmes, therapies, and screening tools.

Family support often refers to community and family-based practical and relational support. It focuses on the safeguarding of children from exposure to harm within neighbourhoods and/or families. It also draws on theories of social capital, multi-dimensional poverty and human development. It is often appropriately linked with inter-agency and cross-professional 'team around the family' approaches.

The overarching aim of all of these approaches to helping children and families is to address gaps and bolster families' strengths by using statutory and discretionary powers to respond to varied needs by providing a range of services, including social work. This is guided by legislation such as s.17 of the CA1989 and the Care Act 2014 powers to support parents and carers. The intention is that this will reduce crises for families, reduce child protection intervention, and the numbers of children in need and children that need to be in out-of-home care or custody.

Early help and prevention practice and research are to an extent associated with government policies such as the austerity measures that began in 2010. Austerity has had a significant impact on the communities and families social workers engage with. Evidence suggests that addressing families' basic resource needs has not been a priority for local authorities, including children's social care services. This, in turn, can prevent the appropriate recognition of needs and has

narrowed the kinds of support available, especially for children with disabilities. For example, such unmet needs have significant links to gaps in other provisions in terms of mental health, speech and language and understanding the whole family needs when dealing with anxiety and distress in autistic children.

BASW England does not promote one form of early intervention, help, support, or prevention over another, but rather understands that all types of support for the family and children in different age groups are essential to improve children's outcomes. All are necessary, including informal support, which indirectly forms community relationships and universal welfare provision. It is also reasonable to assume that some types of early help and prevention will benefit some families and communities more than others.

Participation and child's voice

'Participation', 'co-production' and 'involvement' are umbrella terms for any activities where the general public is involved in developing health and social services. It is relevant to research and at the local or policy level may also be used differently depending on whether it refers to the design and prioritisation of services or services provided to a particular family or child.

As mentioned above, one of the fundamental principles highlighted in the Children Act 1989 is a commitment to listen to children and families and consider their views. This is their right, and participation has also proven essential to deliver responsive care and, as a result, more effective and sustainable social work involvement. Meaningful participation can also build empowerment, self-esteem, social skills and a sense of control.

However, participation remains a contested term in research, social work education and practice. The contention is partly because participation is concerned with democracy and power relations. As a principle for practice, it must be followed with care, especially with children. If not, there is a risk of further marginalising, tokenistic practice, re-traumatisation, or even exploiting

oppressed groups such as the vulnerable children and families we work with. Too often, children, parents and carers become invisible in child protection work. Lack of time and excessive workloads may mean that the tensions between protection and participation are often not explored, especially with children.

Current innovative research and methods of participation endorsed by BASW England utilise theories of recognition and dialogical participation. These suggest that participation moves beyond simplistic notions of voice and perceived competence. Voice, space, audience and influence must be addressed through an ongoing dialogue between social workers and family members and between social workers, managers and policymakers. Furthermore, children communicate in many different ways, and there must not be an over-emphasis placed on verbal communication. Therefore, access to interpreters, advocates, and active work on communication skills for practitioners is crucial.

Anti-racist social work

The debates around 'race', ethnicity and racism have a substantial history in social work and child welfare. BASW recognises that certain groups in society, particularly Black, Asian and other Minoritised Ethnic groups in the UK (including but not limited to Jewish, Romani Gypsy and Traveller people) experience specific, pernicious and structural forms of racism.

It is well established that black and minoritised families are more likely to live in socio-economically disadvantaged communities. There are also inequalities in child welfare, special educational needs, school exclusions, disabilities, and youth justice, with black children of Caribbean heritage overrepresented amongst those receiving more intrusive services. Also, children of Asian heritage are under-represented amongst those receiving family support and services. These children and their families are continuously exposed to racial discrimination and racial microaggressions.

Black and minority ethnic social workers are also disproportionately underrepresented in senior and managerial levels. Often the voices of social work students, practitioners, managers and academics from Black and other Global Majority Communities are silenced or suppressed.

Anti-racist practice requires developing theories and practices that privilege understanding how race power and cultural knowledge impact societies structures. This includes an understanding of one's cultural self and learning about oneself within the relations of race.

Although linked to anti-oppressive practice, anti-racist practice requires specific knowledge of critical race theory, a radical approach by way of theory and its history. Critical race theory contends that racism is a normative and powerful social construct employed to serve white people's interests. Critical race theory focuses less on individualised prejudices and requires an additional focus on racial justice, white supremacy and white privilege.

BASW England is unequivocal that anti-racism requires action to interrupt systems of racism rather than just platitudes. There must be cultural sensitivity without resorting to cultural relativism. A social work practitioner needs professional curiosity and continuously reflexive and morally active practice to address cultural, racial and religious experiences. BASW highlights its [commitment to anti-racist social work](#) and has produced an anti-racist framework.

Anti-poverty social work

COVID-19 has furthered inequality and poverty with a rise of food banks and food poverty and difficulties for those unable to work or having to resort to working in unsafe conditions. The leading causes of poverty are now known to be structural rather than individual. Government policy directly influences poverty levels more than the individual will or activities of families.

Poverty is connected to health inequalities. Poverty also impacts cognitive, social and behavioural development, participation, as well as domestic violence and parental conflict. Children in the most deprived areas are also ten times more likely to need to come into care than children in the least deprived decile. This is known as the 'social gradient'.

BASW England acknowledges the impact of the structural inequalities and the intersection between poverty and heightened concerns about abuse and neglect. This acknowledgement does not suggest that social workers simply conflate poverty deprivation and living in marginalised communities with abuse and neglect. Instead, research points to the need for an intersectional approach and highlights that

social workers cannot tackle child welfare unless poverty is addressed. Indeed, government policies have prioritised measures to increase austerity rather than reduce social and economic inequality. For this reason, BASW has formed groups such as the [Anti-Austerity Group](#) and reiterated the need for BASW members to advocate for and demand social justice for those living in poverty.

[BASW's anti-poverty practice guide](#) and guidance in response to family homelessness (about to be issued) highlight the need for time and reflection to understand and address the impact of living in poverty and housing stress. They also highlight the need for community, relationship-based and advocacy-based approaches.

Conclusion

Children and families social work is complex, emotional work that promotes the positive contribution of support alongside the essential requirement of maintaining children's rights. This includes protecting children from abuse and harm. Support and protection lie on a continuum. Social work literature, research, and everyday social work practice experience highlight that they cannot be separated out.

It is also vital that social workers are not just viewed as competent or incompetent 'technicians'. There must be a broader concept of what is professional children and families social work. This includes the use of self, awareness of values, anti-oppressive practice, acknowledgement of power, reflexivity, and challenging managerial and structural obstacles and practices. BASW England has highlighted some of the broader approaches that can help social workers achieve this. The approaches adhere to BASW's social work code of ethics and BASW England's PCFs. They help penetrate the surface of what social workers encounter daily and involve locating difficulties and possible participatory, relationship-based solutions within a broader social context.

Recommended Key Texts

[BASW Anti-Poverty Practice Guide for Social Work](#)

BASW Homelessness Guide

[BASW The context, roles and tasks of the child and family social worker](#)

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