

Social work in England: State of the nation 2023



**Social
Work** 
England

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Foreword

Social workers support millions of people to improve their chances in life. They work in a vast range of settings in advisory, educational, safeguarding and protection, and direct support roles – helping to protect vulnerable people from harm or abuse and supporting people to live independently. Anyone could need a social worker in their life at any time.

Social Work England has been the specialist regulator of social work in England since 2 December 2019. In this time, we have introduced new professional standards, strengthened the relationship between regulation and education and training, and developed an in-depth understanding of the profession through engagement with the sector and people with lived experience. Since our inception we have faced, and continue to live through, unpredicted and difficult challenges such as the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and a rising cost of living crisis. Millions of people were already facing wide-ranging challenges before these crises, and social workers have been at the forefront, supporting those who need it.

We have also seen heightened movements for meaningful equality in society. The social work profession, with its values and principles of anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice, is uniquely placed to lead the way in promoting equality in all aspects of society. These global events have been the backdrop to our work and that of the social work profession. As such, they have presented significant and specific challenges which are referenced in this report.

Through our regulatory activities, engagement, research and discussions we have learned a lot about the sector, profession and people with lived experience. Living by our values, we are pleased to share our learning in this state of the nation report. The report aims to:

- reinforce the vital role of social work in society
- highlight the role and value of regulation in social work for public protection
- consider the challenges the sector must now collectively address.

The chapter on learning to be a social worker looks at the education and training of social workers. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the way students learned as courses changed and remote learning and placements became the norm. Students faced challenges of self-isolation and missed out on face-to-face interactions that have always been at the centre of social work. Though the government no longer classes the pandemic as an emergency, some of these challenges remain.

We also consider the future of social work education and training. The report sets out some of our learning from inspecting and approving social work training programmes. This includes the quality of teaching and practice based learning, and how students are equipped with the knowledge, skills, behaviours and values to be ready for professional practice.

The chapter on social workers in England highlights the early challenges practising social workers felt at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and how they have adapted the way in which they practise social work.

Despite the emergency response to the pandemic being over, the sector continues to feel the impact. High demand for health and care services, a rising complexity of needs and increases in vacancies continues to put pressure on a system that was already stretched. With employers finding it difficult to recruit and retain permanent staff, there has been an increased reliance on agency social workers. Although social workers are adapting the ways in which they deliver social work, these pressures can undermine the stability of relationships which is at the heart of good social work practice, and can have a direct bearing on people's care.

It is important for us to consider the impact that these issues have on our ability to act as the regulator and ultimately, protect the public. Without shared action among all in the social care system, with considered and innovative national and local solutions delivered by a stable and high-quality workforce, services will be further strained, and people will be at greater risk of harm.

The chapter on upholding the professional standards highlights the importance of professional standards in ensuring safe and effective practice, and how they are the basis for regulating on behalf of the public. Failure to do so can result in concerns being raised with us about a social worker's fitness to practise. The number of social workers that pass through any part of the fitness to practise process is proportionally very small compared to the number of all social workers registered with us. In this report, we share further insights of our learning through the fitness to practise process.

Finally, **the chapter on career-long learning** looks at how social workers are keeping their practice up to date, looking for opportunities to enhance and learn skills, and staying abreast of developments and best practice in their field. Social workers continue to learn throughout their careers, from newly qualified to experienced social workers that have been practising for many years.

This important report enables us to share some of our key learning with everyone with an interest in social work, including those with lived and learned experience of social work. We hope that it starts conversations, enhances collaboration, leads to action to continuously improve standards and ultimately helps to create a stronger social work system in England. A system that serves to protect the public and promotes the rights, strengths and outcomes for people.



Colum Conway
Chief Executive,
Social Work England

Thank you to the profession

We want social work to be the best profession it can be. We believe in the power of collaboration and co-production to help achieve this goal. Co-production is about giving people who are affected by our work the opportunity to participate in and influence our work. When co-production is done well, people should feel heard and that we have listened to their experiences.

Our National Advisory Forum is a group of people with lived and learned experience of social work. They act as a critical friend to support us in our role as the regulator of social workers in England.

A thank you from the National Advisory Forum

The co-production journey of the forum did not begin when it was formed in 2020; it started with a group of individuals from different areas, backgrounds, ethnicities, faiths, genders and ages – all with a personal experience of social work. These personal experiences encompass the breadth of social work, from:

- people living with physical disabilities
- mothers caring for children with additional needs
- individuals that have experienced mental health challenges
- people that have experienced the foster care system or have been adopted, and
- those experiencing social work through and with others in their lives.

We have all heard feedback around the professional identity of social work and the heaviness of many of the narratives, particularly in the context of an extraordinarily challenging few years. We felt it was important to acknowledge the good practice that takes place and share our words of encouragement for the years ahead.

Although social work in its very nature can be polarising for the people that receive it, we can all reflect on positive effects, instances or examples of social work that we have witnessed or received. Some have shared that social work has changed or saved their lives. When reflecting on our own lived experiences of social work the following was shared:

"Social work services have knocked on my door at various stages, both as a child and then as an adult when my own mental health was declining. I was overwhelmed by my mind and my circumstances of parenting 4 children, with the added complexities of the needs of children with disabilities. The intervention, whilst I didn't see it at the time, gave me strength, guidance and confidence in myself as a person and as a parent."

"One of the most positive impacts of social work in my life was moving from supported living into my own flat. My social worker at the time ensured a care plan was in place and worked with me to make the move as smooth as possible. They even visited me a couple of days after I'd moved! I now feel I am more independent, and I have more control over my life."

"When I was 13 years old, I had a social worker who read my case file background and picked up on the fact that no life story work had been completed with me. With great encouragement he supported me to visit places and we photographed them. He obtained my birth certificate and I found out that I had been celebrating my birthday on the wrong date. He also told me I had a brother who was also in care. It was this social worker's persistence and willingness to challenge that ensured I had the information I had a right to. It's meant a lot to me that they did this because although I was not ready to meet my brother at the time, I now have a significant relationship with him and his children."

As a forum comprising both lived and learned experience of social work, when reflecting on social work the following was shared by a social worker in the forum:

"Social work can be a tough job. At times the way social work and social workers are portrayed can make that tough job even tougher. However, tens of thousands of us make a positive, significant and lasting difference to the lives of people every single day in social work practice. It is fair to say that this often goes unreported, but we know from our experience as practitioners that it does not go unnoticed. The people we meet very often thank us for our support. They thank us for helping them to achieve the things that matter to them. And they thank us for our dedication, determination and willingness to go the extra mile."

There is much to celebrate in knowing that someone felt happier or that there was a positive impact from the involvement you had in their life. It is important to not only remember that, but also to harness its value.

When reflecting on something in particular we would like to say to a social worker that has made a difference in our lives, the following was shared:

"I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for you! You will meet lots of different people and you will have an impact on their lives: big or small, positive or negative but keep going! This job is about the people."

"Thank you for making me feel my story mattered, and for taking the time to understand who I am and what happened. I felt like much more than a case, I felt like I was being acknowledged. Always reflect on how your decisions would feel if you were at the receiving end."

"Some people may delay doing the small things that make a difference because they are waiting for the next big thing to come along. Social workers' practice is most often entirely the opposite. As practitioners, social workers strive to, and do, small things that make a real difference all the time."

I think we all understand just how important social workers are. This isn't to say that every social worker always gets it right, and we know that many people may have experienced some instances of social work that can be improved. But we felt it important to introduce this report by taking the time to reflect and by celebrating the power and possibility of the profession.

The National Advisory Forum

Introduction

What is social work?

Social workers support people in a variety of ways. They play a crucial role in supporting change and development, and advocate for a fairer society by tackling inequality. They provide a voice for those that need it, and promote the human rights and wellbeing of those they support.

The role of Social Work England

Social Work England is an executive non-departmental public body established under the Children and Social Work Act 2017. We regulate social workers in England to protect the public, enable positive change and ultimately improve people's lives.

We have been the regulator since December 2019, meaning our annual registration period runs from 1 December to 30 November each year. Our third registration year closed on 30 November 2022. Throughout this report, when we say 'we' or 'our', we mean Social Work England.

Why are social workers regulated?

The term 'social worker' is a protected title. It is illegal for a person to use it unless they have completed the required training to register with us, and unless they maintain their registration. Registration sits at the heart of our role in protecting the public. Being registered provides assurance that social workers meet the requirements set out through legislation in order to perform their important role in society.

The aim of this report

When we began regulating social workers we made a commitment to share what we are learning about the social work profession in England through our regulatory processes. Over our first 3 years, we committed to sharing our reflections in interim reports which were published in:

- January 2021 – Social Work in England – First reflections
- January 2022 – Social Work in England – Emerging themes

This state of the nation report reflects on what we've learnt in our first 3 years of regulation. We will continue to share our learning in future.

How was this report produced?

This report has been co-produced with members of the public, the profession and our National Advisory Forum. We hosted a series of external engagement events to hear what people wanted to see in the report and what their experiences have been over the last 3 years. The insights gathered from these events and our ongoing conversations with stakeholders have helped shape the content of this report. In each chapter, we have sought opportunities for people to share their experiences of social work in their own words.



Executive summary

Learning to be a social worker

Social work education and training is essential to prepare students for practice. It's also key to ensuring they are able to meet our professional standards when they enter the profession.

Higher education has been through a period of great change in the last few years, with course providers making adjustments at pace to ensure the continuation of student training in light of lockdown restrictions. This included the delivery of online learning and decreased face-to-face interaction and placement opportunities for students.

Face-to-face teaching and practice during placements is fundamental to social work. As we look to the future, we know that hybrid learning can provide more flexibility for both students and academics. Therefore, a balance can be achieved with the delivery of social work education.

Since we began regulating social workers, we have started 198 inspections of social work courses. As at 30 November 2022, 99 had concluded. Of these, 23 have been approved and 76 have been approved with conditions. Common conditions include: sharing course details with applicants; evidencing adequate placement capacity; and ensuring employers, practitioners and people with lived experience are involved in the design and review of the curriculum.

Social work should reflect the communities within which it works. This is only possible when the prospect of becoming a social worker appeals to people from a broad range of backgrounds, and when routes into social work are affordable and accessible.

Nationally, economic challenges persist. This makes for a challenging landscape for students, particularly where placement requirements reduce the time available to them to spend in paid employment. This challenging landscape may prove an influencing factor for prospective students when choosing their route into social work.

When we launched our new education and training standards in 2021, we began our journey to improve social work education and training across England. In June 2022 we published our approach to social work education and training. This sets out our areas of focus in relation to initial social work education and training in our strategy for 2023 to 2026, and beyond.

Social workers in England

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges for the health and social care sector. As the profession navigates the ongoing uncertainty and settles itself into permanent new ways of working, the country is facing new economic challenges. As the cost of living increases, more people find themselves in financial difficulty, forcing some individuals and families into poverty. This correlates with an increase in social work referrals.

As at 30 November 2022 there were 100,654 registered social workers in England. 52.1% of the register work in children and families' social care, 31.2% work in adults social care and 7% work in other areas of social work. In the 2021 to 2022 registration year, 5,335 social workers left the register and 6,715 joined the register.

The average age of a social worker in England is 46. 82.9% of social workers recorded their gender identity as female, 16.9% recorded their gender identity as male, less than 0.05% preferred not to record their gender identity and 0.04% self-described.

During the 2021 to 2022 registration year, we received 1,684 applications from overseas applicants. This represents a 175.3% increase compared to the number of applications we received in the 2019 to 2020 registration year (611).

As at 30 November 2022, 94,881 (94.3%) social workers in England had shared their diversity data for at least one of the above categories. Of these, 93,388 (98.4%) answered all 5 of the equality, diversity and inclusion questions. Only 1,260 (1.3%) social workers who engaged with the equality, diversity and inclusion questions chose not to provide any diversity data. We note that when comparing to available data from the [Census 2021 for England and Wales](#). Early analysis of the data we have collected shows that the register is more diverse than the population of England and Wales in relation to ethnicity, gender identity and sexual orientation, and representative of the population in relation to religion and disability. We look forward to carrying out a more in-depth analysis of the data we hold.

As the regulator for social workers, we are concerned with any workforce issues that have the potential to have an impact on public protection. One such emerging issue is the high number of vacancies in both children and families services and adults services, which are exacerbating high pressure working environments.

However, over a 3 year period our register has grown, indicating that social workers are not necessarily leaving social work altogether. We will carry out research in 2023 to gain a greater understanding of the key drivers in this picture across all of social work, not just in statutory settings.

Upholding the professional standards

All social workers registered in England are expected to meet and uphold our professional standards throughout their registration. As part of our role, we investigate concerns about the conduct, character, competence, and health of social workers. This is known as a person's fitness to practise.

The number of social workers that pass through any part of the fitness to practise process is proportionally very small compared to the overall number of social workers registered with us. On average this is 1.6% per year. An average of 3.6% of this number are removed from the register per year, which equates to 0.1% of the register as a whole.

During the 2021 to 2022 registration year, we received 1,734 concerns where a social worker had been identified. Of these concerns, 309 were determined to not be a fitness to practise concern due to no statutory ground of impairment being identified.

In the 2021 to 2022 registration year, we held 1,079 hearings and meetings, an increase of 245 from the previous registration year. This number includes concerns received in previous registration years. To ensure that we are meeting our overarching objective to protect the public, we have a number of process-review groups and networks at each stage of the fitness to practise process. One of these includes consideration of decisions by the decision review group.

In some cases it is possible for a social worker to return to unrestricted practice if they are able to effectively demonstrate remediation. During our first 3 years of regulation, 55 social workers with final orders of conditions of practice or suspension have successfully remediated and demonstrated that they are able to practise unrestricted.

It is important for us to continue engaging with the profession to help those involved to better understand our role to protect the public. It means that social workers can be better informed about what constitutes a concern, how the concerns are investigated and the different outcomes. It enables employers to help social workers understand professional boundaries, best practice and how to uphold the professional standards. This ultimately helps everyone to better understand the fitness to practise process.

Career-long learning

After joining the register, social workers continue to develop their skills and knowledge. Continuing professional development is important for all social workers to ensure that they continue to meet our professional standards.

