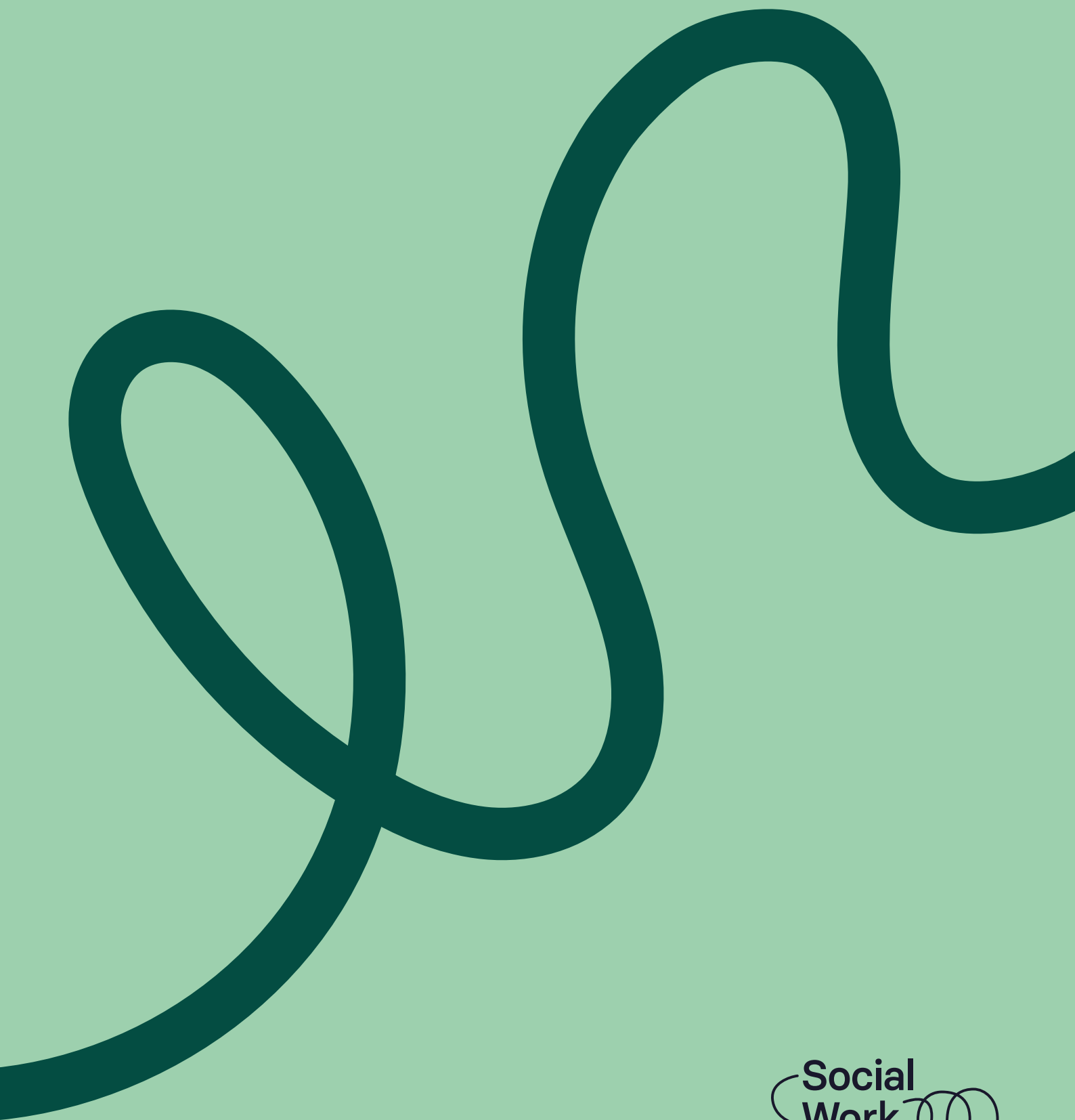


Social Work in England: Emerging Themes



Contents

Foreword	3
Introduction	4
Learning to be a social worker	5
Social workers in England	18
Career long learning	37
Investigating concerns	49
Looking to our Social Work in England report in 2023	65

Foreword

"Over the past 12 months, social workers have continued to respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Professionals have worked in acute and challenging circumstances and demonstrated great resolve in providing vital support to people, families, and communities.

"We continue to ensure we understand the impact of the pandemic, contributing in any way we can to national recovery. Building on the Social Work in England: First Reflections report we published in January 2021, this report shares emerging themes from our work as the specialist regulator and shines a light on the vital role social work plays in the wider health and social care landscape.

"We include the voices of people with lived and learned experience of social work, who are essential to highlighting important ways of working and identifying the changes needed across the sector. I am proud to share the platform this report provides with people who have direct experience of social work.

"Anticipating our third report in 2023, I look forward to reaching out further to people who have an interest in social work. Through an extensive and diverse range of engagement, I hope to speak to new and different people both online, and if safe to do so, in person."



**Lord Patel of
Bradford OBE
Chair, Social Work
England**

"Social workers continue to show great resilience with all those who work in health and social care. Through our regulation, we've looked to respond to the challenges of the pandemic alongside the sector, quickly, proportionately and in the best interests of the public.

"Now in our second year, we've welcomed thousands of new social workers onto the register, published new standards for education and training, undertaken our first review of continuing professional development (CPD), and continued to investigate and resolve fitness to practise cases.

"This second Social Work in England report sets out our regulatory perspective and offers insight to inform quality conversations about social work. Important to our values of transparency and integrity, we explain what we do and what we've learned from our work.

"Our final Social Work in England report will be published in 2023. We hope this will serve as an overview of social work in England, describe the unique and important role of social work, and make clear how we work to uphold public confidence in the profession."



**Colum Conway
Chief Executive,
Social Work
England**

Introduction

This is the second of 2 interim reports leading to our landmark 'Social Work in England' report in 2023. It explains our work as the specialist regulator, shares insight from our work, and includes voices of people with lived and learned experience of social work.

Over our second year, we have introduced new standards for social work education and training, inspected courses, welcomed new social workers to the register, and investigated concerns. We've also commissioned and published research, held the first Social Work Week, consulted on areas of our work, and launched our own podcast series. Alongside these activities, this report contributes to our commitment to engage, learn, and share as a regulator, and is an important part of our vision of specialist professional regulation.

As the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be felt across the country, this report aims to shine a light on the essential support that social workers provide to people. This support has been fundamental to the national pandemic response. Over our second year, we've also continued to see astounding commitment to reflection and action in social work on social justice, racism, discrimination and oppression. We return to these areas in the report as important features of social work.

This report, Social Work in England: Emerging Themes, has been co-produced with our National Advisory Forum, an independent group of people with lived and learned experience of social work. Each chapter of the report has been co-led by a member of the forum and through the development of each chapter, we've sought out opportunities for people to share their experiences of social work in their own words.

Building on the first report we published in January 2021, we hope this second interim report informs a growing national conversation about social work.

Learning to be a social worker

"Education and training are the front door into the social work profession. We approve courses so that students complete their training with the skills, knowledge and experience to meet the professional standards."

Philip Hallam

Executive Director for Registration, Quality Assurance, and Legal Social Work England



Learning to be a social worker

As initial education and training is fundamental to the competence, expertise and professionalism of the social work profession, we approve, monitor and reapprove courses of qualifying education and training for social workers in England. We do this to ensure that students who successfully complete a social work course can apply to register with us and can meet our professional standards.

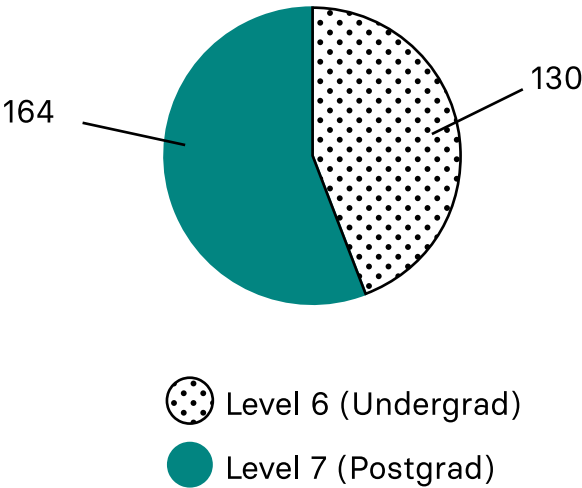
With the launch of our 2021 education and training standards, we are taking an important step on our journey to improve outcomes for social work students. This will help to ensure that they are well prepared, equipped to begin their career, and feel confident as they move into work.



Social work courses in England

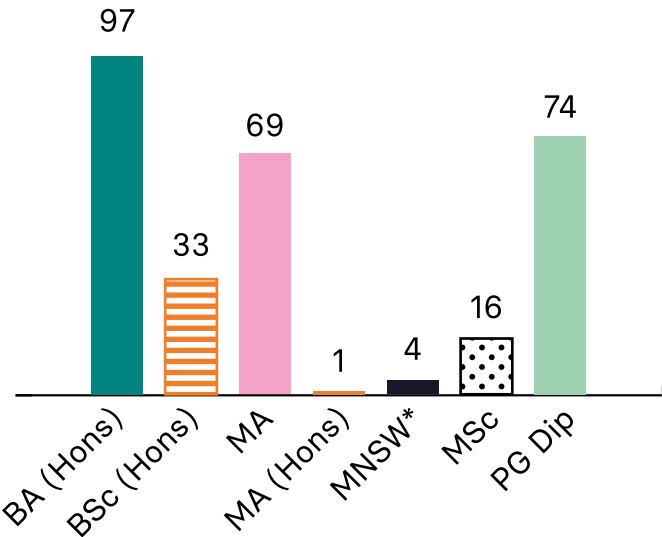
All social workers who qualify in England are required to complete an approved level 6 or 7 degree in social work to be eligible to register with us. There are multiple qualifying routes, including fast track programmes, apprenticeships, and undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Furthermore, there are routes for people who qualify outside of England.

Graph 1: Regulated social work courses in England by level of study



We currently oversee
294
courses across England

Graph 2: Social work courses by award



*Mental Health Nursing and Social Work

New standards in education and training

In September 2021, we launched our new education and training standards, replacing the previous standards. These are the standards we now use to assess all social work courses across England.

Some of the new features of the education and training standards include the following:

- Strengthened admissions requirements where students must have the potential to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the professional standards.
- The inclusion of people with lived experience in the design of admissions processes, as well as the monitoring, evaluation and improvement of the course.
- Educators must ensure that students have effective educational and pastoral support to progress through their course and meet the professional standards when they qualify.
- Students must spend at least 200 days, including up to 30 skills days, on placement in at least 2 different practice settings that provide contrasting experiences.
- Students must receive appropriate induction, supervision, support, access to resources and a realistic workload while on placement.

With the launch of our new education and training standards, we have embarked on a 3-year course approval cycle. This is an important milestone that will enable us to assess how providers are meeting the new standards and gain more in-depth insight into social work education provision in England.

"As we continue to emerge from one of the most challenging pandemics we have ever known, the vital role social workers play in society, supporting our most vulnerable citizens, has never been in sharper focus. To be effective, social work needs a strong professional identity underpinned by effective education, measured regulation and durable leadership. In this critical year we have been pleased to work closely with Social Work England to continue to shape and support the social work education and research community, as we implement the 2021 Standards for education and training and look to future directions and developments for the sector."

