

THE COLLEGE OF
SOCIAL WORK

Social Work

An introduction for journalists





Introduction

Social workers play an essential role in society. They work creatively to empower vulnerable people and enable them to take action to improve their lives. They protect individuals who are at risk of serious harm. However, many people do not come into direct contact with social workers in the same way that they do with teachers, doctors or nurses. They rely on the media to tell them what social workers do and if they are doing it well. In the past, the messages that the public receives through the press about the profession have often been distorted and misleading.

The aim of this guide is to provide journalists with an introduction to who social workers are, what they do and why they are so valuable. We hope it will break down some of the popular myths about the profession and help you to start building a rounded and balanced public view which recognises the successes social workers have as well as the challenges they face.

Social work is at a crossroads. Major reform is taking place to try to strengthen the profession. Tackling negative public perceptions is vital to the success of this project, and is one of the main aims of the new College of Social Work. However, refining the attitudes of the media towards social work is only one side of the coin. We must also change the attitudes and approach of social workers to the media, and this is something The College will be working to achieve. Traditionally social workers and their employers have appeared defensive and distrustful in the face of the media and often unwilling to put across their side of the story and celebrate their successes. The College of Social Work will seek to change this and foster a more honest and productive relationship between social work and the media.

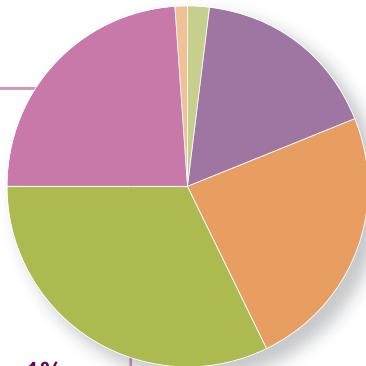
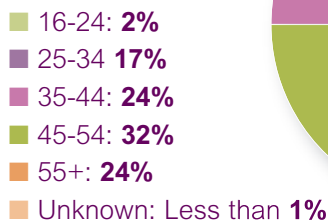
Who are social workers?

Social workers have, at times, been subject to stereotyping and misrepresentation. They have tended to be portrayed in the mainstream media and popular culture as middle to upper-middle class, white, overly 'politically-correct', and out of touch with the communities they serve. A small number of high-profile child protection cases have also created a perception among some people that social workers are incompetent, unprofessional and unaccountable.

Here are some facts about the 87,000 social workers in England. They show a diverse, qualified and accountable profession.

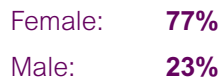
Diverse

Age:



The profession is well-balanced in terms of age representation

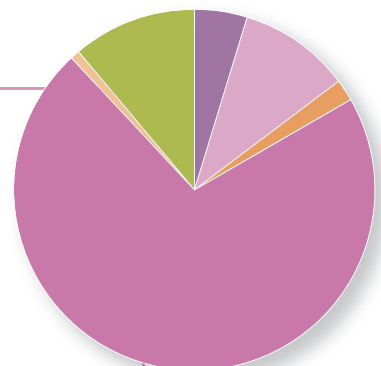
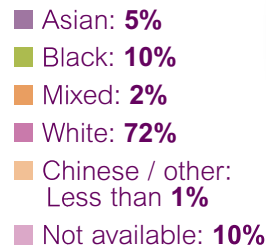
Gender



Men are under-represented in social work although there has been a small increase in the proportion of men entering the profession over the last few years.

**Figures available courtesy of the General Social Care Council, April 2011*

Ethnicity:



The social work profession represents Asian, Chinese and Mixed ethnic minorities in line with the UK population (*Ref. UK Census 2007*). People from black or black british backgrounds are significantly over-represented.

Qualified

It is a common misconception that to be a social worker requires little or no formal training and qualifications. Since 2003, to become a social worker you must have gained a social work degree, either through an undergraduate or postgraduate course. Approved social work courses are regularly monitored to ensure their



curriculum meets the standards set by the Department of Health, the National Occupational Standards for social work and the Quality Assurance Agency's benchmarking statement for social work. The degree requires that the student undertakes at least two assessed and supervised practice placements to get on-the-job experience.