The first years of practice are crucial to a social worker's development. All newly qualified social workers should receive additional support from their employer and manager. We have heard some great examples of how employers support their newly qualified social workers through those initial years of practice. However, we know that this is not consistently the case for all. Given the importance of both public protection and professional confidence in this transition, we will look to introduce requirements that provide mandatory protected time in practice and professional development for all new social work graduates across England, and equity of training across the profession.

In the 2021 to 2022 registration year, social workers uploaded 220,937 pieces of CPD. This was an average of 2.3 pieces of CPD per social worker. For the first time, in the 2021 to 2022 registration year, social workers were required to record at least one peer reflection as part of their renewal requirements. Social workers uploaded 130,970 pieces of CPD that included a peer reflection, an average of 1.3 pieces of CPD with a peer reflection per social worker.

From February to March 2022, CPD assessors reviewed the CPD records and felt that the range of CPD was broader and the quality higher in the 2020 to 2021 registration year than in the previous registration year.

We are committed to engagement and co-production and believe that people who are affected by our work as a regulator should have the opportunity to share their views and help shape our work. We co-produce and engage throughout the year. One of our key annual moments for engagement with the sector is Social Work Week, co-produced with the National Advisory Forum. We want to act as an example to the sector and support the embedding of co-production across the profession. This report has been a great opportunity to hear about how social workers embed co-production within their practice and we look forward to sharing more examples in the future.

Learning to be a social worker



Social work education and training is essential to prepare students for practice. It's also key to ensuring they are able to meet our professional standards when they enter the profession. Our role as the regulator includes setting education and training standards for all social work courses in England. This is to assure the public's confidence that all social workers are receiving the best possible education and training in a supportive and inclusive environment.

Case study

Some students shared their inspiration for choosing to study social work:

"Having had some personal dealings with children's social services and finding that the service was extremely policy driven and did not have that person centred approach, I decided to see if I could understand why and try to make a change."

Newly qualified social worker

"I have witnessed social workers work with vulnerable adults, showing empathy and making them feel valued. This was when I discovered that the social work profession is built on a strong set of values, which includes respecting the dignity, worth, and equality of every human being. The way and manner in which social workers also protect their social work identities made me fall in love with the profession."

Newly qualified social worker

"I had experiences in the past with physical abuse from a very young age. As I got older, I realised how so many people don't have anybody to speak for them, and cases in the news made me realise how much the world lacks social justice. I studied health and social care in college and found myself further drawn to the social care sector. I also want to challenge the stigma around social work and the stigma that people with autism, like myself, lack empathy."

Student

Higher education has gone through a period of great transformation in the last few years. The way in which social work education and training was delivered changed dramatically in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The introduction of national lockdowns meant that social work training and placements were mostly moved to being delivered online, although for some students learning and practice placements were delivered in a hybrid form. Global events involving social justice and equality have raised further awareness of the experience of marginalised groups. Students, educators and social workers alike continue to consider their own values and practice within the context of global events. These include the COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, the rising cost-of-living crisis, and the war in Ukraine.

The impact of COVID-19

Delivery of courses online meant that many students began to feel the impact of social isolation. They missed out on the benefits of attending courses in higher education institutions in-person, such as socialising and learning with peers, face-to-face discussions, and building self-confidence, and independence in preparation for entering the workplace.

Case study

Challenges faced by a student during the COVID-19 pandemic:

"The last 3 years of my life have been the hardest but the most rewarding. My cohort and myself have faced extreme pressures and uncertainty due to the pandemic and the way in which learning had to adapt. I think that we may have missed out on a normal university life but I think that the pandemic and having to adapt, has taught us to be resilient and adaptable to the unknown. This will in turn set us in good stead for the ever-changing world of social work."

Student

As with course delivery, some placements also moved online. This meant that some students were no longer able to have face-to-face visits, and so missed out on the learning they would usually receive working alongside educators and people with lived experience, as well as colleagues with more experience. Research into blended learning by the Office for Students shared that some students would have preferred the opportunity to have more contact with their peers. Some students shared with us that these reduced direct learning opportunities may have led to some graduates feeling less confident in their own decision making, or making visits independently and in-person again.

However, some found the transition from in-person to remote learning favourable. They felt that it improved their work-life balance and online delivery of social work education has made learning more inclusive for many. Whilst there are advantages to both, students benefit from reflective sessions to develop shared learning, and from directly shadowing more experienced social workers, which may have been more challenging to do online.

Face-to-face teaching and practice during placements is fundamental to social work education and training. Building effective and supportive relationships is at the heart of social work practice and is best achieved in-person. However, a case can be made for a hybrid approach.

As we look to the future, we know that hybrid learning can provide more flexibility for both students and academics. Therefore, a balance can be achieved within social work education. At their request, we have worked with some education providers to review aspects of their courses to move to a model that permanently includes elements of digital course delivery. We will continue to work with providers to understand the benefits and monitor the impact of a hybrid learning model.

Case study

Adjusting to hybrid learning:

"I am a lecturer in the social work team at a university. At the moment students have a mixture of face-to-face teaching on campus and online teaching in which we take a blended and hybrid approach.

"There is a lot you can do with hybrid teaching. I think it is important that lecturers familiarise themselves with tools they can use to enhance the online learning experience for students, such as using software like Mentimeter and Padlet. You can put students into smaller groups to complete group work and record sessions which is particularly important for neurodiverse students.

"It can be difficult to read body language and tone in the online environment, so I find doing a check in at the beginning of my lectures helpful. If we are in the online environment students know they can contact me and have an online or on campus meeting to discuss anything. I also encourage regular breaks.

"In terms of adjustments to support students from minoritised groups there are lots that I could talk about. But, as a neurodiverse academic, I am often approached by students if they suspect they have a neurodiverse condition. I think it is because I see my neurodiversity as a 'superpower' rather than a disability. I am open about this when I introduce a module particularly in case my speech or thinking processes are affected during mid-flow of a lecture!

"I have also recently completed a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice. My tutors at the university provided all of us with a choice in relation to assessment methods. For example, we could choose the format in which we submitted an assignment, such as a presentation or an essay. I found this really helpful as it helped me work towards my strengths and being given a choice was really important. It helped promote accessibility and inclusivity, which mirrored my social work values."

Social worker and lecturer

Case study

Ways to effectively implement hybrid learning:

When delivering hybrid learning, prior reflection, and a carefully developed lesson plan are necessary. Approaches include a pre-recorded introductory quiz, book chapter or instructions to enable involvement in a face-to-face session. It could involve setting an exercise, or case study for the learners to follow, posted online, recorded with text speak and given out to those in the classroom. Students can also join sessions by live feed and ask and answer questions in the sessions and have access to a recording and reflect afterwards.

Within a hybrid world I have found setting some tutorials online through Microsoft Teams, and some face-to-face in the University work well. I encourage students to set up online study groups with their peers where they can share experiences and learning. It has also been useful to encourage students to use the Wiki function on Moodle to share ideas and to problem solve.

Social worker and personal tutor

Social work courses in England

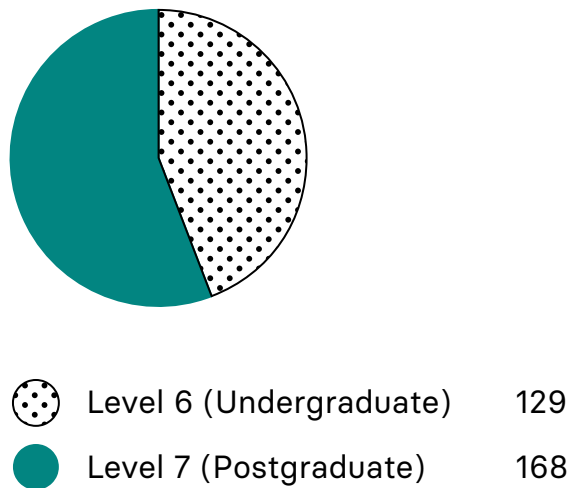
All social workers who qualify in England are required to complete an approved level 6 (undergraduate) degree or level 7 (postgraduate) degree in social work to be eligible to register with us. There are multiple qualifying routes, including fast track programmes, apprenticeships and undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. The variety of routes into the profession ensures that social work is accessible to applicants from different backgrounds and circumstances. For example:

- A person already working in health and social care may be attracted by the idea of a level 6 (undergraduate) degree apprenticeship in social work, as this will allow them to qualify while continuing to work.
- A person looking to make a career change with an existing level 6 qualification may be attracted to a level 7 fast track route, such as Step Up to Social Work, as this will allow them to qualify in 14 months.
- A young person with limited work experience and the time to invest in full-time education may be attracted to a traditional level 6 (undergraduate) degree course in social work, so they can benefit from the full university experience.

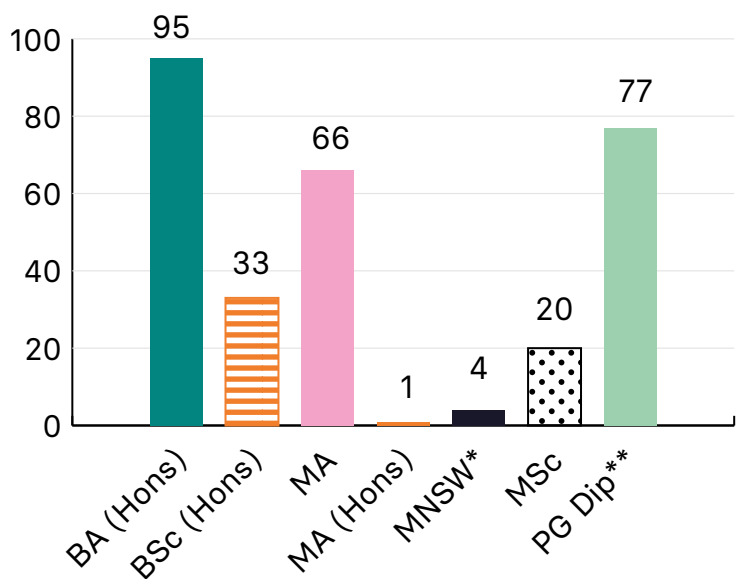
As at 30 November 2022 there were 83 course providers providing qualifying social work courses in England, delivering a combined total of 297 courses. The number of social work courses has remained stable across all entry routes over the last 3 years.

As at 30 November 2022,
we oversee
297
courses across England

Graph 1: Regulated social work courses in England by level of study as at 30 November 2022



Graph 2: Social work courses by award as at 30 November 2022



*Mental Health Nursing and Social Work

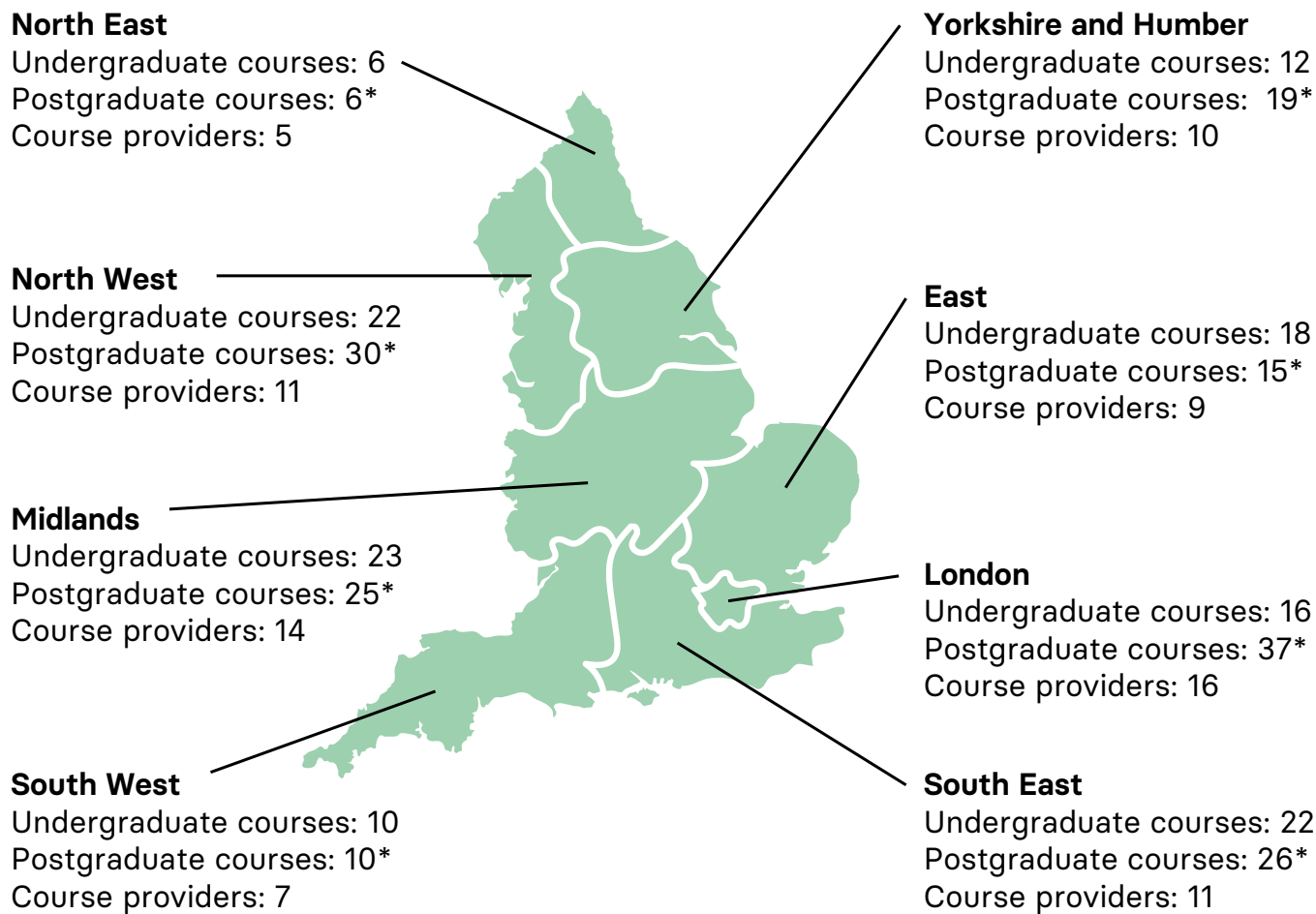
**The postgraduate diploma includes the Postgraduate Diploma Masters exit route. This is an option for postgraduate students who are unable to complete the dissertation element of their course, for example due to extenuating personal circumstances, such as ill health. Note: These courses are not open to admissions.

