

BASW
England

SWU Social
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Union



Consultation Response

Social Work England:
Corporate strategy 2023-2026

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 Social Workers Union (SWU) is the only trade union to offer representation by qualified social workers who understand the complexities of the profession. With officers working across the UK, SWU provides representation at internal hearings for disciplinary and grievance procedures, and employer investigations into practice and misconduct allegations.

This is a joint consultation response from both organisations prepared by the BASW England team and the BASW/SWU Advice and Representation service (A&R). We are pleased to respond to Social Work England's consultation on their corporate strategy 2023-2026 on behalf of our members.

This joint response is in 3 parts: member responses to the BASW England survey (on pages 1-10), a response from the Social Workers' Union and the BASW/SWU Joint Advice and Representation service (on pages 10-13) and BASW England's conclusions, feedback & recommendations (on pages 13-16).

PART 1 | Member responses to the BASW England survey:

The responses to this consultation were captured via an online survey that ran for 10 weeks. This is a snapshot from our membership, and we hope the qualitative feedback is helpful to the overall consultation process. The strength of responses and free text comments are interesting and convey some key issues raised by our members.

Question 1: *What do you think about our ambition to resolve concerns about social workers locally, where it is safe and appropriate to do so?*

The 'fitness to practice' section (in the consultation document) states: "We will... use improved data and analysis of our fitness to practise work to deepen our understanding of concerns, themes and issues. This includes concerns around equality, diversity and inclusion. We can then take appropriate action to address them". However, the consultation lacks detail on practical action and solutions that could be undertaken or any links to relevant existing empirical evidence on these issues.

Having considered Social Work England's ambitions, our members have the following comments, concerns and queries:

- *"As long as we have the same standards and consistency in practice and decision-making that's ok, but we know that is not the case - so how is this going to be managed?"*
- *"A positive move if staffed and resourced properly in a just way."*
- *"It would work a lot better because the current process when done centrally can take months into years. There are so many differences in practice across the country that it would make sense to resolve things locally."*

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- *“The potential problem with localisation is an inconsistent and partial implementation of procedures and resolutions.”*
- *“This has to be better than the convoluted process causing social workers undue distress that we have at present.”*
- *“Would it be fair across the country though? I think it could lead to differing approaches – so I’m unsure.”*
- *“I believe this is an ambitious commitment and unsure how this will be delivered effectively in reality.”*
- *“It would help if Social Work England would give examples of how this work in practice. Social Work England needs to be seen as independent by anyone complaining about a social worker and by the social worker concerned. If Social Work England have concerns about the way complaints are dealt with by employers, they should be able to speak out independently.”*
- *“I assume this question is in relation to the ‘improve our fitness to practice’ activity. This feels a little like more assumption that social workers are not actually fit to practice, when there are larger scale issues such as many years of underfunding and austerity with cuts/loss of support services. Management support is very hit and miss. Some managers use ‘restorative practice’ to push people out and manipulate situations, instead of actually supporting their staff. As a social worker I know colleagues who would not feel safe to disclose their mental health issues - knowing if it ever became an issue, instead of genuine support, it would be used against you. It’s a sad state of affairs really - especially considering we are meant to be a helping profession.”*
- *“Concerns may be resolved locally, but links should be made with the social work register – for when registered social workers move elsewhere.”*
- *“The ambition to resolve concerns implies that concerns are related specifically due to the behaviour of social workers. It places blame upon social workers - specifically - rather than recognising the socio-economic conditions they are expected to work in - which impacts upon their performance leading to a multitude of service concerns. The political environment in which social workers are working also has a direct effect upon increased complaints. Therefore, questions must focus upon the wider impact of the environment rather than just social workers’ behaviours/reactions which lead to concerns.”*
- *“I have read the Social Work England strategy on this. It does not seem at all clear what their plans are. It is important for us to have a much greater understanding of why Social Work England think this is a priority. What is the rationale for complaints being dealt with locally, rather via the regulator? In addition, I am unclear how this would sit alongside employer responsibilities. More information is needed as to why Social Work England believe local management of complaints is somehow inherently better and how this would work in reality.”*
- *“I would like to know more about how Social Work England plan to do to ensure such processes are fair, especially for those from ethnic minority communities who are more likely to be subject to such formalities.”*

Question 2: *How could we continue to improve our approach to regulation?*

Our members have the following comments, concerns and queries:

- *“Social Work England should share where they have intervened and in what circumstances and publish so registrants and employees can see their approach.”*
- *“Be more proactive in course accreditation to ensure social work students are work ready. Take a more active role in promoting the profession to a wide audience, especially when there is negative press – for*

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example child death cases. Engage in data analysis work relating to demand management and workforce analysis/planning. Offer tools to support social worker employers in creating good conditions. Work nationally to connect all groups, such as PSW network, NAIRO, BASW etc respond to critical reviews with a cohesive plan. Overall, be more visible and proactive to promote and protect the profession you regulate.”

