

# Wellbeing for social workers

## Summary

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers have made rapid adjustments to their practice. A substantial shift to remote working, offering person-centred services amid social restrictions, and limited access to typical sources of personal and professional support have all given rise to challenges to practice and social workers' health and wellbeing.

The COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the effects of extended lockdown restrictions, as well as the findings from the latest Local Government Association [Social Worker Health Check](#) have brought together the [Principal Children's Social Workers Network](#) and [Social Work England](#) to collaborate on this short wellbeing statement. Its aim is to signal to professionals and employers the importance of social workers attending to their own wellbeing and to consider the importance of wellbeing to their continued safe and effective practice.

This statement does not create any new regulatory requirements or obligations, nor is it an exhaustive guide to personal wellbeing, we hope it helps social workers to feel able to claim the time to attend to their own wellbeing as an important element of professional practice, even amidst the immense time and workload pressures that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. For those who may need urgent assistance or support, we have included signposts to helplines and further support at the end of the statement.

## Urgent assistance

If you are in distress and in need of urgent assistance, you can call the [Samaritans](#) free on 116 123, or text KEYWORKER to 82528 to access the [Shout 24/7](#) mental health support service.

If you're concerned about your own ability to practice safely and to meet the professional standards, you can self-refer at any time to Social Work England. This is important so that they can discuss your registration and the measures you have, or may need to have, in place to

support your work. You can read out more about self-referral on the [Social Work England website](#).

## What we mean by 'wellbeing'

Wellbeing extends across a range of life circumstances. Familiar legislation to social work<sup>1</sup> articulates wellbeing as being rooted in: dignity, emotional and mental health, autonomy, relationships, and participation in work and training. In reality, this can involve many other factors, including maintaining a healthy and sustainable work-life balance, being able to 'switch off', and tending to non-work life and relationships.

## COVID-19, extended lockdown and wellbeing

The COVID-19 pandemic has stretched resources in social work unlike ever before. Fundamental changes to the way social workers can support people, coupled with the different ways services are delivered or restricted has made it difficult to support people in familiar ways. It has also made maintaining important relationships that support social workers and their practice and connection with peers, supervision partners and managers more complex.

These changes emerged against the backdrop of social workers already experiencing high levels of stress, low morale and burnout, as well comparatively high departures from the profession<sup>1</sup>. Social workers also describe themselves as being 'time-poor', experiencing significant and growing work pressures<sup>2</sup>, and unlikely to feel that they have, or can justify making, the time to invest in wellbeing at work.

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<sup>1</sup> A [survey by BASW in 2017](#) reported on this, and research commissioned by Social Work England in 2019 bore this out.

<sup>2</sup> A [survey by Community Care in 2020](#) suggested that 70% of statutory children's social workers feel that their caseload is "unmanageable" or "hard to manage".

# Situating wellbeing at the heart of professional practice

The reinforcing cycle of stress, limited time to attend to personal needs, and the demands of social work poses a unique challenge for social workers and to us as the leaders and the regulator of the social work profession. We recognise that it is our responsibility to position wellbeing of professionals at the centre of our combined efforts to ensure that the support social workers provide remains safe, effective and in line with [the professional standards](#).

The professional standards for social workers are the standards of safe and effective practice. They require social workers to be able to, among other expectations, build trust with people, be accountable for the quality of their practice and decisions, and uphold professional integrity and the safety of their practice. Upholding the standards depends on giving proper priority to personal mental health and wellbeing and social workers require support to achieve this from peers, employers and leaders.

We know that professionals can experience positive effects of even modest measures taken to support their wellbeing. [Research commissioned by Social Work England](#) in 2019 showed that social workers respond positively to managers who allow space for them to attend to their emotional wellbeing. There has also been [significant research and active discussion](#) around the links between wellbeing, resilience, and high-quality care. Systems regulators such as [Ofsted](#) and the [Care Quality Commission](#), also consider robust supervision an indicator of good quality services.

The Local Government Association (LGA) also supports an employer and systems approach to wellbeing in the social work workforce. They included wellbeing as a dedicated standard in their [standards for employers of social workers in England](#).