The regional picture

Our regional data shows that regions across England have a different uptake of course type. In London, the number of postgraduate courses are more than double the number of undergraduate courses. The East is the only region to offer more undergraduate courses than postgraduate courses.

As part of our regulatory processes, we do not currently collate the number of students in each region. We hope to explore this further in the future through our own education quality assurance processes and independent research.

Regional breakdown as at 30 November 2022



*Figures include exit routes

Implementing new standards in education and training

In September 2021, a year later than planned due to the pandemic, we launched our new education and training standards. Updating these standards was an important step in our journey to improve the quality and consistency of social work education and training. It aims to improve the outcomes for social work students, helping to ensure that they are equipped and prepared with the necessary knowledge, skills, behaviours and values to begin their careers.

The changes we made included:

- An increased focus on equality, diversity and inclusion
- Strengthening involvement from people with lived experience in the design and delivery of courses
- Emphasising educational and pastoral support for students
- Providing more detailed requirements for admissions
- A requirement that social work students must spend at least 200 days gaining experience and learning in practice settings.

Our professional standards for social workers set out what a social worker in England must know, understand and be able to do. They are the vehicle through which we as the regulator can improve support and protect the public. Our education and training standards are therefore designed to ensure that the social workers of tomorrow can realise their potential and meet the professional standards when they join the register.

We approve and monitor new and existing social work courses and re-approve courses every 6 years. The reapproval cycle aligns with the academic calendar and runs from September to August each year. Our first reapproval cycle is initially taking place over 3 years. During this time we will carry out an inspection of every current social work initial education and training course in England. This shorter period allows us an early opportunity to consider the reapproval cycle and the learning from it.

The reapproval cycle

As at 30 November 2022, we had started 198 inspections of social work courses since we began regulating social workers, and 99 of these inspections had concluded. Of the 99 concluded inspections:

- 23 courses had been approved
- 76 courses had been approved with conditions

In August 2022 we completed the first year of inspections. Early feedback shows an emerging commonality in the standards that course providers have conditions set against. These include conditions:

- to ensure course providers inform applicants of all course details so they can make an informed choice on whether to accept a course offer
- to ask course providers to evidence adequate placement capacity and the range of experiences available within placement for their cohort sizes
- to ensure that employers, practitioners and people with lived experience of social work have their views incorporated into the design and ongoing development and review of the curriculum.

Overall, there has been a positive response from the course providers involved in this first reapproval cycle. Some have shared that they found the process to be a supportive and collaborative experience. We will continue to share our learning and findings from the reapproval process over time.

Case study

Why did I choose to work in social work education?

"I am constantly curious, and I strongly believe that human diversity is the most important driver which generates authentic learning. I learn most from people I work with, students, people with lived experience of social work, practitioners, and communities. Being a social work academic does require a continuous exercise of negotiating your professional identity. On one hand you may no longer practise, but at the same time you do work with future generations of social workers and this means heightened responsibility towards wider societal values, particularly social justice.

"As social work academics we are responsible for ensuring that our students gain the professional knowledge, skills and values necessary to practice social work effectively. But what I often cherish most is being in a class full of students who have the motivation to question the information given to them, come up with their own version of tackling a difficult situation and develop their own strategies of how to respond to the social reality presented. It is in moments like these where my main role becomes one of a facilitator and connector and I do humbly value being part of such learning communities, where the energy of thinking and exploring is almost tangible."

Social worker and lecturer

Learning through lived experience

Our education and training standards require that people with lived experience of social work are involved in the design and delivery of all social work courses in England. By sharing their experience, they provide unique insight and help demonstrate the value of social work. This can empower students and help them understand the role they can play in people's lives through best practice of social work.

Co-production is vital in ensuring that a course is current, relevant and provides social workers with the skills and knowledge to be able to support others. The involvement of people with lived experience can be seen across the whole student journey. Their involvement can include:

- Helping education providers decide which applicants are suitable to study social work
- Supporting preparation for practice
- Shaping assessments
- Engaging in teaching and learning
- Sharing their expertise to improve course curriculums over time.



Case study

Co-producing social work education:

"We are part of a service user and carer involvement group for a university that supports social work education with lived experience. Individuals bring a wide range of lived and learned experience and are engaged as 'experts by experience' on all the social work courses. Input from group members is treated with equity and parity regarding the co-production of modules, teaching and training.

"When the university's social work degree courses were re-written ahead of the 2021/2022 academic year, the pre-placement skills module was not co-produced with the core group. We reviewed this as a matter of urgency, having direct discussions with the incoming module leader. Together, we scoped out a new framework for course delivery and this academic year it has been fully co-produced.

"The group wrote course content, the summative assessment case study, the briefing for actors (playing the service user in the summative assessment role-play), the assessment templates, process and proformas, and agreed scoring and student feedback mechanisms – embedding equity between group members and academics at every stage.

"The engagement with students by the group, as experts by experience, delivers a richer, more authentic and real-life experience. In turn, this helps to prepare the students to be more confident to start their initial placements. We believe the degree to which this is successful is directly related to the quality of real, embedded co-production."

Service user and care involvement (SUCI) group co-ordinator and a member of the SUCI core group

Learning through placements

As part of their learning, social work students spend time in practice settings to further develop their knowledge, skills, behaviours, and values. This allows students the opportunity to work with social workers and other professionals, to apply their learning in practice whilst developing decision making and case management skills and to build professional relationships with the people they support. Students also have the opportunity to learn by example from their practice educator whilst on placement.

Practice educators encourage students to develop a good understanding of best practice with appropriate supervision, assessment and oversight, and provide a reflective space to develop and progress. Some students have a link supervisor, or a work-based supervisor, in their placement organisation. A link supervisor is common if the practice educator is based off site.

They support students in their day-to-day work during placement, and contribute towards the students' learning and development, as well as assessment.

Placement requirements

Students must spend a minimum of 200 days in at least 2 practice settings which provide contrasting experiences.

At least one of them must be in a statutory setting, providing experience of statutory social work tasks involving high risk decision making and legal interventions.

We know that organising, supervising, or undertaking learning in practice settings requires a great deal of resource, commitment and collaboration. This ensures that practice learning opportunities are safe, supported and provide a high-quality learning experience for social work students. We will continue to work with course providers to address any challenges we see developing through our reapproval cycle, monitor responses to conditions and promote shared learning between higher education institutions.

Equal opportunity in practice learning

Our education and training standards also require that students are given the opportunity to work with, and learn from, multidisciplinary teams, including in integrated settings. This provides students with an invaluable opportunity to learn from other allied health and care professionals. It also teaches them the wider context in which social work practice is delivered. As we continue to evaluate placement settings in our reapproval cycle, we will be able to champion the value that learning from a variety of placement settings can bring, no matter which settings graduates go on to choose.

It is essential that social work students gain a broad experience of practice and the work environment. These rich and varied experiences of practice allow students from all backgrounds the opportunity to consider their future career paths, providing graduates with the flexibility to work in different areas of social work throughout their career.

Case study

The importance of experiencing different settings:

"I am currently completing my final placement in a domestic abuse service. This is a non-statutory community based service that provides support for women, men and children who have experienced domestic abuse and other forms of gender based violence including people involved in sex working. The aim of the service is to empower, increase independence and rebuild victims' lives free from violence.

"In a non-statutory agency you are given the opportunity to experience work through quality assessment, intervention and support. You are given the opportunity to challenge and promote change whilst working with other voluntary and statutory organisations.

"Voluntary organisations are the backbone of support in England. They are fundamental in providing the tools and skills needed for service users to survive and live an independent life."

3rd year student

"My 3rd year placement was statutory, within a local authority's substance misuse team and rough sleeper team in the North East of England. The substance misuse team supported those around the local authority area with addictions from either illicit substances or alcohol dependency.

"I felt that I learnt a lot from this placement, not just personally but also professionally. I learnt a great deal about the Care Act, housing legislation, mental health and substance/alcohol misuse. This placement grounded me to social work and made me realise that although we are taught a lot through our studies within university, nothing can replace the first hand interaction between a service user and a social worker. It made me realise that although a person may be placed in a bracket, they are all individuals and have their own unique needs and problems that need to be looked at without prejudgement or criticism."

BA (Hons) Social Work student, graduated in 2022

Practice education

All social work students are supported, supervised, mentored and assessed by a practice educator during their time on placement. The role of the practice educator is sometimes described in different ways depending on the social work course and route. Regardless of the title they support learning, assess performance and provide a gatekeeping role where students are not meeting the required standards for practice. They act as role models for the values which underpin the whole profession.

The professional rapport and relationship that students develop with their practice educator can have a significant impact on a student's learning experience, as they explore their professional identity and understanding of practice. Our education and training standards require all practice educators to be on our register, and to have relevant and current knowledge, skills and experience to support safe and effective learning.

Through our inspection process we have observed that practice educators are working in an environment where each education provider has their own distinct documentation, assessment criteria, expectations, package of support, and methods of communication with regards to practice learning. Communication between practice educators and course providers, and employers and course providers, is integral to ensuring that students are supported and that any issues with their practice can be discussed and resolved. However, we understand that supporting students year-on-year in placement settings where there are multiple students from different providers can create an additional administrative burden when undertaking the practice educator role.

Although practice educators may face challenges in performing this role, it can also be a great opportunity to develop their own skills. They can also challenge their own practice through interactions with students. Most importantly, practice educators take pride in nurturing students and helping them develop their practice. This is something which will positively help shape their careers and potentially inspire them to become practice educators themselves later in their career.

Case study

The importance of practice educators:

"Each practice educator differs in the way in which they play their role and experiences can vary. Within my 2nd year placement, my practice educator was off site and only supported me when completing designated points throughout the portfolio.

"In my 3rd year placement, my practice educator supported me fully on a daily basis, from the start of placement until the end. My practice educator was there to support me with policies and procedures, complex decision making, reflection and supervision as well as giving advice and guidance on my own decisions that I was making. I felt that I could be independent, knowing that I had a solid team and practice educator guiding me. My practice educator fully understood her role and having a wealth of knowledge from previous experience, I knew that no matter what challenge confronted me I would be able to seek advice and get an answer that would match.

"I felt that I was fully supported throughout my placements and if I had questions to ask there would always be someone who could give me an answer. I felt that my case load was proportionate to my abilities and over time my abilities grew and my case load became more complex. This was monitored on a weekly basis within supervision as well as daily during team meetings and discussions.

"I would not change anything about the role that my practice educator played within my placement. The format and role that a practice educator plays within a student's learning and development is an important one and the way in which the portfolio and duties of a practice educator are set out are solid in giving the best experience for a student social worker."

BA (Hons) Social Work student, graduated in 2022

Although the role of the practice educator is not currently regulated, the Practice Educator Professional Standards, developed by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), sets out requirements and responsibilities of the role. Through our research and consultation on readiness for professional practice, practice educators have expressed a desire to have a closer relationship with us and there has been some initial support for increased regulation of this role. We want to strengthen our relationship with practice educators because effective practice placements are essential to the success of social work students. Over time, we also want to streamline and simplify the requirements that practice educators, employers and education providers work with in their teaching and assessment of students.

Equality, diversity, inclusion and the student experience

Our education and training standards require that education providers embed equality, diversity and inclusion throughout all qualifying social work courses. This spans many different areas of course design and delivery, from admissions to student assessment and progression. We use our reapproval inspections as an opportunity to understand how institutions are ensuring these values are embedded within social work education. The experiences included here are not exhaustive but instead are included to demonstrate how social work education can provide an inclusive space.

The experience of Black and ethnic minority students

The murder of George Floyd in 2020 led to a wider understanding of the inequality faced by people of Black heritage and gave rise to a renewed focus on improving social justice and equality. Many global movements that followed worked towards raising the profile of issues facing marginalised groups and highlighting the inequalities they faced. The learning from this has helped institutions, as well as individuals, better understand systemic failures that result in inequality for Black and ethnic minority people. It encouraged higher education institutions to further understand the experiences of Black and ethnic minority students and embed anti-racist practices within their teaching. Positive action towards tackling this marginalisation, supporting individuals from the start of their education and training and throughout their professional careers must be continued.

We have a commitment to ensure that the profession champions anti-racist, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice. To do this we must understand the experience of Black and ethnic minority students.

In January 2021 we commissioned research on social work education and training, part of which explored social work students' experience of equality, diversity and inclusion. Of the students questioned:

- 90.4% agreed that anti-oppressive practice was taught on their social work course
- 93.6% agreed that anti-discriminatory practice was taught
- 70% agreed that anti-racist practice was taught
- 78.2% agreed that cultural sensitivity was taught.

Case study

Embedding anti-racist practice in social work education:

The Anti-Racist Practice in the Social Work Curriculum working group brings students and staff together to share knowledge and experience, and explore how to better embed anti-racist practice in the curriculum.

From a student survey conducted across our social work programmes, a number of important issues arose. These included the lack of diversity of the staff group, and the need to support colleagues' confidence and commitment to anti-racist teaching. Students also wanted further opportunities to engage with diversity and difference, including in relation to religion and faith, and underlined the importance of drawing on international perspectives. They also highlighted negative experiences faced by some students on placement, particularly for Black students, and raised the general lack of awareness of where incidents of racism or other forms of discrimination should be reported.

To address the issues, actions include working to ensure our teaching mainstreams anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice from the start, to give students the tools to engage with and apply learning in these areas throughout the rest of the programme. We are scaffolding learning about race and racism, building on this at each level of study, and exploring how to further integrate faith into discussions of identity and intersectionality. Colleagues are also asked to include consideration of issues of anti-racism, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice in their module reviews.

Through our placements team, we have implemented group mentoring with Black and minoritised social workers. This is open to all, but specifically targeted at Black and minoritised students. We have revised our placement paperwork to better highlight questions about how to report racism and other forms of discrimination. We are planning for pre-placement training aimed at negotiating racial justice in placement, and including anti-oppressive practice as a thread throughout our practice education programmes. We are actively aiming to recruit a more diverse membership to our suitability and other practice assessment panels, including through specifying under-represented groups in advertisements. We are also reviewing the diversity of our guest lecturers and seminar facilitators and exploring ways that we can draw on the wealth of experience among our students, alumni and research colleagues to enhance learning opportunities.

