



**Case Examiner Decision
Sarah Coakley – SW119904
FTPS-23755**

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The role of the case examiners

The case examiners perform a filtering function in the fitness to practise process, and their primary role is to determine whether the case ought to be considered by adjudicators at a formal hearing. The wider purpose of the fitness to practise process is not to discipline the social worker for past conduct, but rather to consider whether the social worker's current fitness to practise might be impaired because of the issues highlighted. In reaching their decisions, case examiners are mindful that Social Work England's primary objective is to protect the public.

Case examiners apply the 'realistic prospect' test. As part of their role, the case examiners will consider whether there is a realistic prospect:

- the facts alleged could be found proven by adjudicators
- adjudicators could find that one of the statutory grounds for impairment is engaged
- adjudicators could find the social worker's fitness to practise is currently impaired

If the case examiners find a realistic prospect of impairment, they consider whether there is a public interest in referring the case to a hearing. If there is no public interest in a hearing, the case examiners can propose an outcome to the social worker. We call this accepted disposal and a case can only be resolved in this way if the social worker agrees with the case examiners' proposal.

Case examiners review cases on the papers only. The case examiners are limited, in that, they are unable to hear and test live evidence, and therefore they are unable to make findings of fact.

Decision summary

Decision summary	
Preliminary outcome	11 December 2025
	Accepted disposal proposed - suspension order (1 year)
Final outcome	2 February 2026
	Accepted disposal - suspension order (1 year)

Executive summary

The case examiners have reached the following conclusions:

1. There is a realistic prospect of regulatory concerns 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 being found proven by the adjudicators.
2. There is a realistic prospect of regulatory concerns 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 being found to amount to the statutory ground of misconduct.
3. For regulatory concerns 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, there is a realistic prospect of adjudicators determining that the social worker's fitness to practise is currently impaired. The case examiners did not consider it to be in the public interest for the matter to be referred to a final hearing and that the case could be concluded by way of accepted disposal.

As such, the case examiners requested that the social worker was notified of their intention to resolve the case with a suspension order of 1 year. The social worker subsequently accepted this proposal. Having revisited the public interest in the case, the case examiners determined that a suspension order of 1 year remained the most appropriate outcome in this case.

The case examiners have considered all of the documents made available within the evidence bundle. Key evidence is referred to throughout their decision and the case examiners' full reasoning is set out below.

Anonymity and redaction

Elements of this decision have been marked for redaction in line with our Fitness to Practise Publications Policy. Text in **blue** will be redacted from the published copy of the decision.

The complaint and our regulatory concerns

The initial complaint	
The complainant	The complaint was raised by way of a self-referral by the social worker
Date the complaint was received	14 August 2024
Complaint summary	The social worker advised that she was dismissed from her employment with Portsmouth City Council on 9 August 2024, after concerns came to light that the social worker had recorded a visit that had not been undertaken. Further investigation suggested there were other concerns about recording and visiting Child A, as reflected in the regulatory concerns below.

Regulatory concerns
<p>Whilst registered as a social worker;</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. You failed to undertake visits to Child A, as expected in your role.2. On one or more occasion, you failed to view Child A's bedroom, when visits have taken place.3. You falsified records, recording visits to Child A that had not been undertaken.4. You falsified records, recording that Child A's bedroom had been seen, when it was not.5. Your conduct at regulatory concerns (3) and/or (4) was dishonest. <p>The matters outlined in regulatory concerns (1), (2), (3), (4) & (5) amount to the statutory grounds of misconduct.</p> <p>Your fitness to practise is impaired by reason of misconduct.</p>

Preliminary issues

Investigation	
Are the case examiners satisfied that the social worker has been notified of the grounds for investigation?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are the case examiners satisfied that the social worker has had reasonable opportunity to make written representations to the investigators?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are the case examiners satisfied that they have all relevant evidence available to them, or that adequate attempts have been made to obtain evidence that is not available?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
Are the case examiners satisfied that it was not proportionate or necessary to offer the complainant the opportunity to provide final written representations; or that they were provided a reasonable opportunity to do so where required.	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

The realistic prospect test

Fitness to practise history

The case examiners have been informed that there is no previous fitness to practise history.