## Practical steps to address wellbeing in social work

Wellbeing looks different for everyone, but it requires professionals, managers and employers to reserve time to reflect on practice and identify how noticing and managing wellbeing can benefit the people that social workers support.

Many employers offer wellbeing support to staff – occupational health, mental health first aiders, counselling services, courses focussed specifically on wellbeing and mental health, and policies and guidance around wellbeing are encouragingly commonplace. Social workers seeking support for their wellbeing at work should look to their employers, managers and teams as an important source of information about the wellbeing support available to them.

For those social workers outside of an employer setting, other bodies involved in social work also offer opportunities for reflection and wellbeing activities. The British Association for Social Work (BASW) also offer [top tips for wellbeing](#) with a range of resources to help place wellbeing at the heart of social work employment.

The LGA's [annual social worker health check survey](#) gives professionals and employers the opportunity to speak about the front-line reality of practice and for their views to be turned into priorities and recommendations for action. The survey will launch again in September 2021.

## Wellbeing in social work education

Wellbeing for social work students is an important basis for embedding wellbeing in all professional practice. For this reason, all social work qualifying and specialist courses have to meet certain standards around student wellbeing in order to be approved by Social Work England – for example, by ensuring that students have access to confidential counselling, careers advice, and occupational health service (standard 5.1 of the [Social Work England education and training approval standards for qualifying education 2021](#)).

Support for wellbeing, as well as space to invest in wellbeing, is something that students should expect at both qualifying and post-qualifying levels when they train. We recognise that universities and course providers work hard to get this right for all students, not just social workers. It is important that social work students engage with wellbeing resources that are on offer so that they can integrate wellbeing into the first, formative stages of their professional development.

## Supervision

Supervision is protected time with a manager or another professional colleague in which social workers critically reflect on and improve their practice. It is aimed at supporting social workers

to consider their own values and judgements and provides a means for exploring a social worker's practice, including ethical dilemmas, cultural issues, decision making and the impact of personal circumstances on their ability support people.

Supervision can look different in different workplaces and settings but should be relevant to the social worker's role and take account of development frameworks that they may be working with. By providing space and time for critical reflection, supervision should provide a space for discussing wellbeing as one of the factors impacting any social worker's professional capabilities and locating it as a component of safe practice.

## Wellbeing as continuing professional development (CPD)

[Continuing professional development \(CPD\)](#) describes the consideration and the learning activities social workers undertake to develop and improve their practice. Social workers are required to undertake CPD to maintain their registration under standard 4 of the professional standards. Social Work England requires social workers to complete and record CPD each year.

As social workers are required to demonstrate their CPD, this can serve as a helpful opportunity to reflect on wellbeing, including the strategies social workers develop to maintain their wellbeing and how this impacts their practice. Social workers and social work leaders should stay alert to Social Work England's requirements around CPD and look to [their website](#) for further information about undertaking CPD.

# Further help and support

## Urgent assistance and maintaining mental health

Samaritans – call 116 123 for free or visit [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

Shout 24/7 text support service – text KEYWORKER to 82528

MIND UK – [resources on work stress](#)

Community Care Inform – [resilience and wellbeing guide](#)

## Building wellbeing into training and professional practice

Social Work England – [professional standards](#)

Student Minds – [wellbeing resources for students](#)

Scottish Organisation for Practice Teaching (SCOPT) – [mental wellbeing for social work students](#)

GOV.UK – [advice on health and wellbeing for adult social care workforce](#)

Community Care – [prioritising wellbeing in social work](#)

Community Care – [managing fear in social work practice](#)

British Association of Social Workers (BASW) – [quick self care guide](#)

British Journal of Social Work Practice – [social worker wellbeing](#)

## Resources for employers

Local Government Association (LGA) – [standards for employers of social workers in England](#)

Local Government Association (LGA) – [annual healthcheck for social workers](#)

Mind – [wellness action plan for employers](#)

[BASW Wellbeing and working conditions toolkit](#)