While this work is ongoing, there have been concrete actions that have emerged from the group and begun to have an impact. This important work is also informing our ongoing curriculum review and moving forward, we will be holding termly meetings with student representatives to allow for their input into the next stages of our action plan and ensure we are accountable to the student body."

2 lecturers from a university social work department. Both are qualified and registered social workers.

Case study

My experience of equality, diversity and inclusion:

"Equality, diversity and inclusion is a topic that has experienced many challenges in social work. This can be seen where many people feel injustice, a lack of equality, and a feeling of exclusion rather than a promotion of diversity. This is a direct challenge and opposer to social work values, ethics and professional standards and capabilities.

"As a person with lived experience of social work, I too felt the injustice of discrimination and a lack of equality, diversity and inclusion based on my race, age and sexuality. I hoped to make a difference when I chose to become a social worker at the age of 13.

"On entering social work education, I was faced with a curriculum that failed to represent topics close to my heart, personally and professionally. There was little opportunity to learn from those with lived experience of intersectional issues surrounding equality, diversity and inclusion. At first, I relied on generalised lectures of discrimination to give me an understanding of how to meet social work values, but this was not enough.

"Being part of a student-led social work society, I was able to reflect and act to ensure the curriculum takes an anti-racist approach, embedded throughout the whole curriculum, rather than being a one-off, tokenistic lecture. We ensured that the people with lived experience contributors, reading materials, case studies and references drawn on in lectures were representative of the superdiverse communities that social workers work with in England.

"A curriculum now stands where students are able to reflect on their personal and professional values and ethics. A curriculum where students have the opportunity to learn in a safe learning environment how to challenge discrimination, empower and advocate for the people we work with, and how to effectively promote our values.

"This led to further work on understanding that there are significant difficulties for minoritised communities. And that new social workers are not being given enough opportunity to truly learn how to effectively work with these communities and empower positive and meaningful change. It is so important for social work education to get this right. I feel this on a personal level where I struggled with social workers who failed to recognise my characteristics through an intersectional lens to understand the experience of being minoritised. I also feel this on a professional level where we need to move change forward and act now to be able to truly call ourselves a profession that meets values of upholding social justice, equality, and fairness."

Newly qualified social worker, lecturer and researcher

The experience of students with disabilities

Education providers have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that students with disabilities are not disadvantaged. The shift to remote learning may have resulted in some students using their financial support for improvements to make their home study environment more suitable. Where higher education institutions may have provided less support or reasonable adjustments for students, some students may find a difference in support as they move from the education to work setting.

Case study

Challenges faced by a dyslexic student during COVID-19:

“As much as I enjoyed studying social work as a course at the university, the last 2 years of my study were a bit tough based on the challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although my university tried their best to make sure that support was made available to all students, as a student who is dyslexic, I felt isolated because of the lack of physical contact with my course peers and the lecturers. Reflecting on those years, I realised that being resilient kept me going.”

Student, graduated in 2022

Increased use of technology within education can reduce isolation and make learning more accessible. As awareness of neurodiversity increases, some educators have told us about how they are learning ways to adapt teaching to better support neurodiverse students. As highlighted in an [article by the British Psychological Society](#), the way teaching is delivered can be adapted to provide more breaks, neuro-friendly spaces and appropriately adapted resources. Not only will this help them achieve their full potential, but also go some way to changing the narrative by viewing neurodiversity as a source of creativity and strength.

We know that higher education institutions are making progress in promoting inclusivity within social work education. In line with our strategic objectives, we will continue to proactively embed equality, diversity and inclusion principles in education and training courses. Through our reapproval cycles and research we will continue to learn, challenge and better understand the different experiences students have and what we can do as a regulator to champion equality.

Access to social work education

Social work should reflect the communities within which it works. This is only possible when the prospect of becoming a social worker appeals to people from a broad range of backgrounds, and when routes into social work are affordable and accessible to applicants who may be attracted to the profession at varied stages of their working life. We are committed to better understanding the experience of applicants and students throughout their journey to becoming social workers, including their motivations, demographics and the barriers that they may face.

The impact of rising cost of living

Nationally, economic challenges persist as the cost of domestic energy, house rentals and mortgages, travel, and food increase. For some students, there are additional costs to consider such as childcare and caring for family members. Regionally, some social work students may need their own car to travel to their place of study or placements. Some students support their income with part-time employment whilst studying to cover the cost of student fees and cost of living. This makes for a challenging landscape for students, where placement requirements reduce the time available to them to spend in paid employment.

Although there are university and employer bursaries available to support social work students through their studies, there are normally fewer bursaries available than student places. The allocation of bursaries is not usually means-tested and bursary rates also vary by mode of study and location. There are fast track and apprenticeship routes that allow trainees to 'earn as they learn' while qualifying as a social worker. However, they require students to be based in the work environment full-time for the majority of their studies.

Although there are funding options for many of the varying routes into social work, the rising cost of living may prove an influencing factor for prospective students when choosing their route into social work.

Our new approach to social work education and training

Though the implementation of our new education and training standards in 2021 and our quality assurance activity has shown areas of real strength in the training provided to social work students, there are ongoing challenges to ensuring consistent, high quality and inclusive experiences for all.

In June 2022 we published our approach to social work education and training. This sets out our areas of focus in relation to initial social work education and training for our strategy for 2023 to 2026, and beyond.

Equality, diversity and inclusion is a crucial part of social work values and our professional standards. Consequently, it needs to run through all social work education and training, whether that be student experience or course content. Some of the experiences shared in this chapter demonstrate that there is still work to be done to ensure that initial social work education and training is a supportive and inclusive environment for all.

It is also essential that social work education is reflective of the current and evolving landscape, from understanding and embedding anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice, to learning from global events. Equality, diversity and inclusion will be a key element in our strategy for 2023 to 2026, where we will work with everyone with an interest in social work to ensure these strands are woven throughout social work education and training.

To help achieve our ambitions in improving social work education and training, we are developing new guidance on readiness for professional practice which will include a knowledge, skills and behaviours framework. Linked to our professional standards, the new guidance will help educators bring knowledge, skills and behaviours closer to regulation. This will help to ensure that social work students are more adequately prepared for professional practice and there is clarity on what they need to demonstrate in order to qualify and ultimately register.

To align with our work on readiness for professional practice and to ensure that equality, diversity and inclusion runs through all elements of education and training, we will take what we have learnt from our reapproval cycle and revisit our education and training standards to consider what changes and improvements we want to make. This will allow us to respond to demographic changes, social developments and changes in social work. There will be no changes to the current guidance on the education and training standards until after the end of the current reapproval cycle in September 2024.

In this chapter we considered the importance of the practice educator role in supporting students as they enter the workplace for the first time. However, we also highlighted challenges in consistency and our desire to have a closer relationship with practice educators. Our vision for practice education includes taking forward work on greater recognition through regulation activity of the practice educator role. This will prepare future professionals for practice and supporting those new into practice. We have commissioned research to explore models of practice education and the role of the practice educator to inform this work.

You can read more about our ambitions for education and training in [our approach to social work education and training](#).

Social workers in England



The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges for the health and social care sector. Along with other health and social care professionals, social workers had to adapt quickly to new ways of working to ensure support could continue to be provided to those who needed it.

Social workers went above and beyond to ensure children and adults were protected, families were supported and individual's needs were assessed. For some, work shifted to being carried out primarily online, but as highlighted in an independent UK survey into the impact of providing health and social care during the COVID-19 pandemic, many social workers continued to provide home visits. This often involved carrying them out on people's doorsteps and in their gardens, at increased risk to the social worker's personal safety. The many examples we have seen and heard throughout the pandemic highlight the commitment and bravery social workers displayed to ensure vital support continued to be delivered to the most vulnerable in society, despite the personal risks.

Case study

Social work during the pandemic:

"On my final placement, I was so proud to see social workers going out of their safe places to support vulnerable people during the pandemic. Although I'm glad that the nurses were appreciated during the pandemic for the support they rendered to the nation, I would have also loved to see the same recognition given to social workers who also put their lives on the line during the pandemic. Despite the risk of catching the deadly virus, social workers were visiting vulnerable individuals in their homes, such as children in need, vulnerable adults, and families that needed both continuous and emergency support."

Student

"A social worker went out of their way to stay allocated to my son's case so that his gradual move into independent living happened, and this was during the pandemic. Having consistency of their support during this time was essential to its success. They saw my son as a human being with lots of potential, and made sure that they communicated regularly to help coordinate the complex communications needed."

Family carer

Coronavirus Act 2020: temporary registration

To support the demands on the health and social care sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Coronavirus Act 2020 gave us emergency powers to allow previously registered social workers to return to practice. Rather than process individual requests, we temporarily registered all those who had been registered in the last 2 years to the main register. This allowed them to return to social work if they chose to.

In March 2021 we surveyed all those who were temporarily registered and we received approximately 1,500 responses. Just over 100 of the respondents told us they were practising in England with temporary registration. 65 temporarily registered social workers requested to be removed between August 2021 and September 2022. 835 social workers with temporary registration applied to restore their full registration since the beginning of the pandemic.

Following a decision made by government that the emergency response had ended, temporary registration ceased on 14 October 2022. At the time of its closure, 6,200 social workers had temporary registration.

We want to thank all those who returned to practise during this challenging period. Their commitment to the profession and those they support has been invaluable.

While the move to increased home working allowed social workers to save time on travel, and afforded more focus on administrative tasks, it also led to less peer support and reflection which naturally came from working in a group office setting. Research conducted by King's College London in 2020 shared that this impact was especially felt by newly qualified social workers, who found it more difficult to absorb knowledge from experienced peers in a group setting. Younger newly qualified social workers were also more likely to live in shared occupancy settings, which brought challenges in ensuring confidentiality of calls due to poor home working spaces.

The complex, but necessary, speed of changes to practice also impacted the supervision social workers received. Some social workers felt the length of their one-to-one supervision had reduced as focus shifted to managing increasing workloads, which left little time to consider staff wellbeing. In some settings, group supervision was initially suspended altogether. For many managers, oversight of cases and practice became difficult as they were no longer able to observe their staff in person or accompany them on home visits.

As living through a pandemic became the norm for us all, employers found new and innovative ways of working with people with lived experience. Some councils created temporary team hubs and

introduced roles such as link co-ordinators to help improve working relationships between voluntary and statutory sector teams. These innovations enabled social workers to build stronger partnerships as they shared their experience on how to identify safeguarding risks with other health and care professionals. We will continue to engage with organisations to find out more about these problem-solving and innovative approaches to social work practice.

Case study

Working in a pandemic:

"In 2014, I formed my own mentoring company and joined an assistive technology company. Strategy coaching is provided alongside the technology to help individuals better understand their disabilities, and builds self-belief, confidence and emotional resilience. Social workers with a disability can use the Government's Access to Work scheme to get recommendations for technology, training, and coaching/mentoring. Coaching is fully funded by the government and employers can contribute to purchase assistive technology.

"Even before the pandemic, I recognised how many neurodiverse workers (1 in 10) were struggling in their respective roles. This included social workers, newly qualified workers, those on the assessed and supported year in employment programme, and support workers. All were struggling with high caseloads, admin, ever changing technology and high expectations. Many of the expectations were being set by the social workers themselves, wanting to provide an inclusive service to all in need.

"When COVID-19 came in March 2020, the assistive technology company recognised that their service to support people through strategy coaching and technology was even more important. By using online video call platforms such as Teams and Zoom, they were able to reach people throughout the UK and provide much-needed support to workers. The service provided an opportunity for individuals to talk about their emotions, stressors, their fears of COVID-19, and any health issues. It also helped them to find coping skills and strategies to use in the workplace, such as using technology to help speed up written work which meant that workloads became more manageable.

"It was, and is, a privilege to work with so many people under difficult circumstances. We were, and are, presently recognising how much trauma was being experienced by workers trying to manage caseloads under extreme pressure. Much of what staff went through in the early days of COVID-19 is still being lived by workers now, either through long Covid, sustained exhaustion or high levels of stress."

Work placement senior strategy coach/mentor

Future of hybrid working

The way social workers adapted their practice during the pandemic has shaped how it will be delivered in the future. It builds on the practice of mobile and flexible working arrangements that have been adopted by many employers before the pandemic. The profession has learnt that there is benefit in social workers delivering part of their roles remotely and this hybrid model has proved to be an enabler for positive change.

As social workers practise in a variety of settings, hybrid working is being adopted differently within these settings. There is now the opportunity for continued digital engagement between social workers and people with lived experience, though social workers should proceed with caution, as there could be an increasing amount of digital poverty amongst those needing social work support.

There is an increased safeguarding risk in remote-only interaction, particularly in relation to the observational aspects of assessment. Building trust, rapport and confidence can be difficult to do online, and communication and engagement can be a challenge, particularly for people with more complex needs. There have also been concerns raised about the quality of learning derived from online learning which can be less immersive than in-person training. Although digital engagement has increased, large parts of social work must continue to be delivered face-to-face.



Case study

Ways in which my social worker has helped me:

"Getting care at home and university, helped me do a continuing healthcare assessment when I requested one, signposted me to activities in my local council which got me further engaged in the community, and supported me during disagreements with providers."

Things I value most about my social worker:

"She understands the fundamentals of the Care Act, for example, choice, and she seems invested and passionate about her job and its social impact. Her actions are positively intentional and she is personable."

What a good social worker looks like to me:

"A good social worker is non-ableist. They don't look down on vulnerable people and the elderly, and value the lives of vulnerable people through seeing them as (socially) disadvantaged equals. A good social worker is an ally and an advocate for the vulnerable."

Person with lived experience accessing adult social care services

The challenging landscape

Though the government no longer classes the pandemic as an emergency, the profession continues to feel the impact. High demand for health and care services, a rising complexity of needs and increases in vacancies continue to put pressure on a system that was already struggling.