Dr Janet Melville-Wiseman,
Principal Lecturer at Canterbury Christ Church University
and Chair of Joint University Council Social Work
Education Committee (JUCSWEC)



Inspecting and monitoring courses

We inspect initial social work education and training courses in England. These inspections help us to determine whether a course will meet, or continues to meet, our education and training standards. Inspections involve extensive communication with course providers and include conversations with students, staff and those involved with administering and delivering courses.

Following our inspections, we may choose to approve, reapprove, reapprove with conditions or withdraw approval for a course. This upholds the quality of the education and training students receive and ensures that graduates registering as social workers and entering the profession are competent, and able to practise safely and effectively.

From 1 December 2020 to 30 November 2021, we undertook 4 inspections:

- 3 were requests by the provider for approval of a new course
- 1 was the result of a concern raised to us about an existing course

From 1 December 2020 to 30 November 2021, we have made 4 decisions:

- 1 course was approved
- 3 courses were approved with conditions

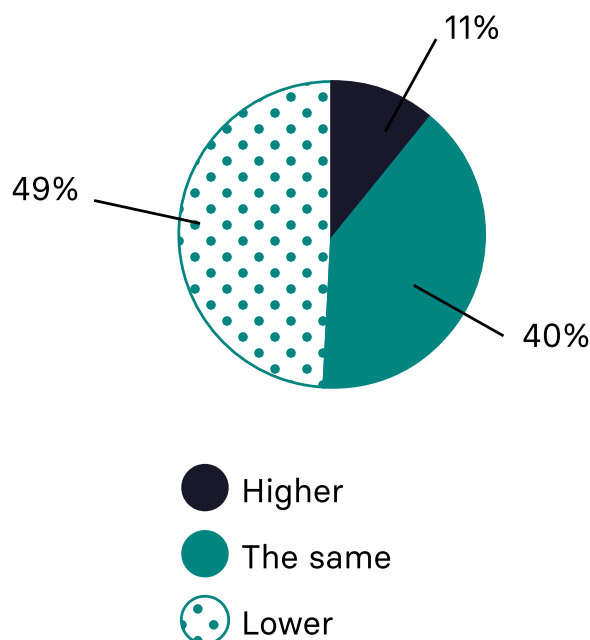
In addition to our inspections, we also carry out an annual monitoring exercise between September and November. We ask providers about their courses, cohorts, student experiences and anything that has impacted on the courses and the way they are delivered.

As a result of this work, we are able to maintain awareness of courses and their delivery between our inspections, while also building a more informed picture of social work education and the factors that influence it.

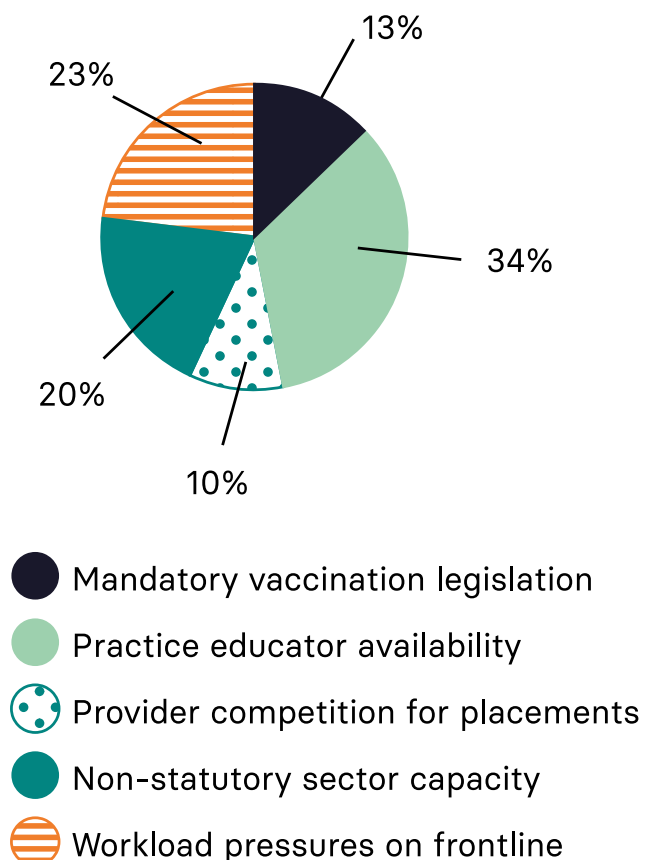
Insights from annual monitoring

In September of 2021, we asked all course providers to respond to our annual monitoring survey. Respondents reported that for academic year 2021 to 2022, student recruitment against target intake was either lower or broadly the same.

Graph 3: Actual student intake against approved target intake



Graph 4: Reasons for ongoing placement capacity challenges



Just over half of providers (51%) told us that they were still experiencing placement capacity challenges as a result of the pandemic. The most significant reason was the availability of practice educators and workload pressures on frontline staff leading to reduced capacity to support students on placement.

Understanding the impact of COVID-19

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, providers made rapid alterations to their courses to adapt to changing guidance and legislation. Many balanced the duty of care to students and their right to be educated, with the quality and safety of their training. Students across England faced ambiguity around their learning. Some found benefits in greater flexibility of their courses, others faced difficulty in balancing personal circumstances and family and caring responsibilities.

Education providers demonstrated resolve and adaptability as they made the fullest use of digital learning, virtual team-working platforms, and new methods of online assignments and examinations. Partnership working emerged as a real strength, with local and regional teaching partnerships and training networks enabling providers to navigate the challenges of delivering placement opportunities and share good practice. This was highlighted in research, which suggested that “the ability to respond to this crisis can be argued to have demonstrated the worth of partnership working”.^{1,2}

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- 1 MacDonald, A., Clarke, A., & Huang, L. (2019). Multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainability: Designing decision-making processes for partnership capacity. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 160 (2), 409–426
 - 2 Paula Beesley & Julie Devonald (2020) Partnership working in the face of a pandemic crisis impacting on social work placement provision in England, *Social Work Education*, 39:8, 1146-1153, DOI: 10.1080/02615479.2020.1825662

We are beginning to reflect on the pandemic and its impact on social work students and their education. We know at the height of the pandemic there were widespread difficulties connecting students with teaching staff, and placements in particular became vulnerable as staff and practice educators were deployed to frontline response efforts.

As courses resume face-to-face teaching and placements are being re-established, we are working with providers to understand the appropriateness of retaining adjustments. Where there may be benefits to making some adjustments permanent, we will look to ensure that they serve to alleviate, not aggravate disadvantages that students face, and are effective in ensuring they uphold the education and training standards.



An academic perspective on COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about many adjustments to the way we live and work. Universities have changed the way in which teaching is delivered, which has not been without its challenges. Prior to March 2020, students routinely accessed some teaching materials via online platforms but did not use these to access all their teaching and learning activities. And yet this is what we have all found ourselves doing from our front rooms, kitchens and bedrooms over the past eighteen months.

In March 2020, I was the teaching director in the School of Social Work at The University of East Anglia. My role became critical in coordinating our school's teaching response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in light of the expectation of the university, the government, local authorities, the needs of students, staff and the requirements of our social work regulator. During this time of crisis, we responded by making and delivering necessary changes together. The learning curve has been steep. My work colleagues were as determined as me to support our students and each other to provide a topical and challenging curriculum. We also made every endeavour to ensure that students could continue to gain experiences via placements although these were stopped at first during the early part of the pandemic.

The focus for universities is to provide the best experience for students as possible. Universities may not have always got things right at every stage during this crisis, but we have listened, learned and adapted, alongside our colleagues in practice, who also faced considerable challenges during the pandemic. It has shown us that we can adapt and change, be flexible where required and think differently about how we teach students about social work. Students have seen and experienced first-hand how local authorities have responded to this new landscape. The placement experiences of students have been very different to that of their predecessors. Because of this, they may have different assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE) support needs moving forward, but the skills and knowledge students have gained are directly transferable.

Arguably, we will not return to the same workplaces and spaces after COVID-19. How we do our jobs has changed beyond what any of us imagined in February 2020. We have adapted and grown as a profession and will continue to use the skills we have gained during this period. My hope for the future is that we can continue to meet the needs of the sector through educating and teaching students to be flexible, proactive and responsive to the people they serve.

Professor Christine Cocker
Head of School of Social Work, University of East Anglia

Learning from research

In January 2021, we commissioned The University of Greenwich to undertake a study into social work education and training in England. We published the findings from the research on [our website](#) in October 2021.

The research looked at 3 main areas associated with social work education and training in England:

1. Specialist regulation;
2. COVID-19 pandemic experiences and responses; and
3. Equality, diversity and inclusion.

Specifically, the study explored the views, attitudes, perceptions and experiences of:

- social work students;
- course providers and academics;
- graduates or newly qualified social workers and in their assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE) programme; and
- practice educators or other representatives of placement providers.



Participants generally recognised the role of the specialist regulator in setting professional standards, holding social workers to account, and ensuring that professionals record their continuing professional development (CPD). Students saw our role as more similar to that of a professional body, which appeared to lead to mismatched expectations. For example that we worked for the benefit of social workers, rather than the public.

There was support for registration of student social workers across all groups. However, participants were concerned about students having to pay the registration fee. There was also a misconception among students that registration would provide protections in a way that is similar to that of a trade union.

Participants shared mixed views on education and training during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most acknowledged the increased flexibility that enabled more balance between professional and personal life, but recognised difficulty for students connecting on their courses and in practice placements. In contrast to academic colleagues, practice educators were more likely to feel that course adjustments did not adhere to the new education and training standards.



Equality, inclusion and the student experience

Over the past year, social work students and educators have continued to reflect on and challenge the structures in society that perpetuate and aggravate racism, disadvantage, and oppression. This has extended to how courses are designed and delivered, as well as student experiences and support through their training. Some students have made use of social media to organise and bring together their voices and experiences.

Through our engagement with student groups and activists, some have spoken to us about the inclusivity of their courses, the support students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds receive on placement, and how anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice is covered in course design and delivery. We've listened carefully and have focused our research work and engagement on understanding how student experiences can differ.