Accountable

Like teachers, nurses and doctors, social workers are registered professionals. They cannot practise if they are not registered with the professional regulator (The General Social Care Council in England, Care Council For Wales, Scottish Social Services Council or Northern Ireland Social Care Council). 'Social Worker' is a professional title that is protected by law. Anyone who tries deliberately to pass themselves off as a social worker when they are not qualified and registered is liable to criminal prosecution.

Social workers have a set of professional standards, a Code of Practice, which they must adhere to in order to remain in the profession. If they fail to meet these standards they can be referred for investigation by the regulator. In cases of serious misconduct they are liable to be suspended or removed from the Social Care Register, meaning that they are unable to practise. Social workers are also subject to the internal disciplinary procedures of their employer.

Where do social workers practise?

The public sector

Most social workers are employed by local authorities in England, Wales and Scotland and by health and social care trusts in Northern Ireland. They are mainly based in council offices. Local authorities have a number of statutory duties of which some, such as child protection, mental health assessments and community care assessments, are carried out by social workers. In England, since 2005 social work departments have been split into children's services and adults' services. Social workers can also be based in other public settings such as hospitals, schools and prisons.

The private sector

Some social workers work for private companies (such as fostering and adoption agencies), and as self-employed consultants.

The third sector and social enterprise

Many practitioners work for charities and voluntary sector organisations. The NSPCC is a unique charity because it has statutory powers to intervene on behalf of children in the same way as the police or local authorities can. The Government is also encouraging social workers who currently work in councils to set up their own mutual organisations and social enterprises, outside of local authority control. These arrangements are proposed as alternative methods of delivering services which work in partnership with local councils.

What do social workers do?

Social work is a complex and varied profession. At its core it is about promoting independence and providing support to enable people to change and improve their circumstances. It is also about intervening to protect those who are most vulnerable in our society from harm and neglect.

Social workers practise in many different contexts and with different groups of people, including: children and families; people with physical or learning disabilities; people with drug and alcohol problems; people with mental health problems; people in the criminal justice system; people who are homeless; vulnerable adults in need of protection; and older people.

Taking difficult decisions

The diverse endeavours that make up social work are unified by one common theme; the need to take tough decisions in complex and often risky circumstances. There are rarely easy solutions to the difficulties people are facing, only options which have their own advantages and disadvantages. Here are some examples of the contexts in which social workers have to take difficult decisions and have to work creatively to help individuals in need.

Mental Health

Approximately one in six people in England has a mental health problem at any given time. Social workers have a major role to play in co-ordinating and delivering services for people

Mythbusting

MYTH: ☹️ *Social workers wilfully snatch children away from their families and put them into care* ☹️

✓ **FACT:** Social workers aim to protect vulnerable children from neglect and abuse, and to work with families, the community, schools and other agencies to ensure that children who are at risk are safeguarded. There is a legal framework for dealing with at-risk children, which social workers act within, and only a court can decide if a child should be placed in the care of a local authority.

with mental health issues. They provide practical help, counselling and advocacy on the service user's behalf. Social workers are often integrated into a multidisciplinary community mental health teams, which comprise other professionals including psychiatric nurses and clinical psychologists. They help those with mental health conditions get treatment and support in the community. The tasks of social workers working in mental health typically involve: assessing levels of risk; carrying out needs assessments; drawing up and managing a care plan in conjunction with other professionals; implementing individual and/or group therapy sessions; arranging breaks for carers, as necessary; offering information and counselling support to clients and their families.