As the profession navigates uncertainty and settles itself into permanent new ways of working, the country is facing new economic challenges. As the cost of living increases, more people find themselves in financial difficulty, forcing some individuals and families into poverty.

The Census 2021 for England and Wales shows that poverty has increased, which correlates with an increase in social work referrals. The 2022 Children in Need Census shows that the number of referrals was the highest since 2019 and the number of referrals from schools was the highest since recording began in 2014. Data from the Department for Education shows that 404,310 children were in need in the year 2021 to 2022, up 4.1% from 2021 and the highest number since 2018. In the same year there were 650,270 referrals to children's services, up 8.8% from 2021 and the highest number since 2019.

Adults social work services are also facing unprecedented challenges to meet demand for support. The Association of Directors of Adult's Social Services (ADASS) Autumn Survey report, published in August 2022, highlighted that there were 245,821 people awaiting assessment, a 20% increase from November 2021.

The rising cost of living not only impacts the people that use social work services, but also social workers themselves. The negative impact that an economic recession and increased living costs can have on the way in which social work is delivered, and on the personal lives of social workers, has been shared by social workers through our engagement.

Perceptions from the profession

In January 2020, we commissioned YouGov to conduct research to understand the perceptions of social work in England. Social workers felt proud of their profession and the impact their practice has on people's lives. However, they also felt the stress and pressure from having to manage high workloads.

2 years later, we asked social workers at our engagement events in July 2022 to share their thoughts about social work now. They said:

"Some processes are more efficient now due to learning from the pandemic and remote working."	"Individuals are working in isolation and we have lost the feel of a team due to working from home."
"It's very busy but still enjoying the job."	"It is rewarding but exhausting at the same time."
"Feeling hopeful."	"We are great at caring for clients/carers, but there is not enough support for social workers' wellbeing."
"Recruitment and retention feels even harder now."	
"There's more court work."	

We will continue to monitor the landscape relating to social work, as well as how the profession is adapting and feeling. This includes carrying out further research in 2023 to explore current perceptions of, and from, the profession. In doing so we can analyse potential impacts on social work, and social work regulation.

The shape of the profession

Upon completing a recognised social work qualification, graduates can apply to join the Social Work England register. Following approval, this allows them to practise under the protected title of social worker in a wide range of settings in England. Being registered shows that the person is capable of safe and effective practice in accordance with the professional standards. These are the standards all social workers in England are expected to meet and uphold throughout their registration.

It is a legal requirement for social workers to renew their registration annually in order to use the protected title of social worker. To do this they record their continuing professional development (CPD) in their online account and make a declaration that they will continue to uphold the professional standards. This is a fundamental part of professional regulation as social workers demonstrate that they are continuing to develop their knowledge and skills through CPD in order to maintain safe and effective practice. This further helps maintain public confidence in the social work profession.

Case study

What regulation means to social workers:

"[Being regulated] gives a sense of purpose and being able to uphold professional integrity within the social work frameworks."

Newly qualified social worker

"[Being regulated] shows a capability to carry out the social work role with appropriate qualifications."

Newly qualified social worker

Now into our third year of regulation, we build on some of the data shared in our first 2 of these reports and provide comparisons across the 3 years where we have found a potential emerging trend. As at 30 November 2022 there were 100,654 registered social workers in England. This compares with 99,702 at 30 November 2020, and 99,191 at 30 November 2021.

**As at 30 November 2022,
there were**
100,654
registered social workers in England

Area of social work practice

For the first time we are able to share which area social workers practice in. As at 30 November 2022:

- 52,454 (52.1%) work in children and families' social care.
- 31,379 (31.2%) work in adults social care.
- 7,018 (7.0%) work in other areas of social work. This includes: criminal justice; domestic abuse; lecturer or other academic; substance misuse; unaccompanied asylum seekers and refugees; and other specialist services.

Providing this information during registration is not a mandatory requirement for social workers. As such, we do not have employment information and/or the sector type for 9,803 (9.7%) social workers.

As at 30 November 2022, the 3 most common areas in which social workers practise are:

1. Child in need and child protection – 20,254 (20.1%)
2. Children and families – other – 13,814 (13.7%)
3. Fostering, special guardianship and adoption, residential – 10,320 (10.3%)

Table 1: Number and percentage of social workers by area of practice in the 2021 to 2022 registration year

Area of social work practice	Number and percentage of social workers
Adult – hospital work	2,852 (2.8%)
Adult – learning disabilities	3,373 (3.4%)
Adult – mental health	8,710 (8.7%)
Adult – older people	7,039 (7.0%)
Adult – other	8,545 (8.5%)
Child in need and child protection	20,254 (20.1%)
Children and families – other	13,814 (13.7%)
Children with disabilities	2,514 (2.5%)
Children’s mental health	2,170 (2.2%)
Court services/CAFCASS	1,871 (1.9%)
Fostering, special guardianship and adoption, residential	10,320 (10.3%)
Lecturer or other academic	1,271 (1.3%)
Other specialist services	4,578 (4.5%)
Categories that account for less than 1% of the sector each. This includes: adult – physical disabilities; children’s hospital social work; criminal justice; domestic abuse; leaving care post 18+; substance misuse; unaccompanied asylum seekers and refugees; and youth justice.	3,540 (3.5%)
No sector type record	2,473 (2.5%)
No employment record	7,330 (7.3%)

Gender identity

When joining the register or renewing their registration, social workers are asked for their gender identity data. We do this as part of meeting the public sector equality duty, and in accordance with our registration rules. Gender identity itself is not a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. However, we chose to use this term in our rules following a public consultation.

Of all social workers registered with us:

- 82.9% recorded their gender identity as female
- 17.0% recorded their gender identity as male
- Less than 0.05% preferred not to record their gender identity
- 0.04% self-described.

These figures have remained consistent over the last 3 years.

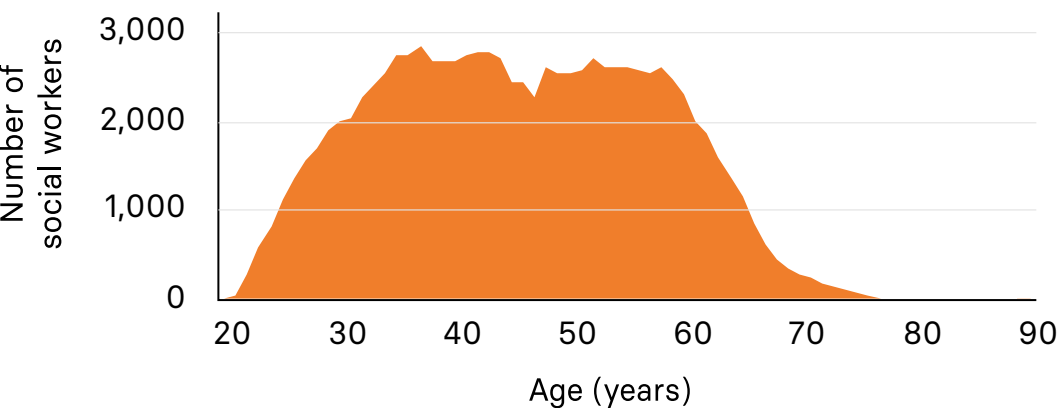
Age

When joining the register or renewing their registration, social workers are asked to provide their date of birth in accordance with our registration rules and as part of meeting the public sector equality duty.

There is a diverse age range within the profession, with 1,762 (1.8%) of all registered social workers aged 24 or under, and 13,846 (13.8%) aged 60 or over. The average age of a social worker in England is 46, which is similar across all regions.

These figures have remained stable over the first 3 years of our regulation. Though this may suggest that we do not have an ageing workforce, this is not a long enough period of time to provide reliable analysis. We will continue to monitor the trends over the coming years to consider if this is a longer-term theme.

Graph 3: Number of social workers by age in the 2021 to 2022 registration year



Length of time on the register

As well as age, we can also share how long social workers have been on the register. We are only able to provide this accurately up to 10 years, as we only hold information from when the Health and Care Professions Council became the regulator in 2012.

In the 2021 to 2022 registration year, 5,335 social workers left the register and 6,715 joined the register. The number of social workers who left the register does not include social workers who failed to renew their registration by 30 November 2022, as we are unable to say at the time of writing the report which of those had chosen to leave the register. The average age of those leaving the register was 53 years.

Graph 4: Number of social workers by length of time on the register in the 2021 to 2022 registration year

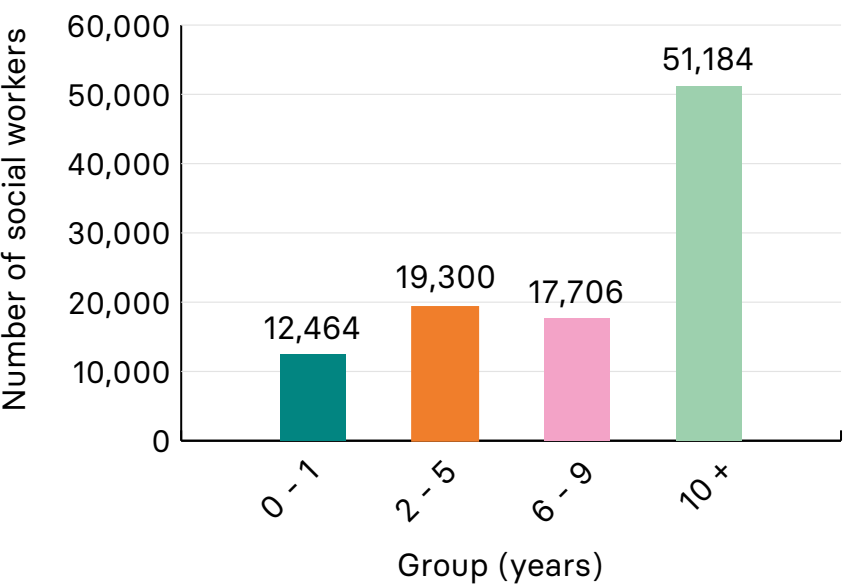


Table 2: Number and percentage of social workers leaving the register by age in the 2021 to 2022 registration year

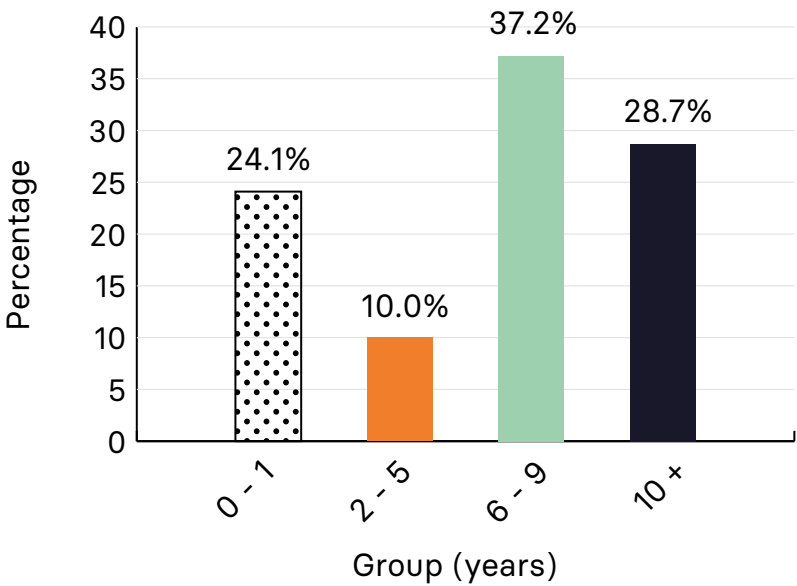
Age	Number and percentage of social workers
24 or under	98 (1.8%)
25-29	283 (5.3%)
30-34	431 (8.1%)
35-39	383 (7.2%)
40-44	334 (6.3%)
45-49	365 (6.8%)
50-54	468 (8.8%)
55-59	767 (14.4%)
60 or over	2,206 (41.3%)

These figures have remained consistent over the first 3 years of our regulation.

To more accurately consider the impact of people leaving the profession, we can look at the amount of time a social worker has been on the register when they leave. Due to the way data has been collected, we are only able to provide information from this year. However, we will continue to monitor the data over the coming years to explore any emerging trends.



Graph 5: Percentage of social workers leaving the register by time on the register in the 2021 to 2022 registration year



Note: Some social workers leave the register and re-join during the same registration year. The number in the graph above counts all those on the register once.

Nationality

Social workers are required to share their nationality when they join the register or renew their registration. Nationality refers to their country of citizenship and should not be confused with national identity, or where they earned their social work qualification. After British (91,380), the most common nationalities among social workers in England are Zimbabwean (1,864) and Irish (1,048). This has remained consistent over the first 3 years of our regulation.

Table 3: Number of social workers by top 10 nationalities in the 2021 to 2022 registration year

Nationality	Number of social workers
British	91,380
Zimbabwean	1,864
Irish	1,048
Indian	537
South African	497
American	411
Nigerian	409
Romanian	367
Polish	362
German	330

Overseas applicants

For those social workers who have qualified outside of the UK, [our qualification requirements](#) ensure that approved applicants hold qualifications that meet comparable standards to those available in the UK.

In the last 3 years, we have seen an increase in the number of applications to join the register from social workers whose education and training was delivered overseas. During the 2021 to 2022 registration year, we received 1,684 applications from overseas applicants, a 175.6% increase compared to the number of applications we received in the 2019 to 2020 registration year (611). Of the 1,684 applications we received, over half of them came from 3 countries – South Africa, Zimbabwe and India. This equates to an increase of 842 applications from these countries alone when compared to the 2019 to 2020 registration year.

Global migration of skilled professionals can help to address staff shortages and makes the workforce more diverse. International social workers have shared with us that the process of registering and securing social work jobs can be lengthy. Guidance on the application process is available on [our website](#) and [Skills for Care's pre-employment criteria](#) outlines how prospective international applicants can ensure safe practice. The [National Care Forum's pastoral care guide for international recruitment in social care](#) outlines the ways in which employers can provide pastoral support to overseas

social workers in the first few months of their first social worker role in England. This support includes buddying and peer support schemes, linking with the local community, and ongoing professional development.