Decision summary

Is there a realistic prospect of the adjudicators finding the social worker's fitness to practise is impaired?	Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	No	<input type="checkbox"/>

The case examiners have determined that there is a realistic prospect of regulatory concerns 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 being found proven, that those concerns could amount to the statutory ground of misconduct, and that the social worker's fitness to practise could be found impaired.

Reasoning

Facts

1. You failed to undertake visits to Child A, as expected in your role.

The case examiners have been provided with a statement from a senior manager at the local authority which states that their policy is for children who are looked after to be visited every 4 weeks. The evidence provided demonstrates the social worker was responsible for visits to Child A except on one occasion when a duty worker completed a visit in January 2024.

The case examiners have been provided with case notes of visits recorded to Child A by the social worker, including both the confirmed and disputed visits.

The case examiners note that even if all the visits occurred as recorded, they would still appear to be outside of expected timescales. In particular, they note that the

visits recorded for 24 October 2023, 20 December 2023 and 16 May 2024 were all completed more than 7 weeks after the previous visits.

The social worker accepts this concern and whilst taking responsibility for their actions, they have provided mitigation, which will be considered later in the decision.

The case examiners are satisfied there is a realistic prospect of this regulatory concern being found proven, should the matter go forward to adjudicators.

2. On one or more occasion, you failed to view Child A's bedroom, when visits have taken place.

The case examiners have had sight of an email to the regulator from the service lead at the social worker's former employer. This sets out that there is a "specified requirement is that every child's bedroom is seen on every visit".

The case examiners have been provided with case notes of the visits recorded by the social worker, all of which state that Child A's bedroom has been seen.

The case examiners have been provided with evidence from the foster carers of Child A who allege that the social worker never asked to see Child A's bedroom and would not have been able to view it without them knowing.

The social worker disputes that they never saw the bedroom on their visits but accepts that they did not view Child A's bedroom on every visit.

The case examiners are satisfied there is a realistic prospect of this regulatory concern being found proven, should the matter go forward to adjudicators.

3. You falsified records, recording visits to Child A that had not been undertaken.

The case examiners have been provided with case notes of visits to Child A recorded by the social worker, dated 24 October 2023, 20 December 2023, 19 March 2024 and 12 June 2024. These visits were all disputed by the foster carers for Child A.

The case examiners have been provided with the foster carers' records for each of the dates listed above and note there is no record of the social worker visiting on any of the dates. The case examiners acknowledge that the foster carers' records are extremely detailed and set out what activities occurred on all of the above dates, on some of the dates it does not appear plausible for a visit to have occurred as the carers and/or child were not available. It appears unlikely that the foster carers forgot or failed to include a visit in their records.

The case examiners have also been provided with evidence of the social worker's calendar on all of the dates and apart from the 24 October 2023, there is nothing in the social worker's calendar to indicate that a visit was planned. The social worker accepts this concern.

The case examiners are satisfied there is a realistic prospect of this regulatory concern being found proven, should the matter go forward to adjudicators.

4. You falsified records, recording that Child A's bedroom had been seen, when it was not.

As set out in regulatory concern 2, the case examiners have been provided with the social worker's case notes of visits, all of which record that Child A's bedroom was seen. The foster carers dispute this. The social worker admits at times they recorded seeing the room, when they had not.

The case examiners are satisfied there is a realistic prospect of this regulatory concern being found proven, should the matter go forward to adjudicators.