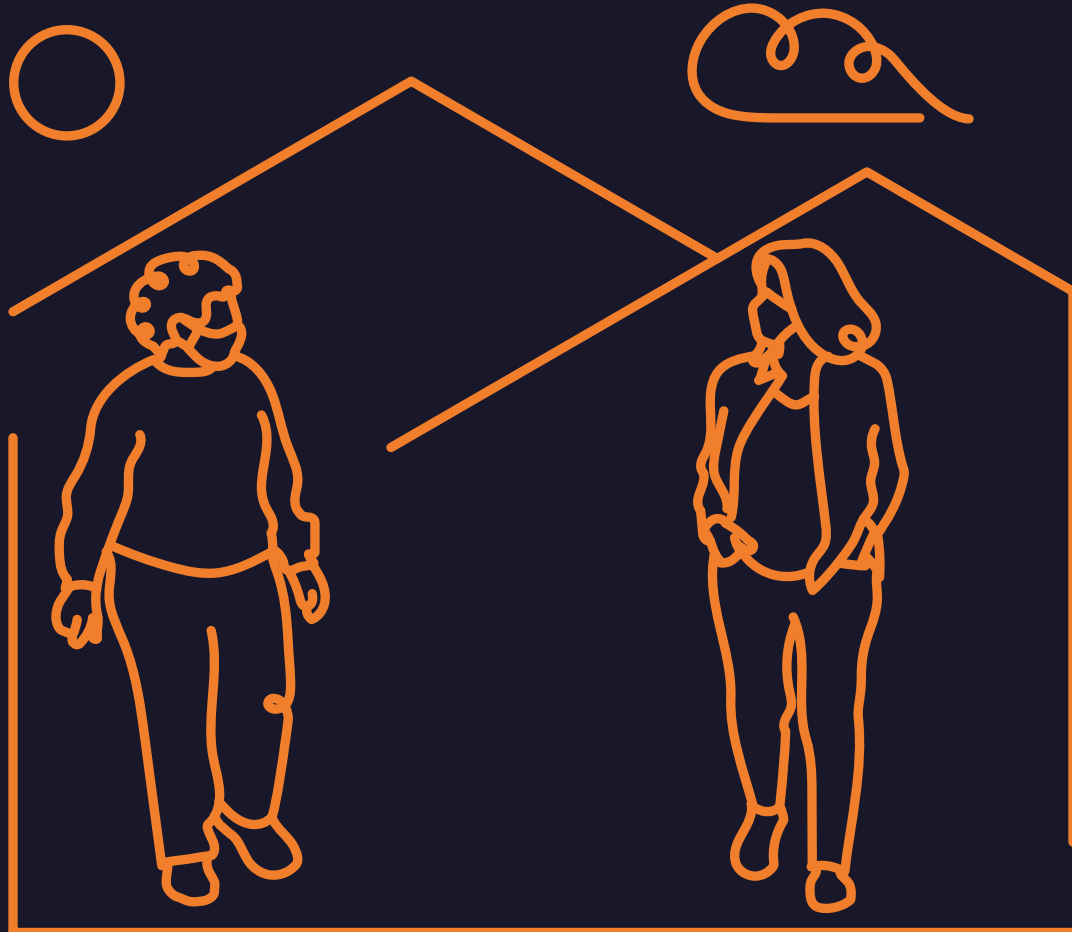
Through our research, graduates and newly qualified social worker groups felt strongly that equality, diversity and inclusion principles were embedded in the values, ethics and standards of the profession. Of those who participated, 29.7% of students and 37.5% of graduates, newly qualified social workers and those in an assessed and supported year in employment agreed that social activism and social activist movements, like Black Lives Matter, impacted their learning and practice experiences.

For our part, the education and training standards launched in 2021 include new requirements for student support, including support for students' health and wellbeing, and access to confidential counselling services. We have begun inspecting all courses in England against these standards which are fundamental to the approval, and continued approval, of these courses. We speak to students during our inspections and consider their feedback carefully when making decisions about a course. We will also continue to build ways for students to maintain their dialogue with us as the specialist regulator, including through our National Advisory Forum, which expanded its membership in 2021.

Social workers in England

"For a long time, we've felt the absence of robust data and evidence around the make-up of social work as a whole profession. We want to share what we know about social workers, to highlight the important contribution of social work to society and better inform decision making about social work in England."

Sarah Blackmore
Executive Director for Strategy, Policy and Engagement,
Social Work England



Social workers in England

As the regulator, we hold a register of all those who can practise under the protected title of social worker in England. We ensure that those listed on the register meet the professional standards and our requirements for registration.

To be eligible to register as a social worker in England, an applicant must:

- have completed a recognised social work qualification,
- be capable of safe and effective practice in accordance with the professional standards,
- demonstrate English language requirements, and
- have not been convicted of a listed offence (other than one that has been quashed).³

What is a 'protected title'?

Under the Social Workers Regulations 2018, only someone registered with Social Work England can use the title of social worker in England.

A person who is not registered and misuses this title is in breach of the law and may be prosecuted for a criminal offence.

This includes falsely representing themselves to be registered or falsely representing themselves to have a qualification in relation to social work.

Anyone can report to us when they are concerned that someone may be misusing the title and practising illegally. We investigate and, where possible, take appropriate action. Depending on the circumstances, we may:

- advise the person of the law,
- send cease and desist notices,
- initiate our own prosecution, if we decide it's in the public interest to do so, or
- refer the matter to the police.

³ [The Social Workers Regulations 2018, regulation 11\(2\).](#)

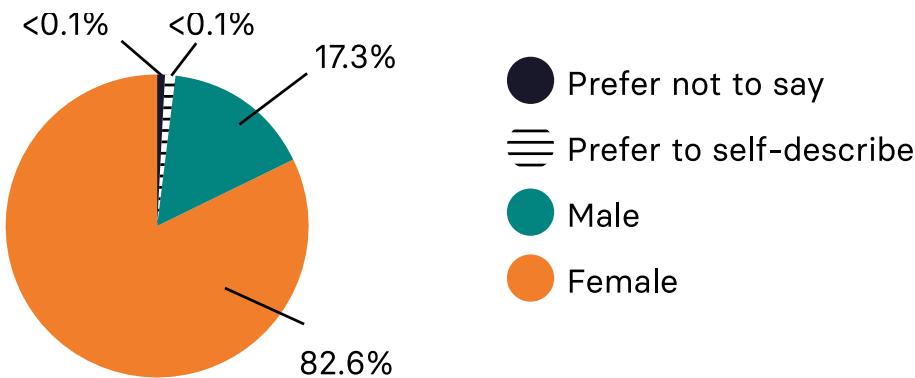
The shape of the profession

Our register lists all those able to practise social work in England. In our first report, we were able to share some of the information we hold on the register. Here we build on those figures with more insight.

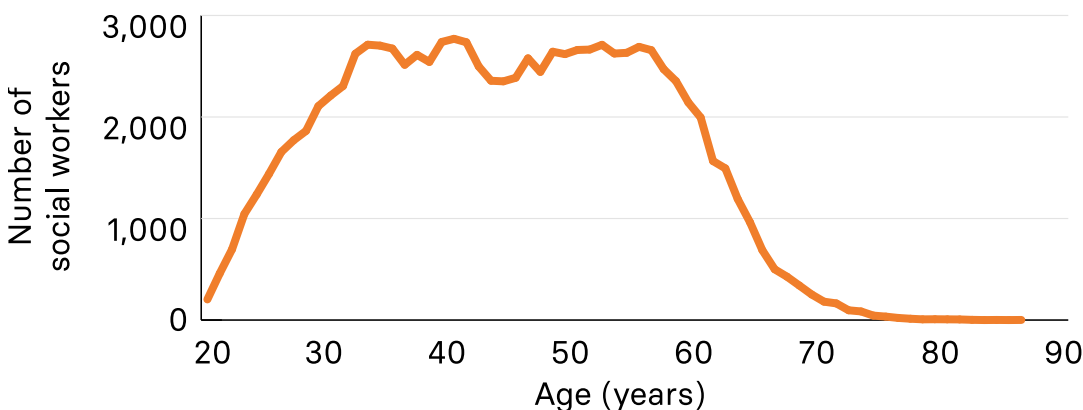
All social workers must apply to renew their registration annually. This means they must submit an application to renew, pay their registration fee, record continuing professional development (CPD), and declare that they are fit to practise in line with the professional standards. These measures help us to assure the public that social workers on the register are capable of safe and effective practice.

As of 30 November 2021, the number of registered social workers in England stands at 99,191. Of all social workers registered with us, 82.6% identify as female, 17.3% identify as male, less than 0.1% preferred not to record a gender identity, and less than 0.1% preferred to self-describe. The average age of a social worker in England is 45.

Graph 5: Social workers in England by gender



Graph 6: Number of social workers by age



When social workers join the register, or renew their registration, they are asked their nationality. This refers to their country of citizenship and should not be confused with national identity, or where they earned their social work qualification. After British (90,580), the most common nationalities among social workers in England are Zimbabwean (1,544) and Irish (1,057).

Table 1: Number of social workers by nationality

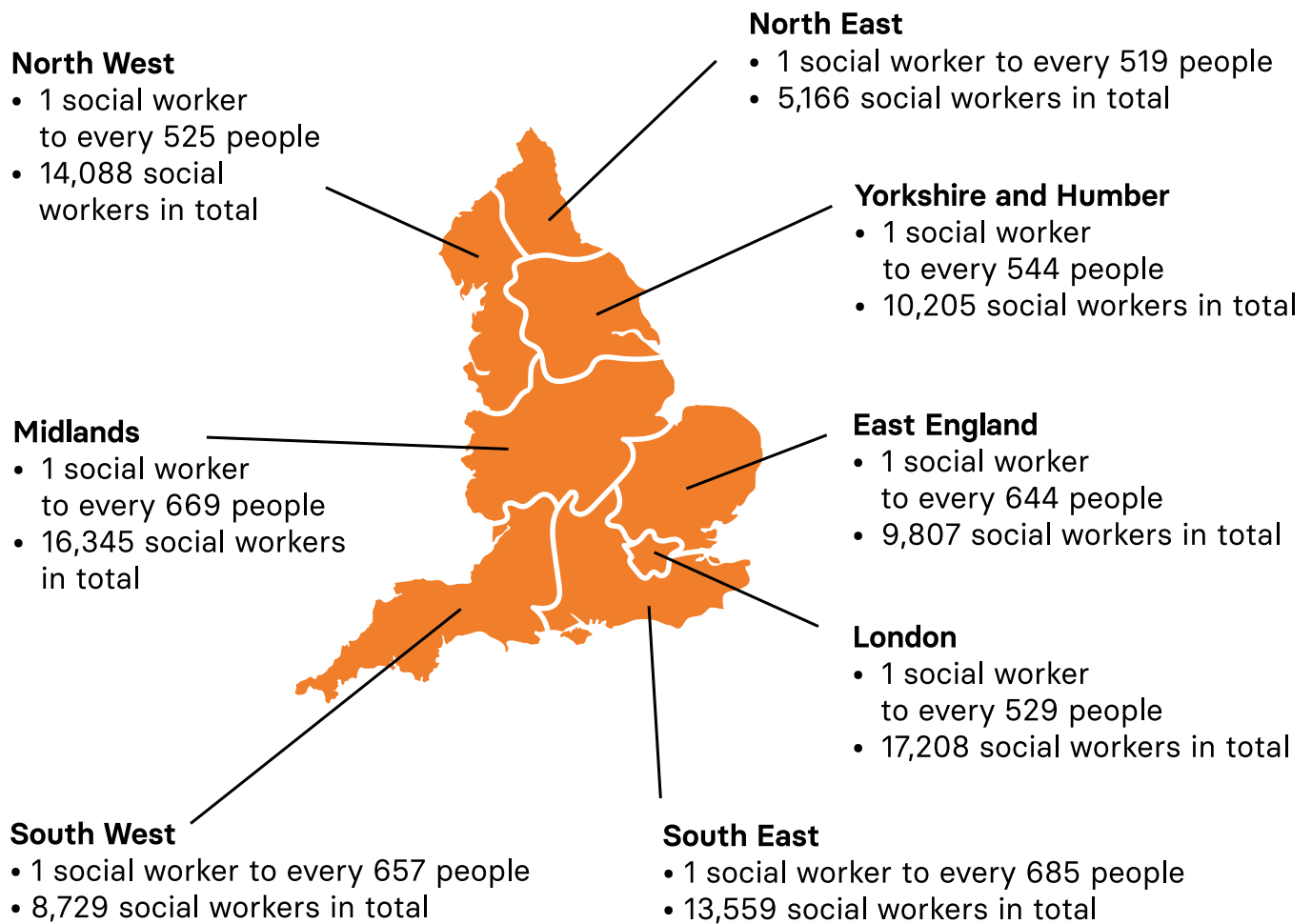
Nationality	Social workers
British	90,580
Zimbabwean	1,544
Irish	1,057
Indian	441
American	417
South African	386
Romanian	377
Polish	354
German	319
Nigerian	312

We are also able to provide a breakdown of registered social workers at a regional level.⁴ This shows that the highest concentration of social workers is in London, while the lowest is in the North East.