- *“The continuous professional development (CPD) requirements are too rigid. Most courses require feedback following completion, so evidence of courses attended should suffice for CPD requirements - not deep and reflective analyses.”*
- *“Social workers need to have more support in relation to regulation requirements and the fees payable should be reduced.”*
- *“Less CPD logs from social workers. Make employers provide a report instead. Take pressure off already swamped frontline staff. Or maybe model it like the medics do and have a 5-year report to continue being registered.”*
- *“The protection of service users and the public is paramount. However, we also need policies to protect social workers from witch-hunts and scapegoating.”*
- *“Social workers are values-led. The very definition of a social work is inextricably intertwined with social justice. To hold social workers accountable for failings in the system is unjust, demoralising and has driven many social workers I know personally out of the profession. This is the very last thing our profession, and more importantly the people we serve, need. Regulations need to reflect our values, ethics and real-life experiences. To do anything different undermines the profession, professional identity and worse it reinforces the idea that it is social workers - rather than the government/LAs - who are responsible for the many tragic circumstances that bring questions about social work regulation to the fore.”*
- *“This all needs a complete overhaul, as current CPD system is too time consuming and unreliable.”*
- *“I would like to see a process that can respond to human error, rather than navigate people to re-register with all the cost and angst that entails. A call to social workers who have been registered for years and evidently have submitted their CPD, but not completed the application (as was my case - I missed that I hadn't submitted a required form to apply for re registration).”*
- *“Some of the information I have received from social workers who have experienced the capability element of regulation has been alarming as not supportive and extremely punitive.”*
- *“Encourage more support by employers for coaching and learning for social workers.”*
- *“By appreciating the positive work that is going on already, both by the regulating body and partnering social work forums.”*
- *“Make management including higher management more accountable for actually (genuinely) supporting their staff, not using this against them. Lobby central Government to value, thus adequately fund social care, in the way they fund the NHS and other essential services. When thinking about preventative opportunities, more needs to be available, as things are going to deteriorate further due to the current economic climate. Recognition that social workers are also being directly affected. Support our social workers to be able to continue to support others.”*
- *“As an experienced social worker of many years, I believe your CPD requirements have conflated issues. Social worker should only need to provide evidence of the CPD undertaken to demonstrate their commitment to the role and how they developed. It should not be about having to write mini essays on learning, as if we are back at the student stage of our careers. Therefore, we need to simplify what is needed in CPD, rather than make it more complicated, time-consuming and costly.”*

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- *“Celebrating the work social workers do and seek to change the discourse about social workers in the media. To also represent the challenges and achievements of social workers - rather remaining absent and neutral.”*

Question 3: *We want to develop our leadership role in addressing risks to public protection. Where should we focus our activity?*

Developing anti-racist, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory leadership (and equality, diversity and inclusion more broadly), in relation to public protection and recruitment and retention are key areas that require focused activities.

Our members have the following comments, concerns and queries:

- *“Promote public understanding of the social work role. Highlight funding shortages and the sources of challenge so the public are clear, you get what you pay for. Government lobbying. The Medical professions do not receive as much negative reviews as social work. Why do you think this is? What is it their professional bodies and regulators do that BASW and SWE doesn’t?”*
- *“It feels like social care, and in particular social workers, are still viewed as ‘experts’ when it suits multi-agency partners, but not enough to involve us in key policy and decision-making until it becomes a necessity. Social work needs to consider its current perception in the media and amongst partnership agencies to elevate its position to accurately reflect its actual contribution.”*
- *“Focus on strengthening and supporting the social work role. Make sure partners and government play their part.”*
- *“Securing more funding and resources for local authorities and other statutory services. Campaign to enshrine things like early-help services etc in law so they have to be provided. Allow partnership agencies to do statutory visits, as well as social workers so a more holistic view is gathered in children’s cases - not just the social worker visiting.”*
- *“Campaign to increase the funding for social work to fund more staff so people can be supported appropriately and not be constantly stressed due to pressures of their workloads.”*
- *“Foster meaningful partnership working. In looking at the evidence base of serious case reviews and the like, the patterns of not sharing information effectively, timely or practicing from a shared and agreed viewpoint are hard to ignore. The breadth of specialism brought from partners - such as education and health - is highly valued, including for its functions of seeing children ‘in the round’ and as checks and balances for practice. A brief snapshot of any multi-agency safeguarding hub will highlight how this shared idea of what issues are appropriate to raise and what actions should be taken (and by whom) varies wildly. The impact is an increase in workload, which is not focussed on those most in need and leads to potential harm. The news coverage of recent tragedies focussed on social workers failings. There was less, if any, mainstream focus on why teachers didn’t properly check why a child might be rummaging through a bin for food. Or why the police didn’t take protective action in a timely way that could have given the social workers the information needed to act. This conduct also has a huge impact on professional identity and public perceptions, both of which have real and significant impacts on the effectiveness of social work intervention.”*
- *“Child protection risks are increased in some cases due to lack of social workers. In adoption there is increased risk of breakdowns due to the lack of practical help and respite.”*
- *“I would like to see Social Work England more present in everyday news raising the relevant issues. I don’t see enough public awareness raising.”*

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- *“This is about supporting/promoting the development of social work as a key profession, ensuring social workers are supported to be the best they can be. Ensure organisations do everything necessary to invest in social workers within their employment. Develop/promote clear pathways into social care and social work. Ensure education of social workers is the best it can be. Provide standards of practice, education.”*
- *“Ensure frontline leaders receive the reflective supervision and coaching/support they need to be more effective in strategising and managing.”*
- *“Through active collaboration with social work organisations and being receptive to concerns that are raised by individuals representing public bodies.”*
- *“There is more commitment needed from Government to provide additional funding, increase benefits, and reduce the cost-of-living crisis.”*
- *“Be more vocal, advocate, promote, stand up for social workers. Currently Social Work England’s Professional Standards are sadly lacking in this area and contributes to poor public relations of the profession.”*
- *“Focus should be directed toward improving and developing new services which support adults within the community and within their own homes.”*
- *“Take a systemic approach, don’t just consider individuals, include the wider environment.”*
- *“Work with BASW who have a huge understanding of the social work role and profession and years of work in this area. Work with other agencies and those with lived experience and the organisations that work with them. All these groups have extensive experience and knowledge that would help you as a new regulator whose experience is limited. Focus on those areas where there have been large enquiries following various kinds of abuse and learn from those.”*
- *“Ensure that the protections in legislation and regulations for children, young people and adults in social care are not compromised or watered down under the guise of bureaucracy (often misusing and misunderstanding Munro). Help the Government to understand the need for the regulations and protections that social work operates in as being vital in offering protection for the public, children and vulnerable adults. The regulations were the result of considerable work and input and are there for a purpose.”*
- *“Ensure that the approaches deployed to recruit students on social work courses tests their values and attributes in dealing with public protection and so reduce risks.”*
- *“Support social workers to have the same power of protection as nurses, police and teachers.”*