5. Your conduct at regulatory concerns (3) and/or (4) was dishonest.

When considering dishonesty, the case examiners have applied two tests, in line with relevant case law. Firstly, they have assessed the evidence to establish what adjudicators may determine the social worker's actual state of knowledge or belief was at the relevant time (the subjective test). Secondly, they have considered whether the social worker's conduct could be deemed as dishonest by the standards of ordinary, decent people (the objective test).

In relation to the subjective test, the case examiners are of the view that the social worker would know whether they had completed the visits they subsequently recorded. The case examiners note the evidence that the social worker was struggling to keep on top of their case recording, but there is no evidence to suggest that they were unclear about what work they had done. The social worker has admitted in their submissions that they completed records of visits which they knew they had not done.

In relation to the objective test, the case examiners consider that if the social worker was found in regulatory concerns 3 and 4 to have knowingly recorded visits which did not occur, ordinary, decent people would view this to be dishonest.

The case examiners are satisfied there is a realistic prospect of this regulatory concern being found proven, should the matter go forward to adjudicators.

Grounds

The case examiners are aware that there is no legal definition of misconduct, but it generally would consist of serious acts or omissions, which suggest a significant departure from what would be expected of the social worker in the circumstances.

To help them decide if the evidence suggests a significant departure from what would be expected in the circumstances, the case examiners have considered the following standards, which were applicable at the time of the concerns.

As a social worker, I will:

2.1 Be open, honest, reliable and fair.

As a social worker, I will not:

5.2 Behave in a way that would bring into question my suitability to work as a social worker while at work, or outside of work.

5.3 Falsify records or condone this by others.

Regulatory concerns 1 and 2

The case examiners note that visits to children who are looked after, have a crucial function in ensuring that children are seen, spoken to and any concerns or issues can be dealt with in a timely way. These visits are also part of safeguarding children, ensuring they are seen and there is some scrutiny of the care they are receiving. Without these visits, children who are looked after are at risk of not having their voices heard in care planning and of losing confidence in social workers, who are supposed to advocate for and support them. Additionally, children's bedrooms are seen as a way of ensuring that care is appropriate and sufficient, that they have comfortable and secure space of their own. The case examiners are of the view that, if proven, regulatory concerns 1 and 2 may represent a breach of standards 2.1, around being reliable and 5.2, in that social workers are expected to complete allocated visits. Given the importance of visits to children who are looked after (set out above) the case examiners consider that the social workers actions would be considered a significant departure from the professional standards.

Regulatory concerns 3, 4 and 5

The case examiners are of the view that dishonesty by a social worker, if found proven, should be viewed as significant and serious misconduct. They note the professional standards guidance (April 2020) which states "*Where [social workers]*

are not open and honest, it can put people at risk and may damage confidence in them as a social worker and the social work profession”.

The case examiners consider that dishonesty in the form of creating records of visits that did not occur, is particularly serious as it has the potential to cause harm to service users, as it undermines the reliability of professional judgement with managers and colleagues believing that interventions have been completed in order to promote and monitor safety. This may prevent any issues being noticed and service users' needs being met in a timely fashion. If proven, these concerns may be found to breach standards 2.1, 5.2 and 5.3.

The case examiners have considered the mitigation put forward by the social worker in terms of both the impact of their health upon the alleged conduct and the challenging context within which they were practising.

Health – The case examiners acknowledge that the social worker submits that at the time of the concerns, they were suffering with ill health, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] It appears from the evidence provided that the social worker's health may have been affected by their workload, rather than their practice being impacted by their health.

The case examiners have considered whether there is evidence to suggest that the social worker's health may have caused the conduct set out in regulatory concerns 1 – 5. They have been provided with evidence from the social worker's medical records which suggest that they approached medical practitioners for support after their dismissal from the former employer. There is no evidence in the records of the social worker seeking treatment or support prior to their dismissal or between October 2023 and June 2024. Whilst the case examiners recognise that the social worker's health may have been deteriorating prior to them seeking support, there is insufficient evidence to allow them to give this significant weight in mitigation.