When comparing the ratio of social workers to the size of local population, as compared with data from the Office for National Statistics⁵, it shows that the North East has the highest ratio of social workers to the local population with a ratio of 1 social worker to every 519 people, and the South East has the lowest with a ratio of 1 social worker to every 685 people.

⁴ This information has been derived from employer postcodes (95.4%) and where this isn't recorded in a social worker's account, their home postcode (4.6%).

⁵ Population projections for regions, 2020, Office for National Statistics



We want to build on this insight, to provide a more complete picture of social workers in England. This includes asking social workers for diversity monitoring data. This information is vital for us to understand the profession, including how reflective it is of the public it serves. Diversity data also helps us understand where and how people may experience our work differently, including where our processes and systems could cause inequality or disadvantage.

If you are a social worker, it's important that you respond to our call for diversity data on your [online account](#).

“Throughout another unprecedented year for social work, I have been so impressed by the many inspiring stories of social workers, teams and local areas going the extra mile to support children and families, all within a context of adapting to the major challenges of the pandemic. There is so much the social work profession should be extremely proud of as we reflect on the last year.”

Isabelle Trowler,
Chief Social Worker for Children and Families and Child
Safeguarding Practice Review Panel member

Coronavirus Act 2020: temporary registration

To support ongoing efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, in March 2020 we were given emergency powers under the Coronavirus Act 2020¹ to allow previously registered social workers in England to return to practice. Anyone who had left the register since 18 March 2018 (unless they had been removed for fitness to practise reasons) was automatically given temporary registration so that they did not need to apply to rejoin the register if they wanted to support the crisis response. These social workers were contacted and given the opportunity to opt out of temporary registration.

At the end of our second year of registration, 6,518 social workers had temporary registration. Though the provisions that allow emergency registration of health and care professionals remain in force, we took the decision in November 2021 to remove temporary registration from those who left the register over 2 years ago. This ensures that we continue to uphold safe standards of practice and meet our overarching objectives to protect the public.

Once the government declares that the emergency response has ended, we will remove everyone with temporary registration status from the register. However, any social worker with temporary registration status wishing to continue to practise must apply to restore their full registration.

COVID-19 and social workers in England

Against the backdrop of our growing understanding of the social work profession in England, social workers are continuing to support the nationwide response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many are now supporting people through the longer-term impacts of the pandemic and social restrictions on people's lives, relationships and communities.

Professionals are consistently reporting adverse impacts of their pressured working environments on their mental health, emotional wellbeing, and personal lives. The extended period of intensive and complex practice, as well as changes to the way social workers work, has compounded the challenges of working in a profession that already reported a high degree of work-related stress⁶.

These experiences have been generally consistent across the profession. Placement providers, newly qualified social workers and students have reported experiencing lower morale and a negative impact on their mental health⁷. Those in certain roles also reported feeling stress when working remotely, as lacking in-person contact created difficulties in carrying out quality assessments⁸.

6 Johnson, C., Coburn, S., Sanders-Earley, A., Earl, S., Winterbotham, M., McLaughlin, H., Pollock, S., Scholar, H., McCaughan, S. (2021). Longitudinal study of local authority child and family social workers (Wave 3). Government Social Research, Department for Education. [Longitudinal study of local authority child and family social workers \(Wave 3\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk) (publishing.service.gov.uk)

7 [Social work education and training in England in 2020 to 2021](#)

8 [Approved Mental Health Professionals, Best Interests Assessors and People with Lived Experience](#)

Through our regulation, research, and engagement we share our latest insight and seek to inform policy development with an accurate picture of social work in England. As the government turns to its health and social care reform agenda, we are upholding our role of public protection by contributing this insight and explaining the intense challenges social workers face.

“Social workers undertake important work in very difficult circumstances. The workforce was under strain before the pandemic and the past 20 months has increased the pressure on them, however, they have continued to support children and families throughout the pandemic and national lockdowns. For this I say thank you.”

Charlotte Ramsden,
President of the Association of Directors of Children's
Services



How COVID-19 changed my practice

My role has not been the same since March 2020 and I don't expect it will ever be the same again. It's quite difficult to truly comprehend all that has changed in this time. In some respects, I haven't felt in the right space to reflect on all the changes because change keeps coming.

One of the things that has had the greatest impact on my role in the last 12 months is the lack of resources. This scarcity creates a pressure, not only on the health and social care system but on individuals, families, and communities. Prioritising resources is a constant challenge.

A somewhat surprising consequence of this is that the principles of strengths-based practice have been pushed to the forefront and embedded. Social workers have needed to be creative and think of alternatives to formal service provision.

Over the last 12 months we have also started to see the impact that COVID-19 has had on social workers' wellbeing. At the height of the pandemic, social workers were under immense pressure. However, crisis can often bring out the best in social workers and my team were incredible at rising to any challenge that they faced.

18 months on and although the pressure is slightly different, it is still there, and fatigue is starting to show. I work incredibly hard to show that my team are valued, recognised and supported, as I recognise that this enables them to be the best possible social worker to the individuals they are supporting.

The use of technology has absolutely supported me and my team to connect with individuals, families, communities and other professionals in a much more flexible, enabling and creative way. Although the technology was available before the pandemic, it wasn't embedded in our work, and it may not have been for some time.

Hybrid working and hybrid social work is here to stay, which I feel will continue to bring positives to my role. Nevertheless, the power of human connection and human relationships has always provided a solid foundation for social work practice. A hybrid world needs to support, enhance and enable these relationships and connections to flourish.

Jo Hayton

Social worker, team manager in a hospital and short-term intervention team

Mental health and mental capacity

Once qualified and registered, some social workers choose to develop knowledge and training in specific areas of practice. Further training can be required in a range of advanced and distinct areas of social work. Some of these roles are set out in law and give practitioners specific legal powers and duties.

There are 2 roles in particular that require high-risk decision making around a person's mental health, mental capacity, and associated restrictions to their liberty for treatment or protection. These areas of practice are set out in law⁹ and require an additional qualification. They are the only 2 specific roles that we currently oversee.



⁹ AMHP - Mental Health Act 2007 and Mental Health (Approved Mental Health Professionals)(Approval) Regulations 2008. Mental Capacity Act 2005 (BIA), amended by Mental Capacity (Amendment) Act 2018 to switch to AMCP.

Professional profiles: understanding mental health and mental capacity professionals

1. **Approved mental health professionals (AMHP)** coordinate a person's assessment and admission to hospital if they need to be treated under the Mental Health Act 1983.
2. **Best interests assessors (BIAs)** help to determine whether somebody who cannot give their consent is being deprived of their liberty lawfully. This role will soon be replaced by the new **approved mental capacity professional (AMCP)**.

Approved Mental Health Professional (AMHP)



- I carry out Mental Health Act functions on behalf of a local authority.
- I complete applications for the detention of individuals, also known as sectioning.
- I consider alternatives to admission, involve patients and identify and involve nearest relatives.
- I am either a social worker, occupational therapist, nurse, or practitioner psychologist. 95% of AMHPs are social workers.

Best Interests Assessor (BIA) - soon to be Approved Mental Capacity Professional (AMCP)



- I carry out Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards functions on behalf of a local authority.
- I decide whether a restrictive situation is authorised by the Mental Capacity Act, or whether it amounts to a deprivation of the person's liberty.
- I am either a social worker, occupational therapist, nurse, practitioner psychologist, or speech and language therapist.
- New legislation from 2022 replaces this role with AMCPs. AMCPs will coordinate assessments made by other professionals.

We are developing specific separate education and training standards to approve and monitor courses leading to the award of an approved mental health professional or approved mental capacity professional qualification. Once qualified, social workers on our register will have their entry on the register annotated to show that they are lawfully able to practise in these roles.

As government policy develops around mental health and mental capacity, we expect to be consulting on the education and training standards for approved mental health professionals, and approved mental capacity professionals. Beyond this, we're also considering different areas of social work practice, and speaking with professionals about how we can better support them as they work in complex and high-risk roles.

Adapting my practice during COVID-19

As part of a welfare application to the Court of Protection, I was required to undertake a mental capacity assessment. Face-to-face meetings were not possible, so the biggest challenge was not being able to meet the person, to build that relationship, understand their personality, the way they talk, think and communicate.

Use of technology was difficult as the person was unable to engage with video calling. The other key challenge was relying on health colleagues to support with the assessment. This included having to consider their understanding of the process, their values, communication style, ways of interpreting information and how that might be different from that of a social worker.

I worked hard to overcome these challenges by having open and honest communication with health colleagues and gathering information from a wide range of people, with and around the person. Gathering information wider than assessments before COVID-19 produced a better-informed capacity assessment. This is now an approach I continue to use.

Social worker and best interests assessor in adult social care

Research into mental health and mental capacity

In 2021, we commissioned research into the roles and experiences of approved mental health professionals and best interest assessors. This supported our work to revise education and training standards for approved mental health professionals and create new standards for approved mental capacity professionals.

A team led by researchers at the University of Central Lancashire and Sheffield Hallam University carried out a series of surveys and focus groups with both professionals and people with lived experience of mental health and mental capacity support. They asked questions around the professional identity and influence of those carrying out these roles, as well as the values that underpin the roles, access to learning, support and supervision, and experiences and perceptions of people receiving mental health or mental capacity support.

Researchers found that even though both roles are available to nurses, psychologists and occupational therapists, both were seen by professionals as social work roles. They all agreed that social work was the basis for their approved mental health professional and best interests assessor work and many went into these roles because they wanted to acquire or develop social work professional skills alongside their own 'profession of origin'. Nearly all approved mental health professionals reported that their approved mental health professional lead or service manager was a social worker, reflecting the social work nature of the role.

The research also highlighted some areas where we will consider whether regulatory responses might help. A quarter of approved mental health professionals and half of best interests assessors said that their training did not adequately prepare them for the role. Notably, over a quarter of approved mental health professionals said that they did not receive dedicated supervision to support them to develop within their approved mental health professional role.

People who had experience of Mental Health Act assessments and nearest relatives of people who received mental capacity assessments were also involved in the research. Their views on professionals' conduct and roles, though mixed, were in-depth and insightful. People participating emphasised the importance of a caring and compassionate attitude, treating people as human beings, and allowing people being assessed to tell their stories without imposing prescribed questions on them.

"[Being sectioned] saved my life basically because I'm not in my right mind when I'm doing these sort of things [...] so, thankfully, the last time they didn't even give me the option to go voluntarily [...] looking back it was the right decision, even though I've hated being in hospital."¹⁰

Person with experience of a mental health act assessment

"They always asked me lots of questions and stuff and then they always go off to have a conversation, so I'm rarely involved in the actual discussion."¹¹

Person with experience of a mental health act assessment

10 Page 49 Approved Mental Health Professionals, Best Interests Assessors and People with Lived Experience

11 Page 49 Approved Mental Health Professionals, Best Interests Assessors and People with Lived Experience

This research will inform our work to develop education and training standards for the courses leading to a qualification as an approved mental health professional, and soon, an approved mental capacity professional. We will consult on these standards with the public and profession in line with the government's timeline for the introduction of liberty protection safeguards. We also aim for our research to inform quality conversations about social work, especially lesser known areas of practice, or roles that require high-risk decision making.