Question 4: *What could the barriers to us achieving our aims over the next 3 years be? Please give reasons for your answer.*

Our members have the following comments, concerns and queries:

- *“Lack of understanding across the profession of which practice issues should be dealt with by regulator.”*
- *“Credibility, the ability to influence nationally and deliver. The record on dealing with complaints and issues is poor. I as a local authority employee am expected to do all the work for Social Work England, there is no concept of what the current landscape for social workers at all levels looks like.”*
- *“Funding – it is clear the funding is reducing across the sector. This will remain a barrier in terms of recruitment and service delivery. Retention - social workers are leaving in droves due to the working*

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conditions, general low levels of appreciation and the widening remit of what is expected of practitioners. Perception - the perception of social workers across various stakeholders is problematic. Professionals view social workers as 'fixers' and contribute little as they are dependent on social work. Children and families still view social workers as 'the social' and the 'child snatcher' tag still hasn't left the profession. Finally, media perceptions are extremely problematic, as social workers are still vilified for serious cases, however these are the minority and due to confidentially successes are rarely published."

- "Government cuts in funding - an obvious threat."
- "Government funding. Too much CPD work to do, and potentially higher registration fees will drive more staff out of an already dwindling profession - this needs to be considered. Also, Social Work England cannot change the lasting impact of austerity and current cost of living crisis/increased poverty levels. This presents higher risk and complexity in cases. If services are not better resourced, then no matter what Social Work England do. It will have minimal impact if they don't campaign on behalf of social workers to improve things on the ground in terms of the practice environment both in authorities and across our communities. Social Work England should be doing a lot more similar to what the Teachers Union and Royal College of Nursing have been doing going on TV advocating for their professions."
- "Punitive, out of touch standards. Social workers are practising in unprecedented times of austerity. We are supporting more families with higher individual needs with less and less resources. The regulator fails to recognise how this impacts the ability for practitioners to perform and practice. The system places blame on individuals rather than the environment. This in turn leads to burnout, experienced workers who support the newly qualified workers will leave. It's been happening for years. It stunts potential talent from entering the profession. These factors are barriers in the short and long term. Complexity theory is a key aspect of working in SW and this needs to inform how we regulate the profession."
- "Lack of trust in Social Work England's approach. Apathy that things won't change as Social Work England is seen as just another Government department. The regulator's objectives may be sound, but not many managers sign up to its processes which are seen as something that has to be done and ticked off of an already high workload."
- "Lack of political will for change in this area."
- "Lack of trust in Social Work England being able to deliver on the strategy. Lack of commitment by Social Work England. Lack of trust within the profession of Social Work England."
- "Lack of knowledge. Failure to listen or check facts. Is Social Work England truly independent or determined by a government agenda?"
- "Over-ambitious aims that will be difficult to fully implement. Not consulting fully with all stakeholders. Not valuing the work done by the social work profession to implement methods and processes created by and for the profession."
- "Lack of Government recognition, acceptance and action. A lack of genuine support for social workers in the workplace from management and unnecessary additional pressure and/or mistrust being placed on social workers."
- "Lack of respect from registered social workers in Social Work England. Lack of confidence that Social Work England is the correct registration body for our profession. Social Work England are taking too long to be seen as a serious and responsive organisation."
- "Education of new social workers seems to be via differing ways and there appears to be a lack of consistency between the differing pathways as to what is learnt and what social worker understands when newly qualified. Having a role in focussing on the standards set in education and training to ensure all courses meet the standards required would be something worth continuing to have a strong role in. For

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example, the understanding around fostering and adoption is little or non with newly qualified social workers and yet it is a huge part of a children's social worker role."

- *"Social Work England do not appear to have built a positive relationship with social workers or a media profile."*

Question 5: *How could we share data and insight to drive positive change in the sector and profession? Please give reasons for your answer.*

Our members have the following comments, concerns and queries:

- *"Simple statistics, timely responses and clear escalation procedures would demonstrate that Social Work England is following guidelines and working transparently to promote positive change."*
- *"Through various media outlets and also directly to social workers employers and Government."*
- *"The issue with a lot of these things is that everything is so data focused and does not look at the nuance and reality of real-life practice. Data on poverty levels etc and more wider population data would be useful to look at the issues service-users are facing - instead of always looking at social work performance data in isolation."*
- *"Lobby government effectively. Broaden the scope to meaningfully work with partner agencies. Work in ways that help others understand what, why and how we do our jobs to help address the negative and widely held perception of social work. A secondary benefit of this is that it will help to galvanise social workers' professional identity, which has been undermined by parallel standards (PCF/KSS) and irresponsible media coverage. It will be a long road, but we have to commit to it as a long-term strategy in order to do the best for the people we came into this profession to support."*
- *"Leave social workers to get on with the job, local authorities and NHS have systems to address poor performance!"*
- *"Share good practise examples. Less bureaucracy so more time for direct work. Share good IT examples. Provoke constructive dialogue and narratives in the media about outcomes for children and vulnerable adults."*
- *"More positive awareness raising about the social work role to improve public perception."*
- *"Go back to the core values of social work, person-centred approach, social justice and service-user engagement."*

Question 6: *What do you most need from the regulator of social work and is this reflected in the strategy? Please give reasons for your answer.*

An increased alignment with BASW's Code of Ethics and collaboration with enhancing existing social work frameworks, such as the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF).