Workload/practice context – The case examiners have been provided with evidence to support the social worker's submissions that they were under significant pressure during the period of concern. The social worker's line manager has stated in evidence that the social worker “*was open and honest when she was struggling to manage her workload, and this was something we discussed regularly with a high level of work and complex caseload acknowledged*”. In particular it is reported that the social worker's caseload contained a high number of care proceedings, which are recognised as time intensive, complex and demanding. The case examiners acknowledge the pressure put upon social care services and appreciate that team capacity appears to have been limited but they have seen limited evidence of the

social worker being supported when they expressed being unable to manage, apart from this being acknowledged.

The case examiners have been provided with evidence of supervision records, which suggest the social worker was being supervised regularly and appeared to have a good relationship with their line manager. However, most of the supervision records contain reference to the social worker struggling, with low scores for wellbeing, reported loss of confidence, working until the early hours of the morning and feeling pressured by 'name and shame' sites on social media. In March 2024 it is recorded that the social worker is struggling to catch up on their work but is being allocated more cases.

The case examiners are careful not to treat this context as a justification for the social worker's alleged conduct, but they have considered whether it could be a factor that may reduce culpability or demonstrate potential for remediation.

The case examiners have considered whether the social worker can be held responsible for visits they did not complete within timescales, when the evidence suggests they had consistently advised their line manager that they could not manage the demands of their high caseload. The evidence suggests the social worker visited Child A rarely and did not advise their line manager that a child who was looked after had not been seen for an extended period. Accordingly, the case examiners are of the view that the context provided is unlikely to fully mitigate the conduct in regulatory concerns 1 and 2.

The case examiners are of the view that falsification of records cannot be mitigated by workload pressure, as this type of dishonesty can effectively 'cover up' where children are not receiving an adequate service and may not be sufficiently safeguarded.

Whilst the case examiners appreciate how the context may have led to the social worker taking action, which was out of character or ill-advised, they are satisfied there is a realistic prospect of adjudicators finding that all the regulatory concerns amount to the statutory ground of misconduct.

Impairment

Assessment of impairment consists of two elements:

1. The personal element, established via an assessment of the risk of repetition.

2. The public element, established through consideration of whether a finding of impairment might be required to maintain public confidence in the social work profession, or in the maintenance of proper standards for social workers.

Personal element

With regards to the concerns before the regulator, the case examiners have given thought to their guidance, and they note that they should give consideration to whether the matters before the regulator are easily remediable, and whether the social worker has demonstrated insight and/or conducted remediation to the effect that the risk of repetition is highly unlikely.

Whether the conduct can be easily remedied

The case examiners acknowledge that dishonest conduct can be difficult to remediate, as it is characterised in case law as a behavioural or attitudinal issue. However, they are of the view that by developing insight into what happened and what they would do differently in the future, alongside learning or training and evidence of positive current practice, the social worker in these circumstances, could demonstrate there is a low risk of repetition, and that they are capable of safe practice.

Insight and remediation

The case examiners consider that the social worker has demonstrated a good level of insight, from the beginning of the regulator's investigation. The case examiners note that the social worker made a self-referral to the regulator which can indicate accountability, although they recognise that limited weight should be attributed to this as it is expected of a registered professional that they declare any fitness to practise concerns. Within their initial submissions, the social worker initially suggested they had falsified records on one occasion only, but they have subsequently admitted all concerns in full.

The social worker's submissions demonstrate that they appreciate the potential impact on the child and foster carers as well as the impact their alleged conduct may have upon confidence in the social work profession. The social worker has provided evidence that they made it known to their line manager they were struggling to cope. They have, however, further reflected that they should have escalated the concerns about their caseload and ability to fulfil their responsibilities with a senior manager to ensure that Child A was seen and supported.

The social worker has further submitted that they have been out of practice since their dismissal and concentrating on their health and wellbeing. This has made it

difficult for the social worker to demonstrate remediation, as they have no evidence of current practice.