Regulating through engagement and co-production

We engage with a wide range of people to build our understanding of social work. We also explain our role as a regulator, our requirements of social workers, and how our work upholds public confidence in the profession. We aim for our approach to represent a modern way of regulating.

In early 2021, we held the first Social Work Week, an online programme of events bringing together speakers, workshops, discussions, debate, and artistic content, around the theme of social work. This year, we also launched our podcast, This Is Social Work, with the first series focusing on the professional standards together with people with lived and learned experiences of social work.

Social Work Week 2021

In March, we held Social Work Week 2021. The first of its kind in England, 6,000 people engaged across 74 online sessions.

The week of events served as an opportunity to learn, connect and engage around the professional standards and the values and principles of social work.

It also provided a platform for us to talk about our work, including the role of the regulator in upholding public confidence, the requirements for social workers to maintain their registration, and areas of our work including research and our First Reflections report.

Our regional engagement team is a team made up of registered social workers who represent us across England. They lead our on the ground engagement with social workers, employers and anyone who has an interest in social work. Working online has meant we've spoken to thousands of social workers, people with lived experience and other stakeholders over the past year.

Co-production has also played a crucial part in the way we work. Our National Advisory Forum is a group of people with lived and learned experience who advise us, as a critical friend, across all aspects of our work. By working with them, we've been able to gather rich feedback on people's experiences and expectations.

In the forum's words: "Co-production is about giving the people who are affected by your work the opportunity to participate in and influence it. When co-production is done well, people should feel heard and like you have listened to their experiences."

Co-production helps us all to have more meaningful impact and help to get things right first time. This in turn supports our primary objectives of protecting the public, alongside promoting and maintaining public confidence in social workers in England.

Outside of our National Advisory Forum, convening groups of people around key areas of our work has meant we've heard about the expectations people have of their social workers. When we spoke with children and young people about our proposals around continuing professional development, they described their ideal social worker being someone who can build relationships, communicate and consistently work with them to achieve positive change in their lives.

"In this unprecedented period of adaptation, coping, emotional and practical challenge, it has been important for BASW to work with Social Work England and other leadership bodies to pursue common goals of great social work, great support, and great recognition. Professions develop through debate, challenge and a collegial spirit of learning. Working in this way across the sector during the pandemic has felt more necessary than ever and is a foundation for the future."

Ruth Allen,
Chief executive of the British Association of Social Workers

Children and young people with lived experience describe the strengths they most value in their social worker:



Our engagement approach means we hear first-hand accounts of the public's experiences and we are able to stay alert to the current conversations in social work. We will continue to develop our approach to engagement and co-production and will consider and reflect on our model in the final Social Work in England report in 2023.

Equality, diversity and inclusion

Promoting social justice and confronting issues of inequality are at the heart of equality, diversity and inclusion. These principles have long been the bedrock of social work professional identity and practice and are set out in the professional standards developed with the sector in early 2019.

Professional standard 1: promote the rights, strengths and wellbeing of people, families and communities

- 1.1 Value each person as an individual, recognising their strengths and abilities.
- 1.2 Respect and promote the human rights, views, wishes and feelings of the people I work with, balancing rights and risks and enabling access to advice, advocacy, support and services.
- 1.3 Work in partnership with people to promote their well-being and achieve best outcomes, recognising them as experts in their own lives.
- 1.4 Value the importance of family and community systems and work in partnership with people to identify and harness the assets of those systems.
- 1.5 Recognise differences across diverse communities and challenge the impact of disadvantage and discrimination on people and their families and communities.
- 1.6 Promote social justice, helping to confront and resolve issues of inequality and inclusion.
- 1.7 Recognise and use responsibly, the power and authority I have when working with people, ensuring that my interventions are always necessary, the least intrusive, proportionate, and in people's best interests.

Over the past year, social workers have continued to apply their skills of reflection and advocacy to anti-racism and equality. Across Social Work Week 2021, we heard powerful accounts of social workers building professional communities to further anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice in social work. Keynote speaker Dr Prospera Tadam encouraged social workers to practise “reflection for action” and to “think about future actions with the intention of improving or changing practice.”

In our own role, we’ve worked in partnership with the Principal Social Worker Children and Families Network and Principal Social Worker Adults Network and What Works for Children’s Social Care on a survey for social workers on anti-racism. We hope to share more about the findings from this work after it is published this year.

Social workers occupy a unique role in society to contribute to national conversations and global action on how to challenge and re-imagine the structures that have acted as barriers to people equally realising their potential. We look forward to engaging with the profession further on anti-racist practice and providing a platform for people to showcase leadership and expertise at our next Social Work Week.

Career long learning

"I'm excited to see the renewed enthusiasm and buzz around continuing professional development (CPD). I've enjoyed hearing social workers speak passionately and creatively about their learning and how important they see their CPD to their sense of professional identity."

Colum Conway
Chief Executive
Social Work England



Career long learning

After registering, social workers maintain their knowledge and skills throughout their career to make sure they continue to meet the professional standards. This is known as continuing professional development (CPD). We require all social workers to record CPD in their Social Work England online accounts. This is part of the annual registration renewal process and ensures social workers demonstrate their ongoing fitness to practise. We encourage social workers to maintain their learning and development by recording CPD throughout the year.

We developed our approach to CPD in consultation with the public and the profession. It emphasises the importance of reflection, and asks social workers to describe the impact of the learning on their practice. CPD can be any activity that the social worker feels would benefit them and their practice. Social workers are encouraged to ask for feedback and often discuss their learning needs in a supervision setting where they have dedicated time to discuss their work with a peer or manager.

Our approach aims to raise the profile of CPD and encourages learning that supports professionals to improve their practice, and ultimately provide better support to people they work with. This is part of our role to uphold safe practice in social work and to promote and maintain public confidence in the profession.

In this section we share what we've learned from our approach to CPD, how we've used the insight we've gathered from our first review exercises, and how we plan to report on CPD recording in the future.



A year of CPD

For the registration year 2020 to 2021, we asked social workers to record at least one piece of CPD in their online account. At the end of November 2021, those on the register had, between them, uploaded 205,432 pieces of CPD. This is an average of 2.2 pieces of CPD per social worker.

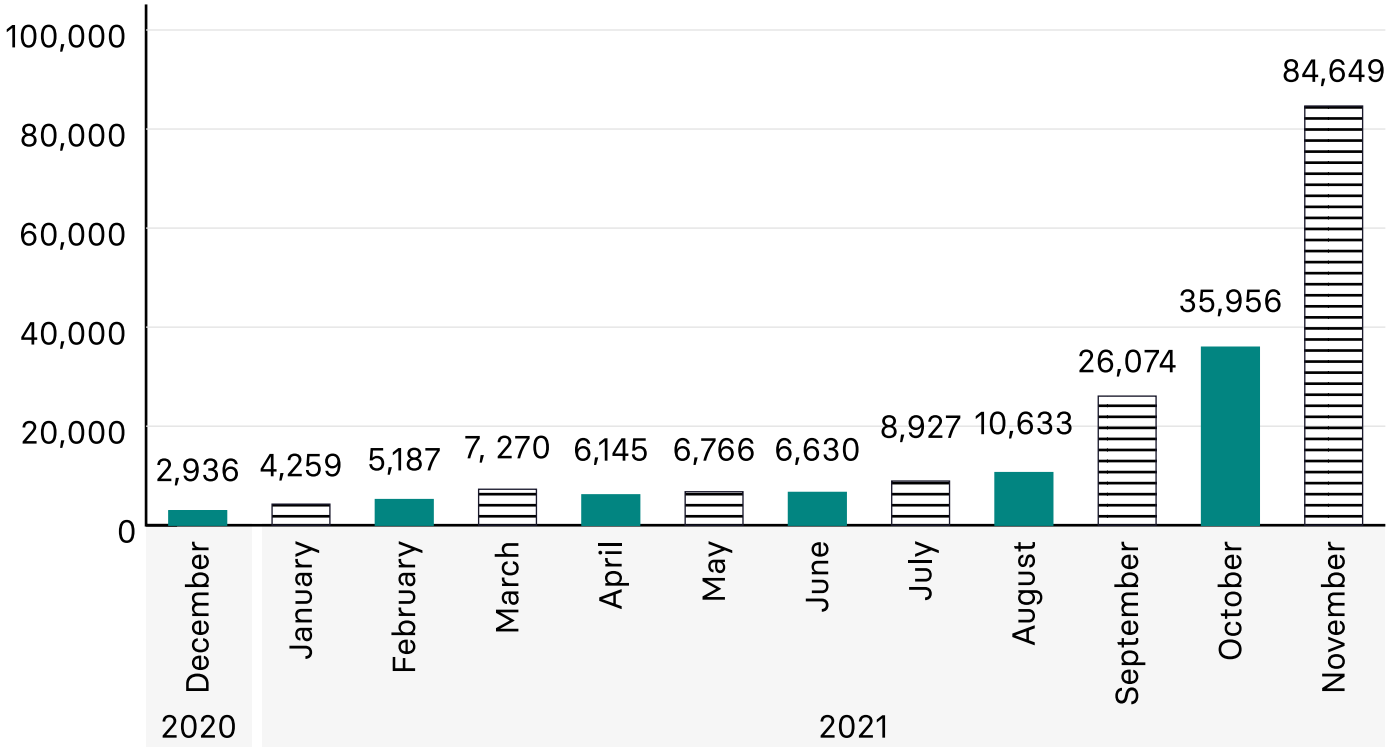
205,432

individual pieces of CPD recorded

2.2

pieces of CPD on average

Graph 7: Number of pieces of CPD recorded by month



What we're learning

CPD review

Part of our work in assuring the public's confidence in social workers is to review a selection of CPD recorded with us. We employ professional and lay CPD assessors who independently review a 2.5% sample of CPD records every year. They review these records to make sure they meet our requirements, and provide feedback and insight on how social workers keep their practice up to date.

Our approach means that we don't measure learning in hours or points. We believe that social workers are best placed to determine their own learning needs in conversation with their peers, managers, and in supervision. We encourage them to think creatively about their learning, and to reflect on topics and experiences that are important and relevant to their practice.

CPD could include anything, from learning from articles, podcasts and webinars to project work, training courses, or reviewing their own practice in a particular area. It could also relate to work completed through programmes such as the assessed and supported year in employment. We want social workers to see the CPD opportunities all around them, including things they're already doing in their role.

From February to March 2021, CPD assessors reviewed the CPD records of 2,205 social workers. They gave an 'accepted' outcome to 2,116 social workers (96%) and an 'advice given' outcome to 89 social workers (4%).

2,205

**social workers' CPD
records assessed**

2,116

**social workers'
CPD records accepted**

89

**social workers
given advice**

From our review of CPD records, the most notable takeaway was the expertise and complexity of social work practice and the difficult circumstances that many social workers face in their work. What also stood out was the great variety of CPD social workers recorded, as well as the diversity in approaches to reflection and describing impact.

Training courses were the most common type of learning activity recorded as CPD. Other common areas of learning included reflections on working during a pandemic, working remotely, changes to policies and procedures, and reflections on cases. There was a variety in both the number of records per social worker, and the length of individual pieces.

Where we asked social workers to demonstrate the relevance of their learning to their practice, most were able to describe the relevance to social work, but it was less clear how relevant the learning was to their specific role. Generally, the impact of learning on practice was also less well-evidenced and social workers often missed the link to how the learning led to them doing things differently.