As the regulator has a legal duty to 'ensure public confidence in the profession', increased partnership working with BASW and other key stakeholders to improve the public profile of the profession would be universally beneficial at all levels.

Our members have the following comments, concerns and queries:

- *"Focus on wellbeing, as without this you will not achieve safe practice so much poor practice arises out of exhaustion and overwhelming workloads."*

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- *“Credibility and ability to influence change and manage public perceptions. Not sure the strategy achieves this and that there has been enough progress since December 2019.”*
- *“My biggest concern about the regulator is they don’t advocate for my views at government level. Social care genuinely feels like the sector that is left behind. Furthermore, I feel that social care does not protect its staff in the same way as other agencies (notably the police) who manage the majority of their issues ‘in-house’ and rarely allow cases to hit the public eye. This allows them to practice without the additional pressure of making a mistake.”*
- *“Advocacy for social workers and campaign with central government for better community services and resources.”*
- *“Engage with government more to influence resource allocation - everything flows from having enough people to do the work.”*
- *“I need a regulator who embodies my social work values and ethics. I need a regulator who is aligned with social justice and who wants to empower me to be the best I can be in any given circumstance.”*
- *“I need SW England to stop wanting more CPD which is a complete waste of SWs time and effort, also we don't appear to be getting anything for our £90 a year.”*
- *“To understand impact of resource issues on performance.”*
- *“Be easy to contact.”*
- *“A balanced approach. More support in highlighting the challenges for social workers, such as the pressures; recruitment/retention issues; work life balances/stressors of the role. The stuff that isn't discussed in media like they are for teachers, nurses and police.”*
- *“Raising the profile and accountability of practice education/educators who train social work students coming into the professions. Work with local authorities to implement greater support for NQSW's. Skills for Care should not be the drivers. I want my social work regulator to have ownership of this amazing profession and bring it to the forefront of national and international respect. Social Work England should be an exciting, dynamic, responsive and petitioning organisation. Take the lead.”*
- *“Raise awareness of profession and the value it provides to public service to citizens.”*
- *“Highlight good practice and do not solely focus on bad practice.”*

Question 7: *Do you think that the strategy could impact any persons with a protected characteristic? If so, is it positively, or negatively? Please give reasons for your answer. The Equality Act (2010) lists 9 protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership and pregnancy and maternity.*

Our members have the following comments, concerns and queries:

- *“Usually, additional scrutiny of practice falls heavily on minoritised staff. However, additional scrutiny is required on an ongoing basis around the application of fitness to practice processes on minoritised staff. Local authorities have been over-zealous in their complaints about social workers - they should be written to raising concerns.”*
- *“Clearly this needs careful consideration at every point and the regulator should demonstrate they are taking steps to avoid any negative impacts.”*
- *“Yes, but it also needs to take into account other characteristics such as social class and neurodiversity.”*

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- *“There should be an anti-racist statement from SWE.”*
- *“There needs to be tangible recognition of individuals with protected characteristics in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion principles. There also needs to be full recognition of the impact of intersectional environmental pressures, such as poverty and financial hardships and the impact this will have on disability, single parents, etc.”*
- *“Everyone is affected by this. However, people who have additional dependencies on them or additional life issues need supportive structures to enable them to continue doing their job with appropriate adjustments (ie: lower caseloads, supportive manager, wellbeing programmes etc). Social workers do not get recognition or adjustments made and then left vulnerable to being portrayed as somehow incapable.”*
- *“Any strategy should be inclusive and be prepared to be directional, accountable and responsive to the changing role of social work, across all mediums we live and work within.”*
- *“There is a disproportionate number of social workers from ethnic minority backgrounds being reported for unfit practice. If there is evidence of this is happening, there needs to be a culture change in how these matters are reported and investigated. How are accusations of racism by Social Work England handled?”*

Question 8: *Do you have any other comments that you would like to share with us?*

Having considered proposals, our members have the following comments, concerns and queries:

- *“It would be good if you communicated with registrants more frequently and on an individual basis beyond – rather than just once a year about renewal. As a regulator it’s hard to see how you are currently adding value to the profession on a consistent basis and where is the seat at the top table? A regulator needs to remain relevant and proactive - where is the evidence of this currently? Where are the tools etc to support practice, recruitment, cost of living. How does Social Work England support its registrants?”*
- *“At the moment I do not understand what the regulator offers social care above and beyond what would currently be offered by general government oversight. I feel the regulator needs to consult with social care more frequently and garner a view which is reflective of the daily lived experiences of practitioners.”*
- *“SWE need to be more outspoken and do more for social workers, instead of just creating more work and costing social workers more money to go to work. I’d be happy to pay a higher registration fee if I could actually see them out there speaking up for the profession and people we support and effecting some positive change. All we see them doing is trying to charge us more to do more additional work logging CPD – which all lands on the social worker. It’s unfair - they don’t seem to actually do anything positive.”*
- *“In my experience, social workers are passionate about doing what’s right, empowering people and striving for social justice. They become burnt out, disillusioned, and leave when they can no longer sustain the impact of moral incongruence within their working lives. Social Work England needs to lead the social work powers in local authorities to meaningfully empower their social workers to practise their values. How can a social worker practise in an anti-oppressive way when their employer and the system bullies and oppresses them? They will continue to do their best to promote their clients’ best interests until the stress of blaming and bullying and the hypocrisy forces them to leave. SW values should not (and ostensibly cannot) be a tap turned on for clients and off for social workers themselves. When dealing with fitness to practice investigations, let’s use a social work evidence base - Bronfenbrenner et al. Let’s attribute causation to where it should be according to the contextual evidence and listen to the factors that have actually led to a situation - rather than laying blame at the nearest social worker’s feet. Any regulator which cannot, so to speak, practise what it preaches will not succeed in its endeavours and will only serve to entrench the pre-existing difficulties it has identified within the profession.”*
- *“Thank you for taking the time to read this. If I sound like I’m on my soapbox it’s because I am and I make no apologies for it. I am still a passionate social worker and have found that channelling some of my*