Through our engagement with stakeholders over the last 3 years, we have learnt that some employers also provide further information to help overseas applicants better understand the UK's social care systems. This helps social workers adapt their practice to the regulatory rules in England more effectively. Social workers protect some of the most vulnerable people in society and we must therefore ensure that all social workers joining the workforce, including international social workers, are appropriately skilled and feel supported to deliver safe practice.

Case study

Supporting international social workers:

"In our region we have also seen an increase in international social workers applying for posts. For this cohort of staff there are other areas that need consideration which are different to our national recruitment. This includes ensuring that they have accommodation when they arrive in the country, setting up bank accounts, providing information around how public services work to name a few. As the numbers have increased, we have set up a central team to manage and coordinate this area alongside our central recruitment team. This is still in the early stages but hope it will make the transition to another country easier and help retain this group of staff."

Principal Social Worker – Adults

The regional picture

As at 30 November 2022, our regional data shows that the highest number of social workers in one region were in London (17,762), while the lowest were in the North East (5,265). We have developed our data analysis process which allows us to better match postcodes to regions. This has led to a more accurate set of regional data this year. Because of this, we are unable to provide comparisons to previous years.

This information has been derived from employer postcodes. We hold this information for 99,295 social workers. There are 32,571 social workers for whom we have multiple employment records. Where we have multiple employment records, only one employer record has been used for this data.

When comparing the ratio of social workers to the size of local population, as compared with the Census 2021 for England and Wales, it shows that London has the highest number of social worker per head of local population with 1 social worker to every 495 people. Whereas the East region has the least number of social workers per head of local population with 1 social worker to every 671 people. These figures have remained stable over the first 3 years of our regulation.

Regional breakdown as at 30 November 2022

North East

5,265 social workers
(5.2% of the register)
1 social worker to every
503 people

North West

14,801 social workers
(14.7% of the register)
1 social worker to every
501 people

Midlands

17,759 social workers
(17.6% of the register)
1 social worker to every
610 people

South West

8,936 social workers
(8.9% of the register)
1 social worker to every
638 people

Yorkshire and Humber

10,663 social workers
(10.6% of the register)
1 social worker to every
514 people

East

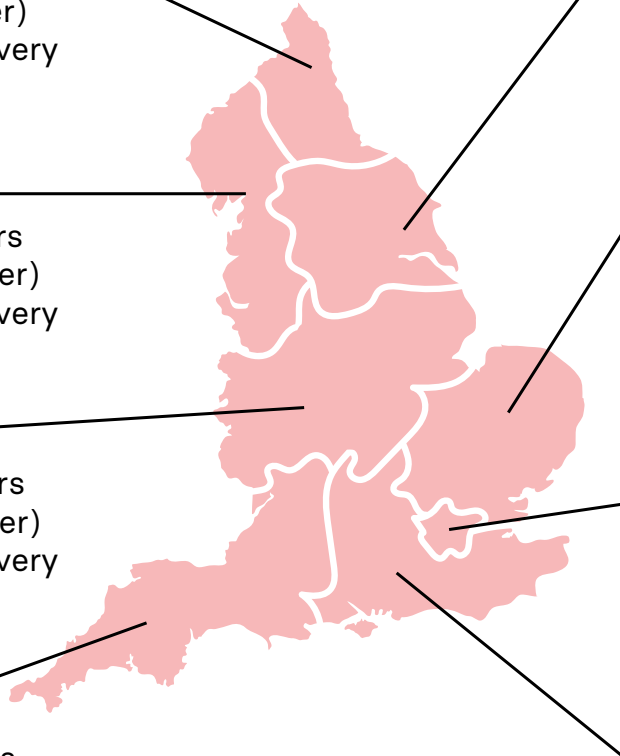
9,435 social workers
(9.4% of the register)
1 social worker to
every 671 people

London

17,762 social workers
(17.6% of the register)
1 social worker to every
495 people

South East

14,094 social workers
(14.0% of the register)
1 social worker to every
658 people



The diversity of social workers

In our last Social Work in England report, [Emerging themes](#), we outlined our commitment to provide a complete picture of social work in England, as we continue to learn more about the diversity of our workforce. This data allows us to better understand the challenges social workers may face as well as helping us to reflect and address inequalities in our regulatory processes.

As part of a campaign to gather social worker's diversity data, we encouraged social workers to submit this important data and we are pleased to be able to share some of these insights. Social workers were asked about the following, but could choose not to share some or all of their diversity information:

- Ethnicity
- Disability
- Religion
- Gender registered at birth where different to current gender identity
- Sexual orientation

As at 30 November 2022, 94,881 (94.3%) social workers in England had shared their diversity data for at least one of the above categories. Of these, 93,388 (98.4%) answered all 5 of the equality, diversity and inclusion questions. Only 1,260 (1.3%) social workers who engaged with the equality, diversity and inclusion questions chose not to provide any diversity data.



Ethnicity

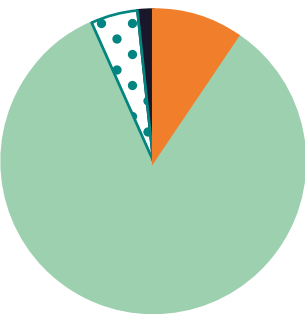
Table 4: Number and percentage of social workers registered, by ethnicity as at 30 November 2022

Ethnicity	Number and percentage of social workers
African	10,402 (10.8%)
Any other Asian background	590 (0.6%)
Any other Black/African/Caribbean background	921 (1.0%)
Any other ethnic group	445 (0.5%)
Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background	806 (0.8%)
Any other White background	4,393 (4.6%)
Arab	70 (0.1%)
Bangladeshi	550 (0.6%)
Caribbean	4,145 (4.3%)
Chinese	243 (0.3%)
English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British	60,786 (63.2%)
Gypsy or Irish Traveller	60 (0.1%)
Indian	2,835 (2.9%)
Irish	1,375 (1.4%)
Pakistani	1,692 (1.8%)
White and Asian	627 (0.7%)
White and Black African	660 (0.7%)
White and Black Caribbean	1,354 (1.4%)
Prefer not to say	2,127 (2.2%)
Opted out	2,060 (2.1%)

Disability

As defined under the Equality Act 2010, disability refers to whether a person has a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term negative effect on their ability to do normal daily activities. This should not be confused with a health impairment, which is where a social worker is not adequately managing a health condition in a way that protects the public from any risks posed by the condition. A health impairment is a fitness to practise concern, a disability is not.

Graph 6: Number and percentage of social workers on the register by disability as at 30 November 2022



Disability	Number and percentage of social workers
Yes	9,147 (9.5%)
No	80,680 (83.9%)
Prefer not to say	4,760 (5.0%)
Opted out	1,554 (1.6%)

Religion

Table 5: Number and percentage of social workers registered, by religion as at 30 November 2022

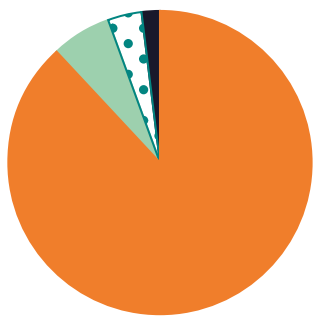
Religion	Number and percentage of social workers
Buddhism	736 (0.8%)
Christianity	41,045 (42.7%)
Hinduism	806 (0.8%)
Islam	3,497 (3.6%)
Judaism	469 (0.5%)
Sikhism	823 (0.9%)
None	37,755 (39.3%)
Prefer to self-describe	1,976 (2.1%)
Prefer not to say	7,278 (7.6%)
Opted out	1,756 (1.8%)



Sex registered at birth where different to current gender identity

Social workers are asked if their gender identity is the same as the sex they were registered with at birth.

Graph 7: Number and percentage of social workers registered, when asked whether their gender identity is the same as the sex they were registered with at birth as at 30 November 2022



Answer	Number and percentage of social workers
 Yes	84,570 (88.0%)
 No	6,230 (6.5%)
 Prefer not to say	3,605 (3.7%)
 Opted out	1,736 (1.8%)

Sexual orientation

Table 6: Number and percentage of social workers registered, by sexual orientation as at 30 November 2022

Sexual orientation	Number and percentage of social workers
Bisexual	2,198 (2.3%)
Gay man	1,278 (1.3%)
Gay woman	2,002 (2.1%)
Heterosexual	80,421 (83.6%)
Prefer to self-describe	531 (0.6%)
Prefer not to say	7,929 (8.2%)
Opted out	1,782 (1.9%)

We note that when comparing to available data from the [Census 2021 for England and Wales](#), early analysis of the data we have collected shows that the register is more diverse than the population of England and Wales in relation to ethnicity, gender identity and sexual orientation, and representative of the population in relation to religion and disability. We look forward to carrying out a more in-depth analysis of the data we hold.

This is the first time we have collected diversity data, and therefore have no previous figures from the profession to compare it with. But the data we now have will enable us to provide better quality information in future.

If you are a social worker, we encourage you to respond to our call for diversity data on your [online account](#).

Equality, diversity, inclusion and the profession

From our data we can see that the social work profession is largely representative of the overall demographic of England and Wales from the [Census 2021 for England and Wales](#). Where there are differences, we want to learn more about the impact of those differences. As previously stated our data shows that a higher percentage of the profession is made up of people who identify as being from an ethnic minority than the population of England and Wales. However, [research by What Works for Children's Social Care into ethnic minority social workers in the UK](#) shows that representation of ethnic minority social workers in more senior roles in both adult and children and families social work services remains disproportionately low.

In 2022, we supported [research undertaken by What works for Children's Social Care](#) which highlighted the impact of racism on the social work workforce. The research found that:

- 28% of respondents reported experiencing racism from colleagues and managers themselves at least once
- 37% reported experiencing racism from service users and families at least once
- 10% of respondents had considered leaving their organisation because of their experiences of racism
- 8% had considered leaving the profession due to this, and the range of impacts on their mental health, physical health and career outcomes

It is widely understood that there is a disproportionality in the experiences of Black and ethnic minority social workers. We will continue to analyse the data that social workers have shared with us so that we can learn more about the makeup of the profession. We will share some of these insights in future as we look to identify and monitor any disproportionate impacts of our work on different groups and take steps to understand and deal with potential bias and discrimination. The data will also help us understand where and how people may experience our work differently, including where our processes and systems could cause inequality or disadvantage.

Case study

Equality, diversity, and inclusion within social work practice:

"I took up the post of anti-racist lead practitioner in the autumn of 2020. The post has been challenging and exciting in equal measure and it has been rewarding to see the small steps being taken toward change and in terms of impact.

"I have made progress in facilitating discussions with children's services to enable reflections on biases, stereotypes and the lived experiences of our communities who may experience racism. I have engaged social workers in considering the impact of language and labels in report writing as well as where English may be a second language for our children and families. Social workers have been enabled to reflect and plan conversations with children about their identity, particularly when they are in bi-racial foster placements. Since being in post I have also set up specific mentoring support for Black and global majority staff members, to aid their further development and progression. In addition, a monthly Black and global majority support group was developed within children's services, for staff with lived experience of racism/racial trauma, which I have also facilitated. Social work staff are growing in confidence to have uncomfortable conversations about race and are beginning to acknowledge their white privilege. This is assisting them to move toward recognising and challenging racism, within the service, with our multi-agency partners and with the wider community.

"As the anti-racist lead, I also encourage all within children's services and within all of my training and workshop deliveries, to look through an intersectional lens. Social workers are beginning to also use the language of intersectionality in their day-to-day work, to understand difference and how this can highlight multiple ways people can experience oppression. For example, we cannot always look at race in isolation, because racism and oppression can be compounded by being Black, a woman, working class, LGBTQ+, Muslim, asylum seeker and by having English as a second language.

"My hope is that equality, diversity, and inclusion, will become a reality in my lifetime, where we are not just paying lip service to the Equality Act 2010 and protected characteristics, that continues to omit discussions around race. There will be no equality whilst people continue to be treated differently based solely on the colour of their skin."

Social worker and anti-racist lead practitioner

Pressures on the workforce

As the specialist regulator for social workers we are concerned with any workforce issues that have the potential to have an impact on public protection. One such emerging issue is the high number of vacancies in both children and families services and adults services, which are exacerbating high-pressure working environments.

Annual figures from the Department for Education show there were 7,900 (20%) unfilled posts in children and families social work in September 2022, an increase of 21% (1,400 vacancies) from 2021. This also represents the highest number and the largest annual increase since this data series started in 2017. Research carried out by the Association of Directors of Children's Services found that the average vacancy rate amongst the 108 local authorities that participated was nearly a fifth (19%) in June 2022, compared with 14.6% in June 2021.

Although workforce data specifically for adult social workers is not available, data published by Skills for Care shows that the vacancy rate in 2021 to 2022 within adult social care was 10.7%. This is the highest since records began in 2012 to 2013. We also acknowledge that so much social work is delivered outside of statutory services, however there is currently little data to capture this.

We understand from both children and families, and adults' services that some local authorities are struggling to recruit permanent social workers. This has led to a greater reliance on the use of agency staff to fill those posts. Others are struggling to retain staff, resulting in experienced social workers leaving posts. Government figures of the children's social work workforce showed 68.8% of vacancies were covered by agency workers in 2022, down slightly from 69.9% in 2021. This equates to 18% of the children and family's social worker workforce. In adult social work, Skills for Care reported that 7% of the adult social work workforce consisted of agency staff in 2022.

Whilst we can see the need for agency staff, and recognise the important contribution they make in supporting the profession and people with lived experience, this is costly for employers and the high turnover of staff can disrupt the support that people receive.

However, our data shows that whilst there are a high number of vacancies, social workers are not necessarily leaving social work altogether. Over a 3 year period our register has grown:

- 30 November 2020 – 99,702 social workers
- 30 November 2021 – 99,191 social workers
- 30 November 2022 – 100,654 social workers

We know that some social workers leave social work practice but maintain their registration. But this doesn't account for the thousands of vacancies facing the sector. We will therefore carry out research in 2023 to gain a greater understanding of the key drivers in this picture across all of social work, not just in statutory settings.

Despite the ongoing issues and pressures identified here, social workers continue to carry out crucial work to support some of the most vulnerable people in society and we want to thank them for their ongoing commitment.

Case study

Advocating for others:

"My role as a forensic social worker is to support and advocate for the inpatients undergoing treatment for their complex mental health diagnoses. I'm passionate about advocating for social justice and advancing cultural sensitivity in social work practice.