5 minutes with a CPD assessor

1. What does an assessor do?

As a CPD assessor, my role is to ensure that CPD entries made by social workers meet the requirements and are relevant to social work practice. Where requirements are not satisfied, we give written advice to the social worker to outline how they could be achieved and recorded in future years. I work alongside other assessors. As a group, we have a mix of social work and non-social work backgrounds, so we have a balance of expertise.

2. Why is CPD important?

CPD is fundamental to career-long learning. It underpins a social worker's continued competence and fitness to practise and is vital to practising safely and in a way that supports the public's confidence in the profession.

Social work is a constantly changing field and keeping up with changes, including legislation, policy and research is essential. It can also help social workers feel confident in their own practice. There is always room for improvement, and as assessors, we want to see social work be the very best it can be.

3. Why do we place an emphasis on reflection?

Reflection goes beyond asking a social worker to list their skills, knowledge and experience. It draws upon self-awareness and a social worker's ability to critically appraise their approach to judgements, decisions, and interventions. An emphasis on reflection asks social workers to think carefully about the link between the learning activity and their practice. This is particularly helpful for understanding how personal perspectives, experiences and values impact on decision making.

4. How could social workers improve how they reflect?

Some of the richest examples of CPD and reflection I saw last year were those where a social worker had reflected on how an everyday interaction had impacted on their practice and described the changes they made as a result. I also saw some great instances of social workers using feedback from people with lived experience. It served as a powerful reminder of the pivotal role that social workers play, and the often critical impact of an intervention on people's lives.

5. What tips would assessors give social workers when recording their CPD?

- Try to take a few moments at the end of each day or week to think about the experiences and challenges you have faced.
- Be willing to engage with others, listen to feedback, and have the courage to ask regularly whether the approach adopted to a particular case, event, or person, resulted in the best outcome for people.
- Record regularly and remember that examples from your everyday practice and life are just as relevant as training courses.
- Tell a story but keep it succinct - context is useful but remember to write from your perspective and tell us about the role you played and how you have reflected on this activity.
- Re-read your entry before submitting it - have you clearly recorded what the learning activity was and how it impacted on your practice?

The assessors felt that social workers generally found it easier to describe the impact of a training course on their practice, but more difficult to describe the impact of a case they worked on. They also found the clearest reflections were those where the social worker could articulate the benefits of their learning to their practice as well as the people they supported.

Insights from our research

In October 2020, we commissioned YouGov to help us learn more about the experiences of social workers carrying out CPD in the first year of our regulation. We published the findings from the research on our website in May 2021.

The research found that social workers generally hold positive attitudes towards CPD. Around 8 in 10 of the participants said they see the value in CPD (83%) and feel it is vital to protect the integrity of the profession (77%). Social workers reported doing CPD to keep their knowledge fresh and keep up to date with the changes that affect them and people they support.

“I am a real fan of developing myself. My peers and users benefit from it as well. It is a win-win for them. You need to update yourself – you could be wrong if not.”¹²

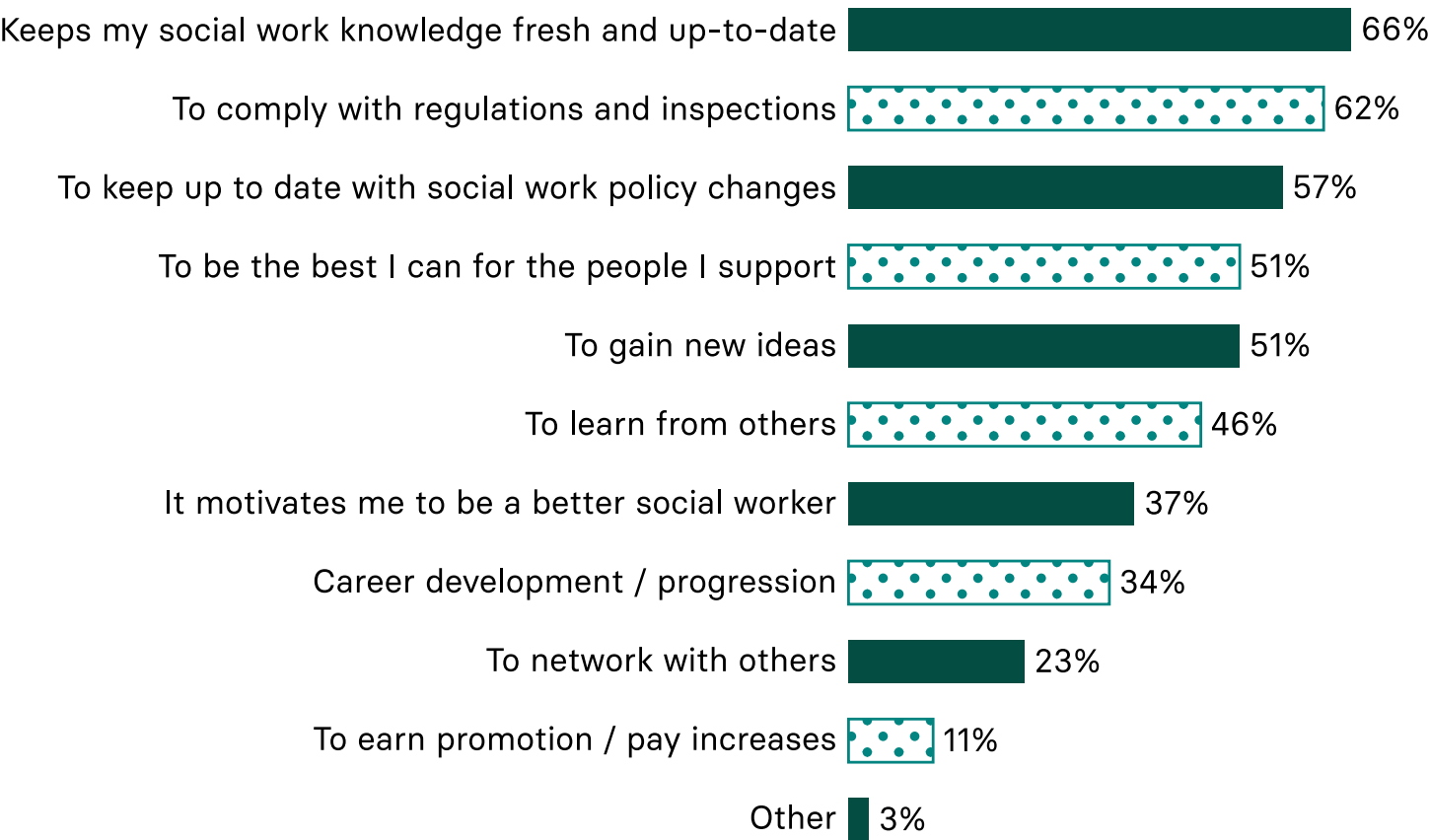
Social worker during interview



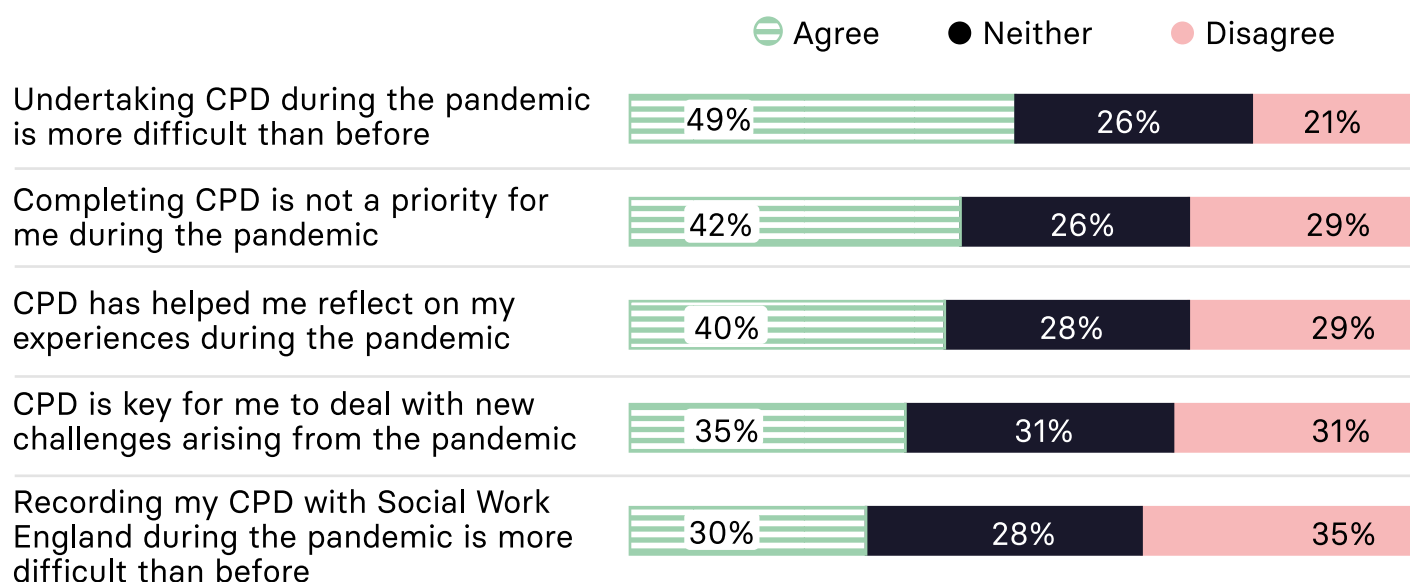
¹² Social Work and Continuing Professional Development

The most common type of CPD reported by respondents was online learning and training courses, which corroborates what we saw in the records we reviewed. Social workers were largely positive about the CPD that they had completed over the past 12 months, with 71% considering it accessible, 69% considering it useful, and 67% considering it relevant. They particularly valued opportunities relevant to their day-to-day roles and those that helped them to improve their practice and the support they provide to people.

Graph 8: Motivations to undertake CPD



Graph 9: Agreement around CPD during COVID-19



On CPD in the workplace, some social workers noted that support for CPD only went as far as necessary to meet minimum requirements for practice. Many also cited a lack of time in work hours as the biggest barrier to completing CPD (60%) and around a fifth (18%) felt that their organisation didn't provide any support at all.

Many social workers reported challenges to completing CPD as a result of the pandemic, and some did not see recording CPD as a priority during the pandemic (40%), though respondents were largely positive about the learning they had undertaken. By undertaking reflection on COVID-19 and recording this as part of their CPD, some social workers were able to consider the challenges of new and different ways of working (35%).

Why my social worker's CPD is important to me

My youngest son and I have, for over a decade, required the services of local authority social workers. My son is diagnosed with severe global development delay, severe learning disability, autism and articulation disorder. He is due to turn 18 in November.

The definition of transition to me as the primary carer and when supporting my son's decision making is not isolated to just age factors, (transitioning from child services to adult services for example), but it encompasses many other factors in times of change, relating to varying personal or professional circumstances.

We have required support during change when moving house, the transition from county to county has at times been rather complicated as not each county works within the same structure and framework. During this 6-year period we have had far in excess of 10 social workers and the change in social workers also brings transitional factors that require close consideration.

During this time, it has been critical to us as a family to have a well-resourced and informative social worker. I have appreciated the social workers that have kept abreast and up to date with the employment development training programmes available to them. Also, those who have been well informed with regards to the demands and hurdles that are due to be endured by us as the end user and those that seek guidance and have a strong professional support network available to them. Those individuals have made some of the most challenging transitions much clearer and have taken concerns and worries out of the process.