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exhaustion, frustration and disillusionment into banging the social work drum helps me to stay in a profession that I question my future in daily. The majority of us are here because it's where our values - our integrity, justice and empowerment to achieve potential brought us. To get here and find that many employers regard these values as a challenge to service delivery is unbearable. We don't expect it to be easy, but it is reasonable to expect opportunities to use your skills in ethical ways and not to be bullied. On this note, I would like to raise that there are currently several 'project' type teams (branches of large recruitment agencies) that are bullying social workers as they prioritise profit. They are - by their own admission- a 'business model' of social work. I have personal experience of these and whilst the personal impact is mine to bear, I worry about the wider impact on the profession. The regulator needs to think about whether any additional measures are needed to ensure that these 'projects' are ethical."

- *"It is time for Social Work England to step up for social workers, being at the forefront of our profession as a regulatory body. You have the foundations now build on it and make our profession proud. For me, Practice Education is crucial to social work and should be a greater priority for Social Work England."*
- *"Fair fitness to practice processes mean employing investigators who are totally impartial to the complaint and who do not have any direct interest in siding with the regulator!"*
- *"Social work is under real pressure. It works in an increasingly challenging environment and with little effective support or voice in the wider world. Social workers are leaving the profession - this includes highly experienced workers. Social workers work very long hours in high pressure roles. Please reduce your CPD demands and the burden it places on already busy social workers. I have heard many social workers feel it is an onerous additional task. You have become part of the pressure that forces social workers to leave."*
- *"I do not feel that having annotations is anything other than a rather simplistic and blinkered understanding of social work. For example, having safeguarding or child protection work as a specialism shows little understanding of how this work runs within and throughout working with children and their families. There is a great deal of information and views on this out there that can explain this in more depth which I do not have the time to do now. Please be assured that I am not against the specialisms that have developed in social work. I'm concerned that these have become needed in order to practice in certain areas, rather than through the newly qualified, advanced, consultant and principle roles. Going through the conventional professional development and career pathways that most local authorities and agencies have. An additional level of regulatory control at point of registration is not necessary. Minimum standards should be met and then developed within practice, but not aligned to registration. The cost implications to do this when it is not needed are also considerable."*
- *"It would help to have greater clarity about what kind of voice you can be for social work as a regulator, as this is not clear to me. Whereas I am very clear about the role other organisations like BASW have in being strong, proactive, positive and supportive voice for social work. So, Social Work England having a clearly stated remit too would be helpful."*
- *"Make Care Leaver a protected characteristic."*

PART 2 | Summary feedback from Social Workers Union (SWU) and the BASW/SWU Advice and Representation Service:

Question 1: *What do you think about our ambition to resolve concerns about social workers locally, where it is safe and appropriate to do so?*

Member feedback for this question included that "this may be beneficial to social works as long as negotiations remain impartial." A member also remarked, "issues may differ from locality to locality, and it may be beneficial to the social worker to remain within the locality in which their experiences occur."

Some fitness to practice complaints currently go directly to the regulator rather than letting them be locally investigated first, and it is our opinion that fitness to practice complaints should only be investigated by the

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regulator when the local process has been exhausted. Resolving concerns locally when safe and appropriate to do so sounds like a positive development, although it may not be applicable for agency social workers.

However, Social Work England's Engagement Leads must make it clear that it is not acceptable practice for employers to issue threats of escalation from a local resolution to Social Work England investigation as a form of employee coercion. Employers frequently threaten to refer social workers to Social Work England, using it as a "stick" to produce the outcome that they want. Social Work England needs to discourage employers from using Social Work England referral as a threat.

Question 2: How could we continue to improve our approach to regulation?

Member feedback on this question was, "impartiality needs to underpin regulation." The Social Work England Business plan 2022 to 2023 aims to "reduce the median age of our caseload at the investigation stage to 9 months" by March 2023. However, 9 months is still much too long for a social worker to be unable to work, especially during this cost-of-living crisis.

Members have remarked that it feels like Social Work England is investigating to find wrongdoing and that they have to defend themselves from accusations. Social Work England seems to focus on one issue of concern without looking at the larger picture and context that brought a social worker to that point, unless specifically asked to do so. The process should be less adversarial and more inquisitive, with an emphasis on solutions, lessons learned, and an investigation process which seeks to find truth through balanced evidence collection rather than seeking evidence to convict.

A&R reminds Social Work England that they have the statutory powers to demand cooperation from employers, but A&R has no investigatory power and relies on the good will of employers, of which there is often none, to produce evidence such as emails. Delays from the employer in providing this evidence can lead to lengthy delays in the FTP process. We believe Social Work England should address this through regional engagement with employers and imposing tighter timescales.