"On one particular occasion, I openly advocated for a patient's expressed wish to remain in contact with his former therapist. It was clear from numerous discussions with the patient and the professional with whom the patient was formerly involved in therapeutic work, that the communication was purely in a social non-professional capacity. As the patient had very few social connections, the relationship with his former therapist provided him with the safety and continuity of interaction with someone he trusted and with whom he felt comfortable. It also allowed him to settle well in the hospital and helped him build trust and confidence to work with the hospital team without fear of rejection and judgement. Originally, the multi-disciplinary team considered the patient's contact with his former therapist inappropriate and potentially damaging. However, after many lengthy discussions, it was openly accepted that the relationship was beneficial to the patient and in his best interest at this particular time.

"To me, social justice echoes the human rights principles and equality values that are the core fundamentals of social work practice. It means ensuring their voices are heard, advocating for equal treatment and opportunities, and a willingness to adapt practices in such a way that they feel included and their rights and wishes are respected and fulfilled."

Newly qualified forensic social worker

Our role as the regulator

The ongoing pressures outlined in this report create challenging working environments which could impact on a social worker's ability to uphold their professional standards. It is important for us to consider the impact that these issues have on our role as the regulator, for regulation and ultimately, how we protect the public. Our ongoing engagement with stakeholders from across the sector ensures that we continue to hear about the challenges social workers are facing in local settings. They are key in sharing learning to and from the regulator and play a part in upholding regulation locally, as well as modelling good social work.

We are acutely aware of the challenges facing the profession and recognise the impact they have for practice and public protection. We also recognise that social work is increasingly operating outside of local authority statutory settings and in multi-disciplinary teams, health services and the voluntary sector. We will continue to work with the sector to ensure this is reflected in our approach to regulation. We will also strive to take new approaches to regulation through meaningful collaboration and co-production to continue to embody social work in our regulation.



Upholding the professional standards



Professional standards describe the skills, knowledge and behaviours required within a regulated profession. Our professional standards are specialist to the social work profession and are necessary for safe and effective practice.

All social workers registered in England are expected to meet and uphold these professional standards throughout their registration. Social workers renew their registration annually and declare to us that they continue to uphold the professional standards in their practice. Non-compliance with these standards is taken into account in fitness to practise proceedings.

Case study

The professional identity of social workers:

To understand the importance of regulation for social workers, we asked a group of newly qualified social workers what professional identity means to them:

"To be able to explain what a social worker is."	"To be protected, understood, and supported."
"It helps to distinguish between personal and professional values."	"It protects us and validates us."
"Recognises the importance of social workers in society."	"Provides high standards when protecting others who are in need of support."
"To uphold the social work standards and values. To be proud to be a social worker."	"It gives others confidence in what we do."

As part of our role to protect the public, maintain confidence in the profession and promote high standards of professionalism, sometimes we need to investigate concerns about the conduct, character, competence and health of social workers. This is known as a person's fitness to practise.

The number of social workers that pass through any part of the fitness to practise process is proportionally very small compared to the overall number of social workers registered with us. On average this is 1.6% per year. An average of 3.6% of this number are removed from the register per year, which equates to 0.1% of the register as a whole.

The average number of social workers that have been part of any stage of the fitness to practise process over the last 3 years is

1,599
per year

The average number of social workers removed from the register as a result of the fitness to practise process over the last 3 years is

57
per year

What we have learned from our work

Through our work to investigate and take action where necessary, we have continued to build a better understanding of the types of concerns we receive about social workers. Over the 2021 to 2022 registration year we developed a more comprehensive list of categories for recording types of concern at the triage and investigation stages. These better align with our standards, and more accurately reflect the types of concerns we receive.

In the following sections, we provide data across the different stages of our fitness to practise process. This data is reflective of the concerns we received in the 2021 to 2022 registration year. Some concerns may not have been processed through their respective stage at the time of analysis, so any data provided reflects those cases that have been considered at that particular stage.

Raising a concern

In the 2021 to 2022 registration year, we received 1,734 concerns where a social worker had been identified. For the same period in the 2020 to 2021 registration year, we received 2,328 concerns, and in the 2019 to 2020 registration year, we received 1,982 concerns. We have started to scrutinise the data we hold to identify any trends in the number and types of concerns we receive with a view to improving our processes.

Like the first 2 years of our regulation, the largest number of concerns received in the 2021 to 2022 registration year came from members of public, followed by employers, and self-referrals.

Table 7: Number of concerns by referrer type (where referrer type has been identified) in our first 3 registration years

Concerns referred by	As at 30 November 2020	As at 30 November 2021	As at 30 November 2022
Employer	270	342	317
Member of the public	1,255	1,306	809
Other agency	46	83	45
Other social worker	52	42	40
Self-referral	110	137	143

The number of concerns received from members of the public was 36% lower in the 2021 to 2022 registration year, compared to the 2019 to 2020 registration year. The number of concerns received from other social workers also decreased by 23%. The number of concerns received from employers increased by 17%.

To better understand the types of concerns we are receiving, we have introduced further categories. Cases may also be recategorised as they progress through the different stages of the fitness to practise process as further case information is gathered. For this reason, it is not possible to provide a comparative analysis of concern types over the last 3 years. As there are now 22 categories, we have provided the 10 most common reasons for a concern to be raised in the 2021 to 2022 registration year.



Table 8: Percentage of concerns by concern type in the 2021 to 2022 registration year

Type of Concern	Percentage of concerns
Poor or inappropriate communication	22.6%
Dishonesty	17.2%
Safeguarding concerns	12.5%
Performance issues	7.5%
Other	6.7%
Professional boundaries	6.7%
Record keeping	4.4%
Bias and/or prejudicial treatment	3.3%
Court proceedings	3.0%
Health	2.8%

Note: some cases may have multiple concern types identified.

Our work to recategorise concerns is being led by professional advisors who are also social workers. This will help us to ensure that we are truly understanding the experience of the profession and those referring.

The role of the professional advisor

Professional advisors are integrated into the fitness to practise service, offering advice, support and guidance to staff regarding the concerns we receive. They provide practise-based knowledge to the fitness to practise process. They maintain close links with other parts of the organisation to ensure fitness to practise activities are connected and they also share awareness of the pressures facing the wider sector.

Professional advisors are able to provide context to concerns, to support decision making and proportionality. Professional advisors have vast experience in working with the public as social workers so they can offer insights into what daily practice can look like for professionals and those with lived experience.

Their role includes one-to-one and group discussions with members of the triage and investigation team, and they also host learning sessions on particular areas of practice. Professional advisors work closely with the regional engagement team. This helps to target engagement with the profession and helps maintain a bridge between the sector and our fitness to practise activity.

Pre-triage

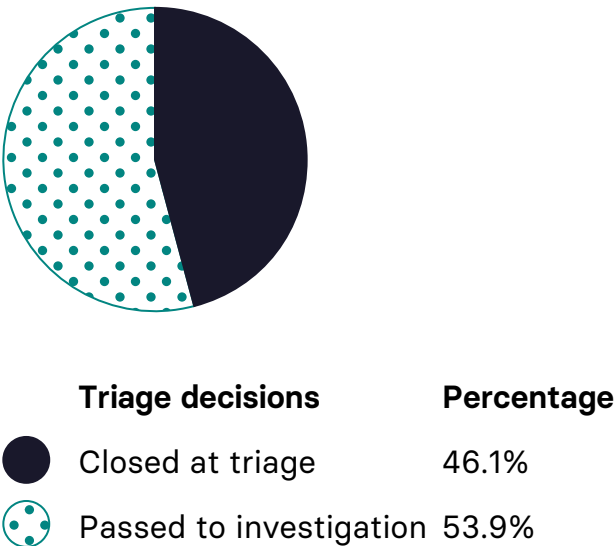
Sometimes the concerns that are raised with us are not about a social worker’s fitness to practise, and are not for us to investigate. In the 2021 to 2022 registration year, of the 1,734 concerns raised with us where we identified a social worker, 309 were determined to not be a fitness to practise concern. This was due to no statutory ground of impairment being identified. These were subsequently closed at the pre-triage stage.

Triage

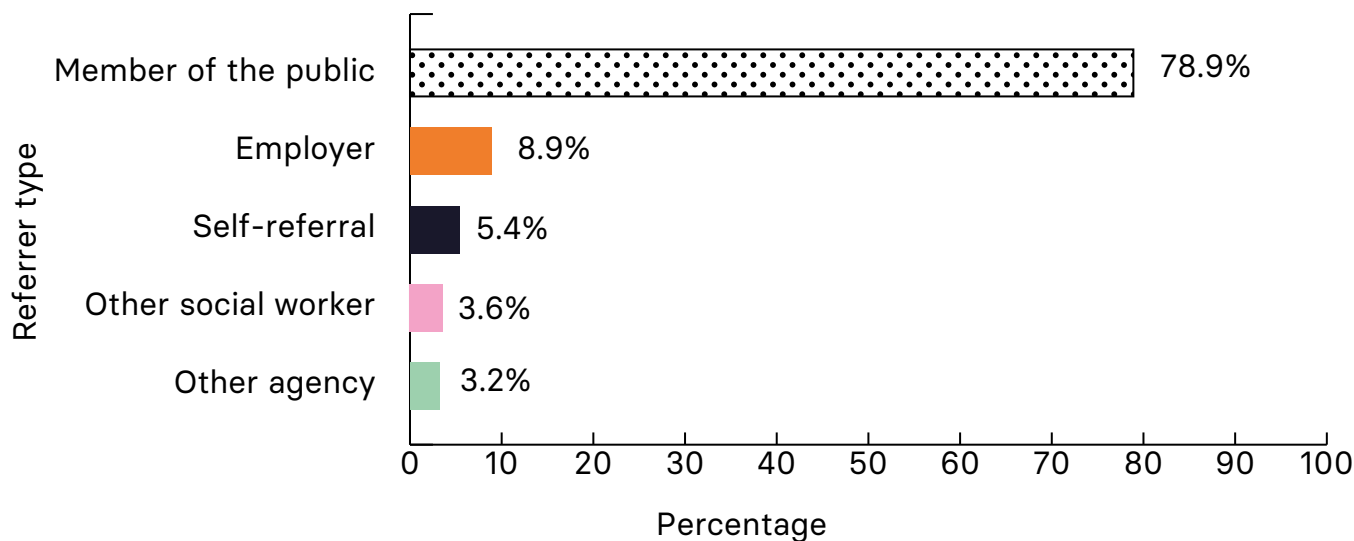
Once we have identified that the concern relates to a social worker and that a statutory ground has been identified, we then consider whether we should proceed to a full investigation. As set out in our guidance, the triage test determines if there is reasonable grounds for investigating whether the social worker’s fitness to practise is impaired.

Of the concerns received in the 2021 to 2022 registration year, and that have been through the triage test, 46.1% did not pass the triage test. 53.9% were opened as a case for investigation. The highest percentage of cases closed at triage are those that have been referred to us by members of the public.

Graph 8: Percentage of cases closed at triage vs those progressed to investigation for the concerns received in the 2021 to 2022 registration year

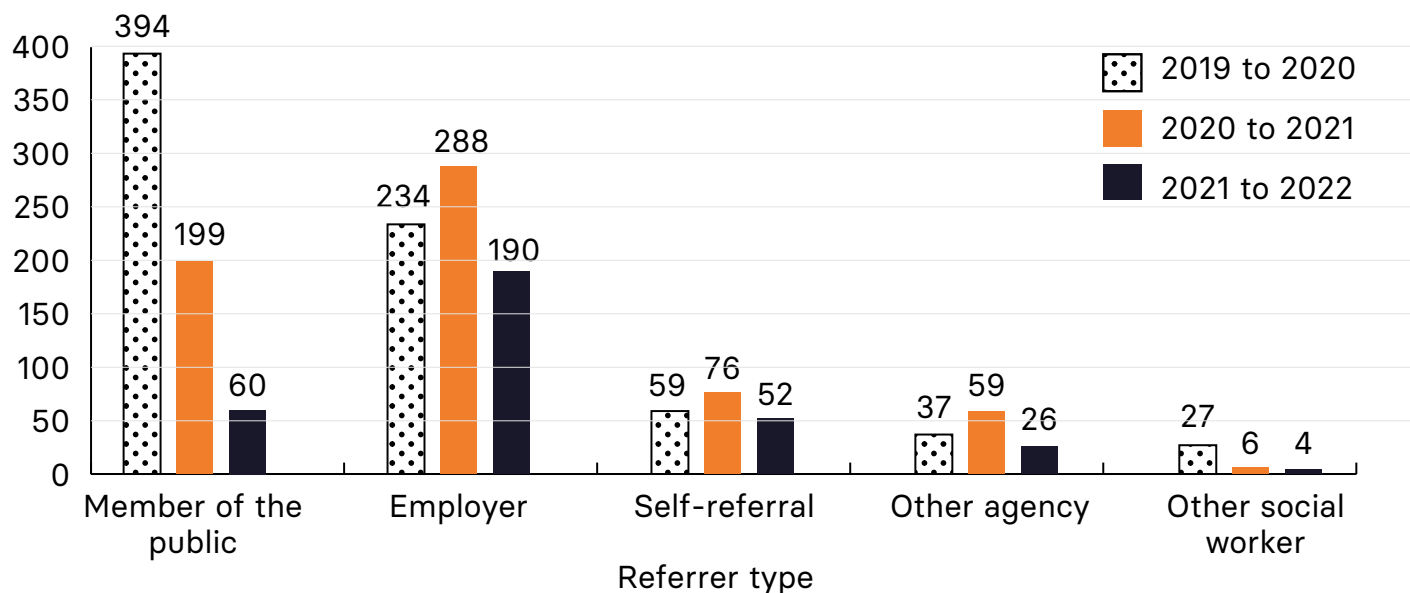


Graph 9: Percentage of cases closed at triage by referrer type in the 2021 to 2022 registration year



There has been a consistent decrease in the number of concerns referred by members of the public that are passed on to investigation. In the 2021 to 2022 registration year, less than a fifth (18%) of concerns referred by a member of the public were passed onto investigation. Consequently, this has caused an increase in the proportion of concerns from employers and social workers themselves. This is despite the fact that the figures in the 2021 to 2022 registration year are similar to those in the 2019 to 2020 registration year.