Natalie McNicholas,
Carer

In line with our recent consultation on CPD, as of December 2021 we increased the number of required CPD records to a minimum of 2 and require social workers to reflect on their learning with a manager or peer for at least one of those pieces. In the future, we will still require social workers to complete 2 pieces of CPD, one of which will be based around a broad theme identified by us. This gives some direction to social workers on areas of practice to focus their learning, while maintaining flexibility so professionals can continue to pursue the learning that's right for them.

Looking ahead, we want to support a culture of regular reflective learning and recording. There are great examples of social workers and employers thinking creatively about CPD, but we recognise that a consistent area of feedback is the lack of support social workers receive from their employers. While we have no regulatory relationship with employers of social workers, we continue to share this feedback with our partners, particularly the Local Government Association, as they set standards for social work employers.

Movements such as Black Lives Matter and the Me Too movement sparked important conversations among social workers about their role in society, how the issues raised affect the people they support, and how they may advocate for change.



We have seen this translate into the learning, reflection, and recording social workers undertake as CPD. Social workers want to understand and challenge their biases, recognising that for people-centred practice, it is key to recognise the person with lived experience as an individual in their own right and not to impose their own value judgement into the decision-making.

“This CPD helped to consolidate my knowledge and understanding of socio-economic differences across the country, the ways in which minority ethnic groups, women and others can face discrimination.”¹³

Social worker, reflection on CPD

Seeing social workers consider global events in their CPD is supported by the research we commissioned. This found that almost half of participants (48%) had undertaken CPD related to equality, diversity and inclusion. Many described an interest in broadening their understanding of institutional racism and other forms of discrimination.

How I create space for CPD

As a manager of social workers, I try to ensure that my team are given time to complete their CPD. One way I do this is by scheduling bi-monthly group learning sessions. During those sessions social workers start completing their online CPD log.

As a group, the team identify their learning needs and each member of the team takes turns in preparing for the session and leading the discussion. We’ve covered topics like sibling sexual abuse, motivational interviewing techniques, helping children to deal with COVID-19 anxiety, and leadership and organisational skills. So, a real mix.

Feedback from social workers is that having this time during the day, scheduled in their calendar, meant that their CPD was factored into their time throughout the year and they spoke positively about the learning opportunities they were exposed to as a part of the group.

Social work manager, looked after children’s team

13 Social Work and Continuing Professional Development

Investigating concerns

"Investigating a concern about a social worker's fitness to practise is a serious undertaking. We consider whether a social worker's conduct has fallen below the professional standards, whether they risk putting people in harm's way, or whether they have, or may, damage public confidence in the social work profession."

Jonathan Dillon
Executive Director of Fitness to Practise
Social Work England



Investigating concerns

We investigate concerns about the conduct, competence and health of social workers, often referred to as a social worker's fitness to practise. This is an important part of our role in responding to risks to the health, safety and wellbeing of the public, and to upholding the public's confidence in social work. A small percentage of all social workers are subject to fitness to practise investigations.

The nature of social work means that investigating concerns can be complex. Social workers often support people, families and communities at vulnerable times in their lives. They may not ask for the support of a social worker, consent to it, or agree with the recommendations and decisions that a social worker makes. In these circumstances, people will often disagree with a social worker's professional decision or will not welcome the interventions required. This may create conflict and leave people feeling aggrieved, but such circumstances do not ordinarily amount to concerns about a social worker's fitness to practise.

As the specialist regulator, we investigate serious concerns about the personal conduct, capability, health and competence of social workers that could put people at significant risk of harm or damage public confidence in the social work profession. To do this, we have modern powers and an effective and proportionate approach that consists of three broad areas: triage, investigations, and hearings.

Over our second year, we've continued to communicate our approach to fitness to practise to the public and the profession. We've also built a better understanding of the types of concerns we receive about social workers, where we may need to respond to risks in practice, and how members of the public engage with us as the regulator.



Understanding fitness to practise

Triage

Anyone can raise a concern to us about a social worker's fitness to practise. However, not all the concerns we receive proceed to a full investigation. Our triage team carefully consider all the information that the person who raised the concern has given to us. When applying the triage test, we consider a number of factors to decide whether or not we should investigate the concerns, including:

- the seriousness of the concern;
- whether there is likely to be sufficient evidence to support the concern;
- whether the incident is isolated or repeated;
- whether there has been a breach of established standards or guidance;
- what action has been taken already to address the concern, including whether a social worker has taken any steps to remediate; and
- any outcomes of any previous regulatory investigations.

Over the past year, we received 2,328 concerns about social workers. Of those that have been triaged, 55% did not meet the triage test and the rest were opened as a case for investigation. If a case passes the triage test it does not mean that we have decided that the concerns have been proved or that the social worker's fitness to practise is impaired, we have simply found that the concern meets the requirements for investigation. Some cases may not progress past triage where it is found that concerns may be more appropriately investigated by another body.

Investigation

An investigation is a more detailed enquiry into a concern once it passes our triage stage. When an investigation is opened, the social worker is told about the concern and is given an opportunity to respond and provide information to assist the investigator.

Investigators are impartial. They work to gather all the relevant information to the concern and support the people involved. Wherever possible they speak regularly with the social worker or their representative, to ensure they understand the process and possible outcomes.

The role of case examiners

Once a case has been investigated, the evidence obtained and any representations provided by the social worker are referred to our case examiners. The case examiner team is made up of both lay (non-social workers) and professional case examiners (registered and practising social workers).

If the case examiners decide that there is a realistic prospect that a social worker's fitness to practise is impaired, they will then decide whether it is in the public interest for the case to progress to a hearing. If they decide that there is not a public interest in referring the case to a hearing, the case examiners consider whether the case can be resolved by way of accepted disposal.

'Accepted disposal' refers to our ability to dispose of a case in circumstances where the social worker accepts that their fitness to practise is impaired and any sanctions, and demonstrates that they have taken measures to improve their practice. This is designed to avoid unnecessary hearings where a social worker agrees with the resolution and where public protection has been upheld. Not all cases are suitable for accepted disposal and contested or very serious cases will almost always be referred to a hearing.



We have more powers available to us than counterparts in the wider regulatory sector, and the government are now considering extending these powers to the other healthcare regulators as part of its regulatory reform agenda.

Hearings

The most serious cases move from an investigation to a hearing. A case can progress to a hearing either because of the seriousness of the concern, or because a hearing is required to resolve disputes about the facts being alleged.

If we receive information that indicates that a social worker may pose an immediate risk to the public, to themselves, or where there are other public interest reasons we will apply for an interim order. An interim order can prevent a social worker from practising, or place limits on their practice until the investigation is concluded and appropriate action taken.

At a hearing an independent panel of adjudicators will consider the facts of an allegation. Where sanctions are imposed it is the minimum necessary to protect the public, and the wider public interest. At a hearing, the adjudicators may decide to:

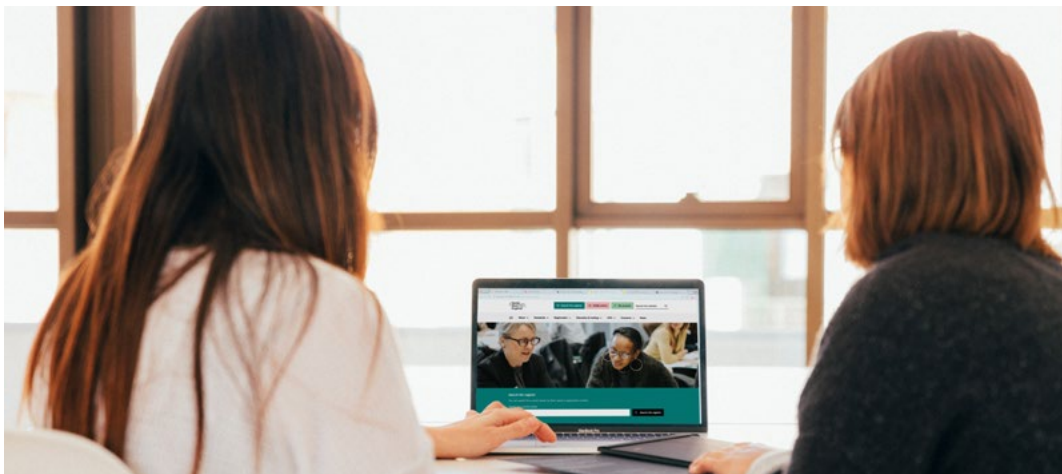
- take no further action,
- issue advice or a warning,
- impose conditions on a social worker's practice for up to 3 years,
- suspend a social worker's registration for up to 3 years, or
- remove a social worker from the register

Case review

We monitor suspended social workers and social workers with conditions of practice. This includes where social workers have accepted that their fitness to practise is impaired and agreed to the sanctions proposed by case examiners or when an order has been imposed by our adjudicators.

Reviews will be arranged shortly before the condition or suspension orders are due to expire. The purpose of a review is to decide whether the concerns which led to the condition or suspension order have been addressed and whether the social worker's fitness to practise is still impaired. At a review, sanctions are either removed, amended, extended, or changed to a different sanction.

If an order is removed, the social worker can return to unrestricted practice. If it is decided at a review that the social worker is still not fit to practise without restriction, the existing order may be extended, amended or replaced with a different sanction. In circumstances where there is evidence that the order is not being complied with or other concerns have arisen, we will seek an early review.



What we've learned from our work

Our work to investigate and take action where there are serious concerns about social worker's fitness to practise provides us with insight into the profession, and into the public's experiences of social work. Here we share what we have learned from our work and build on the findings we shared in our first interim report.

Over our second year the highest source of concerns we received came from members of the public, followed by employer, and self-referral. Concerns raised to us included themes of poor or inappropriate communication (27.4%), dishonesty (15.9%) or safeguarding concerns (12.3%).

Table 2: referrals by type

Referral type	% split
Member of the public	64.9%
Employer	20.6%
Self-referral	7.5%
Other social worker	4.7%
Other agency	2.2%

Table 3: fitness to practise concerns by type

Fitness to practise concern by type	% split
Poor or Inappropriate communication	27.4%
Dishonesty	15.9%
Safeguarding concerns	12.3%
Other	11.9%
Court proceedings	8.1%
Record keeping	8.0%
Professional boundaries	7.9%
Violent or abusive conduct	3.3%
Conviction	1.8%
Health (other)	1.4%
Health (substance abuse)	1.0%
Sexual misconduct	1.0%

In our first interim report, we noted that we were receiving concerns at a higher rate than we anticipated. This trend has continued throughout our second year. Since taking over as the regulator, we have received around 35% more referrals than we anticipated based on the number of concerns reported to our predecessor, the Health and Care Professions Council.

We want to understand the increase in referrals, which are, in the majority, made up of direct referrals from members of the public and cannot be fully explained by any one cause, such as COVID-19.

Engagement from the public and from people who have direct involvement with social workers is important and enables us to respond swiftly to matters of public protection. However, there are concerns that are referred to us that do not relate to an individual social worker's fitness to practise. This has resulted in a high proportion of referrals not being carried forward to an investigation.

We have taken measures to make clear the kinds of concerns we are able to investigate by making changes to our website and our advice when people contact us. But we also want to better understand why we are seeing such a high referral rate from members of the public. We're looking closer at our referrals and working with research partners to find out more about the experiences of the public in raising concerns about social workers.