The SSSC have a set of standards for employers, and it is our view that it would be beneficial for all involved if social work employers in England were required to also to meet standards that Social Work England felt were reasonable. The fitness to practice process is currently focused on the individual social worker and isn't holding employers to account for their potential roles in issues. We frequently see situations where the context a social worker has worked in has been one where there were insufficient resources available to that team in the discharge of its duties leading to social workers being in the intolerable position of having to 'manage' cases of vulnerable service users without adequate resources and support. Part of the investigation into the practice of social workers should include a clear commitment by Social Work England to thoroughly investigate the context within which practice was occurring.

Question 3: We want to develop our leadership role in addressing risks to public protection. Where should we focus our activity?

Members have fed back that Social Work England should focus on the public's "trust and respect of social workers and support focussing on recruitment and retention, and positive and different ways of working such as flexibility and part-time." Members have also commented, "Keep social workers in social work. Training, reflective supervision, encouragement, resources and campaigning for resources. Social Work England should support the profession!"

The Social Work England leadership role needs to focus on working with Local Authorities around resourcing matters – including a lack of resources, reflective supervision, structure, and good management practices – and supporting the communities around these Local Areas that lack resources.

We encourage Social Work England to lead on developing social work culture through a less punitive approach, advocating for more resources for social work, and more opportunities for genuine continuous professional development and reflective practice.

Question 4: *What could the barriers to us achieving our aims over the next 3 years be? Please give reasons for your answer.*

Members state, "Social workers leaving the profession will be a barrier to improvements." Members have also given the feedback that, "Social workers' needs should be respected and accommodated. Long hours and challenging difficult cases cause pressure when support and resources are not available."

We are moving into another period of austerity without any reprieve from the previous period of austerity and this will lead to many external barriers. The lack of resources in social work will become an even more difficult barrier as a harsh economic climate will have a disproportionate impact on social work service users and the demand for social services will continue to increase. This will lead to even higher and more complex caseloads and – without an influx of resources and staff to fill vacant roles – this will increase social worker burnout and make retention even more challenging. In turn this may lead to an increase in conduct or performance issues because of the level of stress upon individuals. This context requires recognition in the fitness to practice process.

Question 5: *How could we share data and insight to drive positive change in the sector and profession? Please give reasons for your answer.*

A member commented that, "Sharing data does not alone provide positive change. There needs to be a robust acknowledgement and response to the crisis within social work regarding retention."

Another member said, "More joined up and multi-agency communication and interactive support is required regarding data sharing."

Social Work England must have robust EDI data so that trends can be identified and addressed, like the overrepresentation of social workers from ethnic minority backgrounds in fitness to practice cases.

We welcome and support the recent moves by Social Work England to capture this data and of course, once it is available, the analysis and an action plan to ensure a fair approach must follow.

Question 6: *What do you most need from the regulator of social work and is this reflected in the strategy? Please give reasons for your answer.*

A member has given the feedback that, "If we must be regulated, we want an impartial agency on the side of social work, not a government body. Why is social work overseen by the Department for Education? Has Social Work England questioned this, or can it provide answers?" Another member stated, "We need a regulator that fully understands the complexities of the job and the difficulties we face daily when supporting families in communities that lack resources."

We need Social Work England to incorporate a greater social work ethos into their approach, rather than a purely regulatory lens. Social Work England must acknowledge the deteriorating context in which social workers are doing their work and focus on support rather than control. The current Social Work England approach does not seem reflective, and it is unclear how much of an impact the responses to these consultations are making.

Social work is a profession that is undervalued and often vilified in the media; either for over-intervening in people's lives or for not doing enough. We need Social Work England to engage with the public, the press, and political parties to reshape the majority view of social work to one which recognises its true role.

Question 7: *Do you think that the strategy could impact any persons with a protected characteristic? If so, is it positively, or negatively? Please give reasons for your answer. The Equality Act (2010) lists 9 protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership and pregnancy and maternity.*

A member answered, "Interactions with the regulator can be very stressful and may impact on a person's mental health or protected characteristics. I've found support from colleagues and trade union very beneficial in these circumstances." Another member said, "Intimidating processes can impact on anyone experiencing

them. This would be magnified if already subject to inequalities.”

Another member gave the feedback that, “The focus on the individual rather than the bigger picture holistically can prevent an insight into inequalities and characteristics impacting upon that individual.”

Employers’ resources are going to be cut even further, so what impact will that have on social care and social work provision? We often see cases where the failure is by the employers and it is clear that the social worker has been working under untenable restraints driven by management decisions and government policies. Social Work England must take into account that social work takes place within a context and that it is a managed process. It is possible that structural inequalities exist within Social Work England regarding protected characteristics, but Social Work England does not have the EDI data required to analyse this.

Question 8: *Do you have any other comments that you would like to share with us?*

A member remarked, “If we as a profession must have a regulator, I prefer that it is specific to social work rather than general professions, as was the case with HCPC.”

The topic that SWU and the Advice and Representation Service finds important to address regarding Social Work England’s strategy is the variance in Social Work England’s stated aims and objectives when it comes to fitness to practice concerns. Social Work England does not seem to recognise the inequality existing in the fitness to practice process. Some social workers can spend large sums of money on a solicitor, but many do not have the resources to do so and are at a disadvantage during this process that is extremely legalistic in nature. It is an adversarial process and not everyone is not on equal footing when it comes to factors like money, resources, time, knowledge, experience, support, and confidence. Many social workers do not have any resources available to them to counteract any unfairness and we do not see anything in Social Work England’s strategy that will address core issues around fairness in fitness to practice.

We welcome the opportunity to work with a specialist regulator and urge Social Work England to incorporate social work values into its core.