Some social workers have Approved Mental Health Practitioner (AMHP) status. AMHPs are

responsible for organising and co-ordinating, as well as contributing to Mental Health Act assessments. Where an individual is assessed as having a mental disorder that places them or others at serious risk of harm, this may require the individual to be detained in hospital without their consent under the Mental Health Act. The AMHP's role includes making the application for compulsory detention in hospital which must be supported by two independent medical practitioners, at least one of whom is specifically qualified in mental health. However, AMHPs should also seek alternatives to detention, such as arranging appropriate support in the community to try to ensure that people can be cared for in the least restrictive environment.

“There is little that can compare to the satisfaction of seeing a recovery and improvement that you have helped to effect. The role involves a wide variety of skills, from advocacy to group work skills, to advising about best support needs and using specialist legal knowledge. No day is a boring day”

Kelly Hierons, Self Directed Support Practitioner, Older Adult Mental Health Team

Children and Families

Local authorities have legal duties not only to safeguard children from abuse, but also to ensure that they are healthy, educated and able to take an active part in their community. Ideally, social workers work side by side with professionals from other agencies and with families to achieve these outcomes. In high profile child protection cases where things have gone wrong, it is often because of a breakdown in communication between the agencies dealing with the child.

Much emphasis has been placed in recent years on social workers providing 'preventative' services, such as working to improve parenting and promoting positive family experiences as a way of stopping abuse and neglect before it can begin. However, at the point that a child is deemed to be at risk, social workers need to intervene using legal means to protect the child. Social workers carry out assessments and a child may be placed on a child protection plan to monitor progress in the case. Where no alternative is possible, the child may need to be removed from the family either temporarily or on a permanent basis. It must be emphasised that social workers do not have the power to remove children from their families without a court order. It is the court that ultimately decides if a child should be placed in local authority care.

Mythbusting

MYTH: *“The role of the social worker is mainly managerial and bureaucratic”*

✓ FACT: One of the defining characteristics of social work is that it requires a very broad set of professional and personal skills. It is a dynamic and creative profession which deals directly with those in need. The Munro Review, commissioned by the Government, is looking at reducing bureaucratic burdens on social workers so that they can spend more time working directly with service users.

Taking a child out of the family home and placing them in the care of the local authority is an incredibly difficult decision and one that social workers contribute to in a multi-agency forum with professionals from health, education and the police. Social work should always give due regard to the child's family and care proceedings should be a last resort. The decisions social workers have to take in these situations are rarely clear cut. In cases of abuse, family members may be able to deceive professionals and withhold information. In these situations social workers must use their knowledge, skills, experience and professional intuition to recommend a safe course of action for the child and family.

“Good assessments are vital to ensure that the family and other professionals gain insight in order to make good decisions in the future about children. The child should be at the heart of every assessment” **Winston Morson, Hospital Social Worker, Children's Social Care**

Older people

In the UK today there are over 30,000 people who are over 100 years of age. People in the UK are living longer and as a result of this they are having to deal with the significant health and social problems that are associated with the ageing process. These difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that older people are some of the most deprived and vulnerable people in our society.

Adult social care services deal with basic social care needs, but social workers are required when more complex issues come into play. This might include brokering personal care services,



or helping people who are coming to the end of their lives. They may also need to use their expertise to manage conflict, such as acting as an independent advocate for a person with dementia when their wishes conflict with that of a carer. Social workers also do a tremendous amount of work, in conjunction with other agencies, to try to safeguard older people who can often become victims of emotional and financial abuse.

Ageing is often associated with growing vulnerability and an inability to cope. Social workers, working with other professionals in health and social care, can develop empowering strategies which can provide support while maintaining independence. These include the increased use of assistive technology, personal budgets and educating other professionals about true person-centred practice which allows for an element of risk whilst accepting that risks can be managed creatively.

“I have found my role one of the most rewarding, challenging and interesting. The majority of people I support have varying degrees of dementia and chronic mental health difficulties. I have found people's strength of character and the support that loving partners and families are willing to provide in the most challenging of situations admirable and almost unbelievable”
Victoria Hart, Social Worker

Mythbusting

MYTH: *“Becoming a social worker requires minimal qualifications”*

✓ FACT: To become a social worker you must have completed an approved social work degree course. Acquiring professional skills and knowledge does not end there; it is currently mandatory for social workers to complete 15 days post registration training and learning every three years. The Social Work Reform Board, the body set up to facilitate reform in the sector, has developed a Professional Capabilities Framework which will be owned by The College of Social Work and will guide the development of good practice among professionals.