Concerns in focus: court proceedings

We regularly receive concerns, particularly from members of the public, in relation to matters that have been, or are currently undergoing court proceedings. This is most often in relation to social workers involved in cases concerning children and their families.

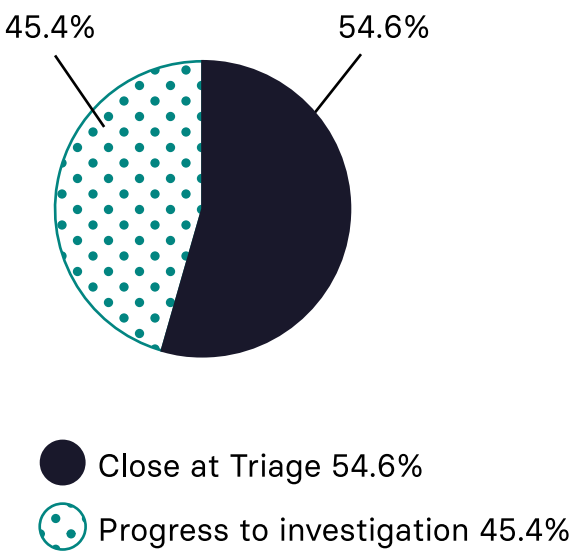
Social workers in court settings represent the interests of the person or people they are supporting. While they may work with others, including the family and community members in a person's life, they work in the best interests of that individual. This means that their testimony can sometimes conflict with the views, wishes and accounts of the people around them, including parents, relatives and other people close to an individual.

We continue to encourage social workers to clearly communicate their role and what that entails. They should explain that even though they may work with several people in a person's life, they represent the needs and best interests of the person they are supporting, including in court settings. For members of the public who have concerns about a social worker, we encourage them to raise this at the earliest opportunity with the court. We cannot reverse a decision made by the courts.

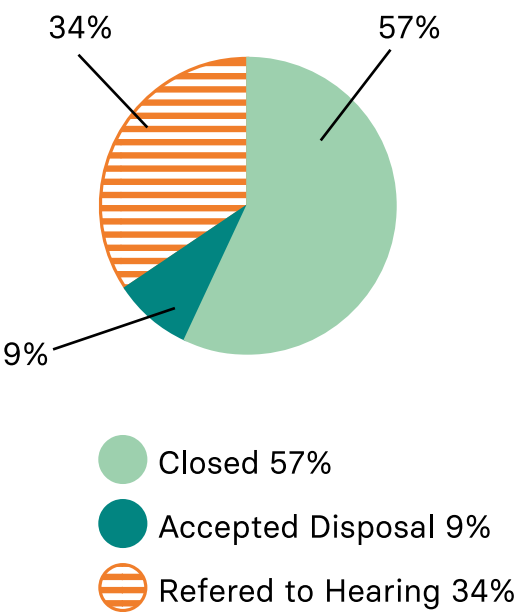
If anyone has a concern about a social worker's fitness to practise and would like to understand whether this may be suitable for regulatory investigation, please see our guidance on [how to raise a concern](#). We will continue to develop our online guidance to better inform public expectations of us as the regulator in cases relating to court proceedings.

Over the past year, we have received 2,328 referrals, of which 45.4% progressed to investigation. 30% of those have been referred to the case examiners, 26% of which have received a decision. Of those cases that have received a decision, 57% were closed, 34% were referred to a hearing and 9% were resolved through accepted disposal.

Graph 10: Cases closed at triage vs those progressed to investigation



Graph 11: Case examiner decisions



5 minutes with a case examiner

1. What does a case examiner do?

We are independent decision makers. At the end of each investigation, 2 case examiners are asked to decide whether there is a realistic prospect of our adjudicators finding the social worker's fitness to practise impaired. We always work in pairs – one is a practising social worker, the other is a lay person.

2. What background do case examiners have?

Currently 11 of our 18 case examiners are practising social workers. Alongside their work with Social Work England, they all work across the country in a variety of different settings, including frontline roles. Our 7 lay case examiners joined us with experience from decision-making roles in ombudsman services, higher education, police conduct, and other regulatory bodies.

3. What decisions can you make?

Our role is to ensure that cases only progress to a hearing where it is necessary for the adjudicators to consider them. This may be to do with public confidence in the profession, or to uphold the professional standards. Where we find there's no realistic prospect of the adjudicators finding a social worker's practice to be impaired, we can close the case. Where there is a realistic prospect, we assess whether a hearing is necessary. Where it isn't necessary, we can seek to resolve the case by mutually agreeing with the social worker a finding of impairment, and a suitable sanction.

4. How are your decisions overseen?

Our decisions are subject to a quality assurance process. A sample are reviewed at our decision review group. The review group includes people with lived experience of social work, a representative from another regulator, our regional engagement team, and other regulatory staff. The review group generates learning for the case examiner team, which is delivered at a monthly workshop.

Lay case examiner

Over the course of 2021, we continued to hold hearings remotely. We have held 812 hearings overall.

Table 4: Final hearings by type

Type of hearing	Number of cases	Number of cases (%)
Interim order application	123	15%
Interim order review	501	62%
Final hearing	127	16%
Substantive order review	61	8%

Table 5: Final hearings outcomes by type

Outcome	Number of cases (%)
Impaired - No further action	3%
No further action	18%
No impairment - Advice or Warning	5%
Advice or warning	10%
Conditions of practice order	8%
Suspension order	34%
Removal order	22%



Involving people with lived experience in our work

Over the past year, we have deepened the involvement of people who have lived and learned experience of social work in our fitness to practise activity. We have brought our National Advisory Forum closer to our thinking on the future of our approach and also embedded members in our quality assurance measures, such as the decision review group.

The decision review group is not involved in the independent decision making of case examiners or the hearings panels but provides scrutiny of a targeted sample of decisions across the 3 stages of the fitness to practise process: triage, case examination and hearings. It provides enhanced oversight of high risk decisions by consistently testing and reviewing performance, as well as identifying and achieving best practice. The group does not seek to take any action that would undermine or jeopardise the independence of decision makers at the statutory decision stage and seeks to improve our handling of concerns.



My role in the decision review group

As someone with lived experience of social work, it is important that people like me are involved in reviewing decisions. People with lived experience are often left out of these important conversations and forums.

The review group at Social Work England looks at the fitness to practise cases that have been completed. It looks at all the decisions made in relation to the case and thinks about whether the decisions are correct. Within this process, people with lived experience contribute as equal members.

Fitness to practise is really important. Not only does it ensure that we have a social work profession that is safe, but that it is able to support people to achieve really good outcomes and live their best lives. As someone that has raised a fitness to practise concern myself and been very frustrated with the process, it was really refreshing to know that Social Work England are ensuring the voice of people with lived experience are involved in their processes. What we share is taken on board as equally valid as any other contributing member of the panel.

For me, the opportunity to be involved in this work has been life changing as I'm always bringing to the space the reminder that behind every process there is an individual person with feelings and emotions. We need to look at the human being behind every single decision made. When I became a member of the National Advisory Forum, I was unsure of the role that people like myself would play in the fitness to practise process. Knowing that people like me are involved I feel much more reassured that Social Work England are trying to get this right.

Ultimately knowing that people with lived experience are working alongside social workers to look at the fitness to practise process gives me a sense that we're all trying to work in a way that really ensures that the social work profession is fit for supporting people. We are central to the whole reason why fitness to practise exists in the first place. We should have a voice at the table.

Ensuring that social workers themselves are providing high-quality support through the lens of fitness to practise is an integral part of how we help those with lived experience achieve their outcomes and maintain public confidence in the social work profession.

Isaac Samuels

Member of the National Advisory Forum and decision review group

Learning more about fitness to practise

In 2021, we commissioned the research organisation Woodnewton to speak with members of the public about their experience in making local complaints about a social worker, as well as any engagement they've had with Social Work England.

This research aimed to help us develop our understanding around the public's expectations and perceptions of our role so we might better understand why members of the public were raising a higher than anticipated number of referrals with us. This research is due to be completed in early 2022 and we will use the findings to inform the way we explain our statutory responsibilities and make improvements to the way anyone can raise a concern with us online.

We also want to learn more about how we might improve communication and information-sharing with the appropriate parties during a fitness to practise investigation. Over the past year, our regional engagement team have developed a virtual fitness to practise network in collaboration with local authorities, and employers of social workers.

The aim of this work is to establish a single point of contact in each local authority or organisation who will manage all communication or establish the best arrangements for each fitness to practise concern. We also hope to establish regular meetings where we will have structured communication, share case studies and examples of collaborative working, and review improvements.

Once established, we hope this network will provide us with a forum for hearing from the profession about their ongoing understanding and experience of fitness to practise. The network will also act as a reference group if we need input from employers into fitness to practise activity.



Greater Manchester focus group

In October, our regional engagement team held a focus group with staff from the 10 Greater Manchester local authorities and other organisations including the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS).

The group explored local fitness to practise issues and the organisations' experiences of dealing with concerns and working with Social Work England. The group discussed the nature of the fitness to practise concerns that we receive and how people are directed to us. We were keen to hear from local authorities and other employers to understand how we can work together to continue to improve our work in the best interests of everyone involved.

This focus group is key to establishing a collaborative approach to improving our fitness to practise processes, ensuring that members of the public are well informed and understand the role of the regulator. It's also the basis for a network in which to identify areas of practice improvement, and to proactively resolve issues at a local level wherever it is suitable to do so.

How people experience our work differently

In our first interim report, we explained that through our inherited work and our own experience of regulating, we are working to identify the determinants of how different groups of people are referred to the regulator.

To better understand the true picture of representation in the referrals we receive and in our inherited caseload, we need to improve our data. At the point of our launch, the demographic data we held about social workers in England was limited.

In 2021, we asked all social workers renewing their registration to complete diversity monitoring data. This data helps us understand where and how people may experience our work differently, including where our processes and systems could cause inequality or disadvantage. This isn't mandatory, so we recognise that it may take some time to accumulate the data that will enable us to interrogate our fitness to practise caseload. In doing this, we will build a more accurate and detailed understanding of the impact of fitness to practise on social workers with protected characteristics and those from minority backgrounds.

We also recognise that bias, prejudice and discrimination can sometimes play a role in concerns raised about social workers. We have developed guidance on our website to advise those raising concerns about social workers to carefully consider whether their concerns are fair and unbiased. We are also improving the design of our concerns-raising function online and are working to embed our guidance and prompts to those raising concerns.



Looking to our Social Work in England report in 2023

This second interim report is an important opportunity for us to share the learning from our second year of regulation. With thanks to those who have contributed, we've also been able to share the experiences of social workers and people with lived experience to provide a snapshot of social work in 2021.

The data we've provided gives an update on the figures we shared in our first report, and helps to demonstrate the progress we've made in a year where social workers have continued to respond to the crisis of the pandemic. What it has shown is the strength and resilience of social workers across England and the value of the profession to society.

Being able to reflect on our experiences over our second year has been invaluable to us. We will now look to build on that knowledge to gain an ever broader and deeper understanding of social work. This will then be shared in our Social Work in England report in 2023.

We look forward to working with professionals and people with lived and learned experience of social work to inform the final report. As our first major publication on the state of social work since our launch, we hope it will be an important contribution to a growing conversation about social work in England and inform quality decision making about the profession.

The final report will also come at a time when we will be reflecting on our first 3 years as the regulator and setting our ambition for the future in our next corporate strategy. All of which contributes towards our ultimate aim of ensuring that people receive the best possible support whenever they might need it in life.