PART 3 | BASW England summary feedback, conclusions and recommendations:

There is wide-ranging empirical evidence that the working environment and working conditions can negatively impact on social workers. This does not appear to be fully considered or reflected in the proposals outlined in the Social Work England corporate strategy 2023-2026. The statement “Our wider ambition... that every social worker can practise, develop and progress in an environment supportive of sustained safe and effective practice” does not go on to evidence how this will be achieved at a micro and macro level, especially in the context of challenging work environment reported by many of our members. Staff vacancies, discrimination on the workplace, impossible working conditions, high caseloads, a lack of compassionate leadership and significant lack of resources continue to be highlighted to BASW as the day-to-day realities of everyday social work.

It is encouraging that the importance and impact of Black Lives Matter is recognised in the proposals for Social Work England’s corporate strategy in a challenging and uncertain context. However, there is no mention of how this aligns with values and ethics of social work overall in terms of social justice, human rights and BASW’s Code of Ethics. It would be of considerable value if Social Work England strengthened this narrative and integrated the Standards for employers of social workers in England 2020 outlining the support needed for all social workers.

The mention of “specialist roles and advanced practice” being of “higher risk to the public” is ambiguous and not necessarily accurate for some roles. For example, it is unclear how the role of Practice Educator, which would be eligible for annotation, carries additional risk. What definition of risk is being applied? It is unhelpful that aspects of the social work role are only viewed through the lens of ‘negative risks’. Risks can also have beneficial and positive outcomes.

The statement: “...our expectations that social work educators have direct practice and experience” is both ambiguous and aspirational. We assume this is part of Social Work England’s considerations for requiring social work educators to have current direct practice experience whilst also assessing students. As things stand at the moment, our members have shared concerns about independent practice educators being unable to practice

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because they are not employed by a social work organisation, although some may have access to direct practice experiences. Further clarification is needed in this regard.

In the section 'People at the heart of all we do', there is no update provided on the regulator's 'action pledged on equality' related to an equality audit commissioned in 2020. The audit highlighted inequalities in Social Work England's workforce after a staff survey revealed just 10% of the organisation were from Black or ethnic minority groups. Reportedly, the findings represented "a significant challenge to the organisation in the wake of the increased focus on racial equality following the killing of George Floyd and the ensuing Black Lives Matters protests". It would be helpful if there was a detailed evidence of progress to date in view of concerns raised that Black and ethnic minority social workers are disproportionately subjected to fitness to practise investigations and have disproportionately higher ASYE failure rates.

The Chief Social Worker for Children and Families also wrote to the regulator regarding tackling social work students' concerns on the lack of anti-discriminatory practice focus on their courses. A helpful synopsis of action to date and plans going forward in more detail within the strategy would be welcome by our members. Finally, a summary of the progress made to comply with the Professional Standards Authority standards (specifically on assessing the risk of fitness to practise referrals and processing registrations, which were reportedly below expectations previously) would be informative and useful. These important 'people' issues require inclusion and prominence in the Social Work England corporate strategy to properly promote equality, diversity and inclusion internally (within the organisation) and externally (for social work). These important 'people' issues require inclusion and prominence in the Social Work England corporate strategy to properly promote equality, diversity and inclusion internally (within the organisation) and externally (for social work).

The consultation also focusses on key strategic approaches to achieving change by focussing on social workers' transition from education to employment, early career development, CPD and specialist roles. However, BASW members have shared historically their opposition to mandatory assessments as part of a career pathway. A rigid development framework could also hinder staff career opportunities and exacerbate workforce inequalities. It would be helpful if the sources could be cited in relation to Social Work England's use of "external reviews and reports" and the reference to "we have substantial information on the risks in the system through our own activity", as no details are provided. It would be helpful to know which external reviews and reports and internal activities are informing Social Work England's key strategic approaches. Furthermore, there are references in the consultation to the "unique viewpoint" that Social Work England has, informed by their data, research, engagement and experience. It would be beneficial for BASW and all stakeholders for there to be increased transparency, collaboration and rationale for the evidence-based decision-making in relation to policy, practice, education and strategic direction.

The consultation refers to the reports Social Work England have produced during their first 3 years, which highlighted relevant ongoing challenges and issues such as high caseloads, recruitment and retention, and certain parts of agency operation. However, these issues were well-documented way before the Social Work England's inception in December 2019. For example, BASW & Bath Spa University published the UK Social Workers: Working Conditions and Wellbeing report in 2017. The report concluded: "We have demonstrated that social workers across the UK are exposed to high levels of negative working conditions, and that these conditions are significantly influencing the role that they do... We suggest that there needs to be a focus on improving the amount of demands experienced by social workers [...] because this would subsequently improve stress and make individuals less likely to leave the job". Also, there were several articles spotlighting poor working conditions for social workers in Community Care spanning many years beforehand (examples are here: 1, 2, & 3).

The strategic aims of 'readiness for professional practice' and the need for refinement of the pre- and post-qualifying frameworks are understood. We would recommend a focus on post-qualifying training and continuous professional development, rather than a focus on pre qualifying readiness for practice of social work education courses that the regulator already approves, reviews and reapproves. However, there is a lack of support and substantial challenge from our membership on any attempts to conflate, confuse, replicate or replace the PCF. This is a view shared by BASW members, non-members, partners and other stakeholders during our dialogue in preparation for this consultation. At this stage, it is unclear whether the proposed 78 Knowledge, Skills and Behaviour (KSB) statements would replace or function alongside the PCF, PEPS and QAPL in practice and whether they may be interpreted as mandatory in any case. Our members (and other key stakeholders) have underlined

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the importance of the PCF (especially) and its value is reflected in how it is integrated into the fabric of the profession.