The social worker has not sought to rely upon testimonials but there is evidence from the former employer to suggest that they were a competent and committed social worker, and while this cannot mitigate dishonest conduct, there was no evidence found on investigation to suggest that the social worker was falsifying records for any other children on their caseload. This may provide some assurance that the alleged conduct was out of character for the social worker.

Risk of repetition

The case examiners have acknowledged the high level of insight demonstrated by the social worker. This is likely to assist in reducing the risk of repetition, however, without significant evidence of remediation, the case examiners are not satisfied that the risk of repetition is low.

Public element

The case examiners have next considered whether the social worker's actions have the potential to undermine public confidence in the social work profession, or the maintenance of proper standards for social workers.

The case examiners acknowledge that honesty and integrity are of paramount importance for social workers. A finding of dishonesty undermines public confidence in the profession. The public and other organisations, including employers, need to be able to rely on social workers to be open and honest in their dealings. The case examiners consider that the public would expect a finding of impairment to be made in a case involving dishonesty by a social worker. It therefore follows that a failure to find impairment could undermine public confidence.

The case examiners consider that there is a realistic prospect of the social worker's fitness to practise being found to be currently impaired.

The public interest

Decision summary

Is there a public interest in referring the case to a hearing?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
	No	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Referral criteria

Is there a conflict in the evidence that must be resolved at a hearing?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
	No	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Does the social worker dispute any or all of the key facts of the case?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
	No	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Is a hearing necessary to maintain public confidence in the profession, and/or to uphold the professional standards of social workers?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
	No	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Additional reasoning

The case examiners have concluded that the public interest in this case is engaged. However, they are satisfied that this interest may be appropriately fulfilled by virtue of the accepted disposal process.

Whilst the matter is serious, the case examiners are not of the view that it is so serious that a hearing might be necessary to maintain public confidence in the social work profession, or in Social Work England's maintenance of the standards expected of social workers.

The case examiners have noted that the social worker has indicated to the regulator that they consider their fitness to practise to be currently impaired.

The case examiners consider that the public would be satisfied to see the regulator take prompt, firm action in this case, with the publication of an accepted disposal decision providing a steer to the public and the profession on the importance of adhering to the professional standards expected of social workers in England.

Accepted disposal

Case outcome	
Proposed outcome	No further action <input type="checkbox"/>
	Advice <input type="checkbox"/>
	Warning order <input type="checkbox"/>
	Conditions of practice order <input type="checkbox"/>
	Suspension order <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Removal order <input type="checkbox"/>
Proposed duration	Suspension order (1 year)

Reasoning

The case examiners have identified the following mitigating and aggravating factors in this case;

Mitigating

- The evidence suggests that the social worker was suffering with a period of illness and stress.
- Excellent insight demonstrated and the social worker has taken accountability for their conduct.
- Evidence of good practice outside of the alleged conduct. No evidence to suggest this conduct was repeated on any other cases.
- Evidence of wider or systematic issues in the workplace and that the social worker was struggling to cope with their caseload.

Aggravating

- Repeated dishonesty over a period of 9 months.
- There was a risk of harm to Child A.

In considering the appropriate outcome in this case, the case examiners had regard to Social Work England's sanctions guidance (December 2022) and reminded

themselves that the purpose of a sanction is not to punish the social worker, but to protect the public.

The case examiners have decided that it is not in the public interest to refer this matter to a final hearing and have chosen the least restrictive sanction necessary to protect the public and the wider public interest. They have started at the lowest possible sanction and worked up, testing the appropriateness of each sanction to confirm their decision is proportionate.