People with disabilities

Social workers must ensure that services are provided to disabled people to meet their needs and enable them to access equal opportunities in all areas of their lives. Historically, people with physical impairments and learning disabilities have been stigmatised and excluded. Social workers provide advocacy to disabled people to support them to challenge discriminatory attitudes and practices and enable their voice to be heard in society. There is a strong legal framework in place, including the Disability Discrimination Act, Equality Act and Mental Capacity Act to help protect disabled people from discrimination and abuse.

Social workers enable people with disabilities to access specialised services and equipment to maintain their independence and can also support disabled people to take control of and manage personalised care and support budgets.

“I support people to live full and valued lives and maintain their independence and well-being. A key part of my role is enabling people’s opinions to be listened to and included, ensuring they are in control and have choice of services provided to meet their needs.”

Trudy Burns, Social Worker, Community Learning Disability Team

How will The College help journalists?

At the end of 2008, the Government launched a review of social work through the Social Work Task Force. In its final report the Task Force made a number of recommendations to strengthen the profession, including the establishment of a College of Social Work that: ‘...will articulate and promote the interests of good social work. It will give the profession itself strong, independent leadership; a clear voice in public debate, policy development and policy delivery; and strong ownership of the standards to be upheld.’

One of the main aims of the College is to give a voice to the profession, so that people can recognise it for what it really is. We will work with social workers, employers and the media, to ensure that accurate and honest portrayals of social work become the norm, rather than the exception. These are the three main ways in which we will achieve that aim:

- 1. Provide easy and reliable access for journalists to a range of social work spokespeople including practising professionals, managers and academics from different locations and settings.**
- 2. Articulate the views and priorities of the profession by providing information and comment on major developments and issues of policy within the sector.**
- 3. Work with local authority communications teams and employers to help them to promote proactively stories about their social workers and social work departments to the media.**

For further information, please contact:

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John Gaston, Strategic Media Officer **Tel:** 020 7089 9927 **Mobile:** 07545 844286

www.collegeofsocialwork.org

Mythbusting

MYTH: *☞ All social workers work in child protection ☜*

✓ FACT: Certain child protection cases have received such high coverage in the media that people often assume this is the only real function of social workers. This is certainly not the case. Social workers fulfil a number of essential roles in society with many different groups who have social needs.

Key social work contacts

Social work employers bodies

Association of Directors of Adult Social Services

020 7072 7433
www.adass.org.uk

Association of Directors of Children's Services

0161 838 5757
www.adcs.org.uk

Association of Directors of Social Services Cymru

01633 648574
www.adsscymru.org.uk

Association of Directors of Social Work

0131 474 9220
www.adsw.org.uk

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c/o Social Care Institute for Excellence

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Email: collegeinfo@scie.org.uk

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Training, research and best practice

Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee

Contact: Hillary Tompsett,
Kingston University
020 8417 5092
www.juc.ac.uk/social-work-educationcommittee

Social Care Institute for Excellence

020 7089 7117
www.scie.org.uk

Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services

0141 559 5059
www.iriss.org.uk

Social Services Improvement Agency

029 2046 8685
www.ssiacymru.org.uk

Regulators

General Social Care Council

020 7397 5802
www.gsccl.org.uk

Scottish Social Services Council

01382 207261
www.sssc.uk.com

Care Council for Wales

029 2022 6257
www.ccwales.org.uk

Northern Ireland Social Care Council

028 9041 7600
www.niscc.info

Inspectorates

Ofsted (children's services)

0300 123 1231
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Care Quality Commission (adult services)

03000 616161
www.cqc.org.uk