We feel strongly that knowledge, skills *and* behaviour are *all* fundamental and integral to anti-discriminatory, anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice. We hope this important feedback is incorporated into the proposed reforms to 'readiness for professional practice'. We are delighted that anti-racism will be specifically embedded into all aspects of practice and all professional pathways. However, there does not appear to be consistent messaging with anti-racism, anti-oppression and anti-discrimination. It is encouraging that the approach to social work education and training acknowledges the necessity for anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice, but what about anti-discriminatory practice? Also, there is absolutely no mention of food insecurity, poverty or the 'cost of living crisis', all of which are issues that punctuate modern social work and wider society. It remains unclear what supportive provisions Social Work England are able to introduce given the harsh and hostile societal context that social workers operate in and the impact on the workforce.

For the reasons outlined above, members shared the KSB's will exacerbate and intensify an already overcrowded social work education landscape. Furthermore, they will create additional burdens for social workers, which would be disadvantageous for social work. However, there are clear benefits to Social Work England governing relevant social work education frameworks; but it is essential that BASW and other key partners and stakeholders retain significant roles in how the frameworks evolve in future. We remain open to working in partnership with Social Work England (and other partnership organisations and stakeholders) to enhance the PCF - ensuring it encompasses all that is required of contemporary social workers.

The consultation refers to taking forward "work on greater recognition through regulation activity of the practice educator role in preparing future professionals for practice and supporting those new into practice". As custodians of the Practice Educators Professional Standards (PEPS), Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) and our work relating to the Quality Assurance in Practice Learning (QAPL), we strongly believe that BASW should be significantly involved in this. This is a crucial opportunity for collaborative and reciprocal partnership working between BASW, Social Work England and other stakeholders to benefit social work.

There is an undeniable emphasis on gathering data and intelligence about the demographics and diversity of the social work profession, which is important, and we agree with. However, this should not detract from taking necessary action on what is already known in the interim. Substantial data *already* exists in relation to the "differences in outcomes for people in relation to the backgrounds." Furthermore, it would be helpful to know what action has been taken following the Anti-racism survey report published in March 2022. There is a very real danger of progress being stifled by endless hunts for data and/or 'data hierarchies'.

What is becoming increasingly striking (from our membership survey and wider forums across the profession) is the growing levels of dissatisfaction with Social Work England as a regulator. This includes comments noted in a Social Work England report that concedes that only 26% of social work academics feel supported by the regulator. Social Work England is described as being "bureaucratic and distant"; and perceived as aligned with government, rather than an "independent regulator" (from a Practice Educator). These views are also echoed in the comments section of recent Community Care articles in relation to the regulator (1, 2 & 3). We hope the corporate strategy will embed a focus on more direct engagement with the Higher Education institute sector and registrants.

We are pleased there are plans to re-visit and review the education and training standards and supporting guidance (hopefully this includes the professional standards), which is mentioned in the guidance on Social Work England's approach to social work education and training. We hope the standards will be enhanced in terms of anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive and anti-racist and values *explicitly* and will emphasise the importance of equality, diversity and inclusion more broadly. We are delighted that anti-racist, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice principles will now be included in the education and training approval standards for Approved Mental Health Professionals (AMHPs) and Approved Mental Capacity Professionals (AMCPs). However, unfortunately, neither the consultation guidance, nor the overview of Social Work England's new approach to education and training out plans to address the disproportionate outcomes experienced by social workers from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds. We hope attempts are made to resolve this situation as soon as possible.

Furthermore, we hope that food insecurity and poverty will also be recognised and integrated accordingly into any revised standards.

The suggestion of reviewing social workers registration fees, and possibly increasing them is of concern to our members, especially in view of the economic climate and recession. The Social Workers Benevolent Trust has recently announced they are struggling to meet demand as the cost of living crisis deepens. Social workers are reporting being in debt, some are accessing food banks, with some reporting worsening mental health as a result. A recent survey highlighted that many social workers are already out of pocket from inadequate mileage allowances. The financial struggles of newly-qualified social workers impacted by the cost of living crisis is also common parlance. These concerns are echoed in a recent quote from the president of the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) who expressed: “Things have never been so bad,” for people needing care, carers and staff.

The consultation states: “...fees have not been increased in nearly a decade”. However, Social Work England only existed from 2019. There is no recognition in the strategy of the impact of 12 years of austerity or the harsh working conditions for social workers in this context. Interestingly, social workers in Scotland will have their future registration fees paid by their employers. We are confident that social workers would be grateful if Social Work England were able to negotiate a similar agreement with social work employers across England.

There is an urgent need to tackle the recruitment and retention issues within social work. Again, this has been well-documented and common parlance for many years (1, 2 & 3). We believe BASW, Social Work England, ADASS, Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS), the Local Government Association (LGA), Skills for Care and other key stakeholders have primary roles and responsibilities in developing urgent solutions and strategies to address this.

We look forward to the planned future consultation on the requirement for all social workers to have 100 hours direct practice each year to maintain their registration. Our initial observations are that whilst maintaining high social work standards and continuous professional development is vital for the profession, the level of bureaucracy, coordination, cost and disruption to service delivery and the impact on professional relationships required to implement this proposal would easily outweigh the benefits. The challenges to this proposal from stakeholders is outlined in a previous Community Care article.

We recommend that an equality impact assessment is undertaken following the implementation of any changes and/or new provisions.

We believe it is crucial for social work for Social Work England’s corporate strategy 2023-2026 to champion and uphold the core values and principles held within the BASW Code of Ethics. The evolution and contemporary relevance of BASW has a long history, which underlines all our work is generated by the profession for the profession.

We hope this feedback is helpful and received in the constructive spirit with which it is intended.

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