The case examiners have already determined there is a realistic prospect that the social worker's fitness to practise would be found impaired. The sanctions guidance advises that if the personal element of impairment is found, "*a sanction restricting or removing a social worker's registration will normally be necessary to protect the public*". The case examiners are therefore led to consider sanctions which restrict the social worker's practice. They note that the guidance suggests it may therefore "*be reasonable to move beyond the lower sanctions (no action, advice or a warning) on this basis alone*". The case examiners have already determined that they do not consider that the social worker has demonstrated sufficient remediation and that a risk of repetition remains. Therefore, the sanctions of no further action, advice or a warning are considered inappropriate on the basis that these outcomes will not restrict practice and therefore not sufficiently protect the public.

The case examiners have then considered a conditions of practice order, however they note the sanctions guidance again which states these orders are less likely to be appropriate in cases of character, attitude or behavioural failings. The case examiners have not been provided with any evidence that the social worker feels able to remediate or return to practice currently. Furthermore, the case examiners felt this order does not adequately address the serious nature of the alleged misconduct.

The case examiners next considered a suspension order, in order to mark the seriousness of the alleged conduct and protect the public. They are guided to only consider a suspension order when the social worker has demonstrated some insight and when "*there is evidence to suggest the social worker is willing and able to resolve or remediate their failings*". Whilst the case examiners recognise that the social worker has not returned to practice, it appears from their submissions that they may wish to do so in the future, and the social worker has indicated they would accept any suggestions of suitable remediation from the regulator.

The case examiners have established that it is possible for them to offer a suspension order, and they considered if the conduct in this case is so serious that nothing, but a removal order will satisfy the public interest? The case examiners are of the view that repeated falsification of records is serious enough to justify removal,

and they consider that this is a finely balanced decision. The case examiners reminded themselves that they are required to propose the minimum sanction necessary and they consider that suspension of the social worker can both protect the public and uphold standards in social work. A suspension order will be reviewed before it is completed, ensuring that the social worker evidences sufficient remediation before they return to unrestricted practice. The case examiners are of the view that while some members of the public may expect a removal order in a matter of this seriousness, they are also satisfied that the public would appreciate, given the mitigation discussed, that there is a public interest in returning a skilled practitioner to the profession, if public protection can be assured.

In considering the duration of the suspension order, the case examiners once again return to the sanctions guidance, which indicates that while an order can be made up to 3 years in duration, case examiners need to be mindful of the risk of deskilling a social worker, if proposing a prolonged suspension order. The case examiners are of the view that a 1 year suspension order provides an opportunity for the social worker to recover their health fully and undertake professional development to assist with their return to practice. This sanction will mark the seriousness of dishonesty.

The case examiners have decided to propose to the social worker a suspension order of 1 year duration. They will now notify the social worker of their intention and seek the social worker's agreement to dispose of the matter accordingly. The social worker will be offered 42 days to respond; this is to take into account the Christmas period on top of the usual 28 days offered to consider a restrictive sanction. If the social worker does not agree, or if the case examiners revise their decision regarding the public interest in this case, the matter will proceed to a final hearing.

Recommendations for the social worker

Prior to any future attendance at a review panel, the case examiners suggests that it would be of assistance to any such panel if the social worker was able to provide evidence that they had undertaken steps that would facilitate a safe and effective return to the register without restriction. These steps may include:

- i. Evidencing learning, self-directed or otherwise, particularly around values, ethics and the duty of candour;
- ii. Providing evidence of the steps taken to promote their health and wellbeing.

Response from the social worker

On 30 January 2026 the social worker returned their completed accepted disposal response form, confirming the following:

'I have read the case examiners' decision and the accepted disposal guide. I admit the key facts set out in the case examiner decision, and that my fitness to practise is impaired. I understand the terms of the proposed disposal of my fitness to practise case and accept them in full.'

Case examiners' response and final decision

The case examiners have reviewed their decision, paying particular regard to the overarching objectives of Social Work England:

- The protection of the public
- Maintaining confidence in the social work profession
- The maintenance of professional standards.

The case examiners remain satisfied that an accepted disposal suspension order of 1 year is a fair and proportionate way to conclude this matter, and is the minimum sanction required to protect the public and the wider public interest.