Graph 10: Number of concerns received that have been passed onto investigation, by referrer type in our first 3 registration years



Investigations

If a case progresses past the triage stage, the social worker in question is informed and given the chance to respond or provide further information. Our impartial investigators then gather the relevant information which may include evidence from other organisations, including employers. This stage of the process can take some time due to the complex nature of evidence gathering.

Case examiner stage

The evidence gathered by the investigator is then passed to a team of 2 independent case examiners – a practising social worker and a lay professional (someone whose profession is outside of social work). The case examiners consider the evidence, and representations by the social worker to decide whether their fitness to practise is impaired. Case examiners can either close the case, refer the case to a hearing or offer accepted disposal.

Accepted disposal

Accepted disposal can be offered if the case examiners decide there is a realistic prospect of finding a social worker's fitness to practise is impaired, but that it would not be in the public interest for the case to proceed to a fitness to practise hearing. In order for a case to be concluded in this way the social worker must agree that their fitness to practise is impaired, and accept the outcome offered by case examiners.

Case examiners are able to offer accepted disposal through one of 6 outcomes.

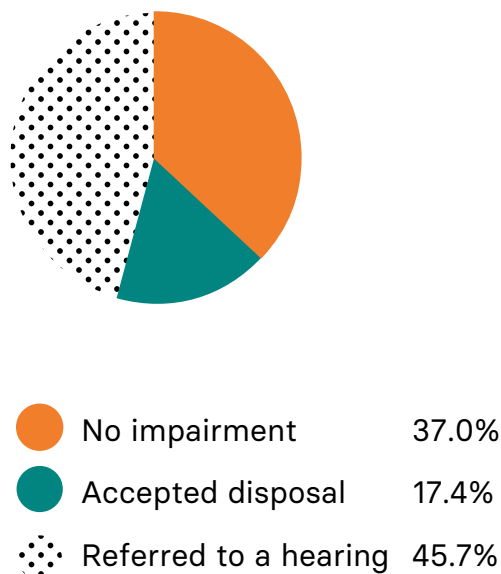
- No further action
- Advice
- Warning
- Conditions of practice
- Suspension
- Removal order

The most common outcome in the last 3 years offered through accepted disposal is a warning, followed by conditions of practice. If accepted disposal is not appropriate, or not agreed by the social worker, the case will be referred for a hearing.

Of the concerns received in the 2021 to 2022 registration year, and that have had a case examiners decision:

- 37% were closed as no impairment found
- 17.4% were resolved through accepted disposal
- 45.7% were referred to a hearing

Graph 11: Percentage of case examiner decisions of the concerns received in our first 3 registration years



Analysis of our data on accepted disposal suggests that continuous engagement throughout an investigation is an influential factor in accepted disposals. Case examiners are greatly assisted by strong communication and engagement with social workers and social work employers. Data suggests that sustained engagement is more likely to result in a case being concluded via accepted disposal.

One of the challenges of achieving outcomes in this way is in the understanding of the purpose of accepted disposal, and the importance of early and sustained engagement throughout the process. We have more work to do to promote a clear understanding of accepted disposal, both for social workers who are represented professionally and those who choose to represent themselves.

We have learnt that in the right set of circumstances, accepted disposal is an effective regulatory tool which ensures that public protection is maintained without the need for a fully contested hearing. We have found that early engagement with social workers under investigation has allowed the case examiners the opportunity to fully consider whether cases are suitable for accepted disposal.

We have had positive feedback from some social workers around the fact that an accepted disposal decision has allowed them to have a timelier decision in their case than if the case were to proceed onto a full hearing.

We will soon be undertaking a study of our caseload to consider how we might optimise the use of accepted disposal in the future.

In cases where the case examiners deem it is necessary for an independent panel of adjudicators to make a decision in the public interest, the evidence gathered by investigators along with the case examiners decision is passed to our external legal provider. This enables them to prepare for a final fitness to practise hearing.

Interim orders

An interim order is an order imposed by independent adjudicators. It can be applied for at any point during the fitness to practise process if an immediate risk to the public is identified. An interim order can place conditions of practice on a social worker's registration or suspend them from practice until a final hearing takes place. Interim orders are reviewed regularly for as long as the order remains in place. It is recognised that to place restrictions on a social worker's ability to practice before formal findings have been made about their fitness to practise is serious. This is why interim orders are only applied for in the most serious of cases. In the cases where an immediate risk to the public is not evident, preparation will be made for a final hearing.

To identify the need for an interim order, risk assessments are undertaken throughout the course of the fitness to practise process. Several factors must be considered, including the seriousness of the concerns, and whether there are grounds for imposing an interim order are met. These grounds are protection of the public, and/or best interests of the social worker.

Hearings and meetings

In the 2021 to 2022 registration year, we held 1,079 hearings. We held 834 hearings in the 2020 to 2021 registration year and 454 hearings in the 2019 to 2020 registration year.

We hold several different types of hearings and meetings.

- Interim order applications
- Interim order reviews
- Final fitness to practise hearings
- Final order reviews
- Restoration applications
- Registration appeals

Our fitness to practise rules enable us to hold some hearings as meetings, which are held remotely. All of the above, except final fitness to practise hearings, can take place as meetings. If a hearing is being held as a meeting, the adjudicators will meet to make a decision about the case based on documentary evidence only. This means that no one will be able to give oral evidence or make oral submissions.

Table 9: Number and percentage of types of hearings and meetings held in our first 3 registration years

Types of hearings and meetings	2019 to 2020		2020 to 2021		2021 to 2022	
Interim order application	86	18.9%	123	14.7%	122	11.3%
Interim order review	272	59.9%	500	60.0%	694	64.3%
Final hearing	25	5.5%	126	15.1%	162	15.0%
Final order review	62	13.7%	61	7.3%	91	8.4%
Restoration	0	0.0%	7	0.8%	3	0.3%
Registration appeals	9	2.0%	17	2.0%	7	0.6%
Total	454		834*		1,079	

* The total given in the [Social work in England report: Emerging themes](#) did not include the number of registration appeals and restorations that had taken place.

The data shows that the number of interim order reviews held has significantly increased over the last 3 years, as has the number of final hearings. This is due to a variety of reasons including hearing cases remotely, proceeding with some cases as meetings, and some cases being reviewed by 2 person panels of adjudicators instead of 3.

We saw a peak in restoration and registration appeal hearings and meetings being held in the 2020 to 2021 registration year. We will continue to monitor all our fitness to practise data and analyse any further trends.

The percentage distribution for final hearing outcomes over the last 3 years has remained stable. Of the final hearings held, the adjudicators reached the decisions set out in the table below.

Table 10: Number and percentage of final hearings outcomes by type in the 2021 to 2022 registration year

Outcome	Number and percentage
Conditions of practice order	0 (0.0%)
Conditions of practice order with an interim order for conditions of practice	11 (6.8%)
Discontinuance in full – application accepted/ not impaired	13 (8.0%)
Impaired – advice	0 (0.0%)
Impaired – no further action	2 (1.2%)
No impairment – advice	3 (1.9%)
No impairment – warning	2 (1.2%)
Not well founded – facts/grounds	13 (8.0%)
Not well founded – no Impairment	21 (13.0%)
Removal order	3 (1.9%)
Removal order with an interim order for suspension	36 (22.2%)
Suspension order	4 (2.5%)
Suspension order with an interim order for suspension	42 (25.9%)
Warning order	12 (7.4%)

Remote hearings and meetings

With the introduction of a national lockdown in March 2020, people had to quickly adapt to new ways of working to allow them to continue to deliver necessary services. For us, that meant making temporary changes to our rules to allow us to hold almost all of our hearings for both fitness to practise and registration appeals online. Although final hearings were temporarily halted at the beginning of the pandemic, our ability to adapt quickly meant that we could continue to hold hearings remotely for interim orders to ensure ongoing protection of the public.

Holding hearings remotely also means we have made them more accessible for social workers and witnesses by removing the need for participants to travel or take extensive time off work.

This was initially a temporary measure but, in order to continue to see the benefits outlined above, we needed to make the changes permanent. In April 2022, following a [public consultation](#), we published [amendments to our rules](#) that would allow us to define the 'place' a hearing could take place as either a physical or virtual location. This has allowed us to continue to conduct our hearings remotely but some hearings will still take place in-person or in a hybrid way where it is necessary to ensure the hearing is fair.

As most of our hearings take place remotely, it allows social workers and witnesses the opportunity to participate from the comfort of safe and familiar surroundings, without having to travel.

All final hearings that have taken place since the first national lockdown in March 2020 have been held remotely, except:

- 4 in-person final hearings (where all participants physically attend a hearing in our hearing suite in Sheffield)
- 1 hybrid final hearing (where some participants attended remotely and some in person)
- 3 blended hybrid final hearings (where some days of the hearing were attended in-person and some hybrid)

Case study

A social worker's experience of remote hearing:

"I would say that a remote hearing is quite good if the IT skills are good and the system is running smoothly. I would like to thank the IT support people from Social Work England, who were exceptionally good in supporting the smooth running.

"Hearings are never a comfortable or an easy thing at all, but remote hearings are better, especially if you don't have representation, because you can be in your own home. Travelling to be questioned that much is so difficult.

"I prefer remote hearings, especially on Teams, as everyone involved is visible on screen."

Social worker attending a final hearing

While we have seen the benefits of holding hearings remotely in terms of accessibility we have still experienced challenges. When we took over as the regulator for social work the forecast number of hearings we would be required to hold was very different from the reality we faced. A significant pause to final hearings caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the effect of the legacy caseload we inherited, has impacted how quickly we have been able to progress and conclude fitness to practise cases.

It is clear that we will have a challenging number of hearings to hold over the next 3 years. We are looking closely at what more can be done to ensure that we are working to conclude cases appropriately at the earliest possible stage, alongside ensuring that the right cases are taken into the fitness to practise process.



Single point of contact network

Through our 3 years of regulation, we have learnt that improving communication with a local authority will reduce the time it takes to obtain vital evidence for a case to be passed to the case examiner stage. Our regional engagement team have established a single point of contact network, with a contact at over 90% of all local authorities in England.

The network consists of key individuals nominated by their organisation to liaise and communicate with Social Work England about fitness to practise cases. They have been fundamental in improving communication and providing documents that had been difficult to obtain.

They have also supported witnesses to provide a statement or attend a hearing. Early feedback suggests that the role of the single point of contact network has had a positive impact on the progression of cases. A single point of contact network forum has now been established with representatives from different local authorities with the aim of sharing learning to ultimately improve the fitness to practise process. Following the success of this network, we will be looking to establish a similar forum with the NHS.

Supporting our fitness to practise process

To ensure that we are meeting our overarching objective to protect the public, we have a number of process-review groups and networks at each stage of the fitness to practise process. One of these includes consideration of decisions by the decision review group. The decision review group is made up of relevant experts from Social Work England, members of our National Advisory Forum, and an independent representative from one of our comparable regulators. On a monthly basis, the group evaluates a proportion of decisions made by the regulator, and by our independent decision makers (case examiners and adjudicators). The group helps to develop an insight into broader trends in fitness to practise investigations and hearings through the implementation of thematic reviews. It also considers learning from cases that are successfully appealed by the Professional Standards Authority, and may make recommendations regarding learning and feedback provided to us by the Authority. National Advisory Forum members play an important role in providing a voice from the perspective of someone with lived experience, ensuring a more robust quality assurance process.

Some of the emerging themes in fitness to practise decisions include cases where social workers have received convictions for driving under the influence of drink or drugs, use of social media and organisational issues which impact fitness to practise referrals. Due to these recurring themes, we recently developed and consulted on our new drink and drug driving policy.

The policy sets out the factors our decision makers (adjudicators and case examiners) should take into account when considering (both of the following):

- The seriousness of the offending
- The question of whether a social worker's fitness to practise can or should be found impaired when convicted of such an offence

Case study

The role of an expert by experience in the decision review group:

"From my point of view, involvement of an expert by experience in the decision review group is an essential part of the process. It is also another example of where co-production is being embedded within Social Work England processes.

"Each case under review is discussed in detail on an individual basis. Members of the group share their expert viewpoints which are taken into consideration before reaching final consensus. The function of National Advisory Forum members, like myself, is to give an expert by experience (lived and/or learned) perspective and act as a critical friend with an authentic perspective of, and through the lens of, a service user.

"We have the decisions and a thorough briefing in advance of meetings to ensure we are well prepared and focussed for the meetings, and where relevant we also debrief afterwards. I know that I can, with conviction and real honesty, assure my friends and ex colleagues, who are social workers and service users, that the decision review group works and is in everyone's best interest – the profession, social workers and service users."

Member of the National Advisory Forum and decision review group

Through the learning of the decision review group, a local authority designated officer network was also created. A local authority designated officer is responsible for managing allegations against adults who work with children.

The aim of the network is to engage at a local level and offer local authority designated officers an opportunity to learn how and when to refer fitness to practise concerns to us as the regulator. We have created guidance to assist local authority designated officers

and the network has disseminated key messages to local authority designated officers across England. We have also been able to agree principles on when local authority designated officers will invite us to key information sharing meetings once a case progresses to the investigation stage to aid us in gathering key information in a timely manner. This assists with greater public protection but also ensures referrals are not made too early or unnecessarily. The network meets twice a year with a dedicated email address for queries to be raised whenever support is required.

A fair and supportive process

Through our engagement with social workers who have experienced our fitness to practise process, we know that they feel it is lengthy and that it can be traumatic for those undergoing investigation. But a thorough investigation is important to enable fair and proportionate decisions, and to effectively protect the public.

Remediation

In some cases it is possible for a social worker to return to unrestricted practice if they are able to effectively demonstrate remediation. Our case review team monitors suspended social workers and social workers with conditions of practice on their registration. 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. While they cannot change the decision made, they will be there to guide the social worker through their remediation and back to unrestricted practice wherever possible.

During our first 3 years of regulation, 55 social workers with final orders of conditions of practice or suspension have successfully remediated and demonstrated that they are able to practice unrestricted. In these cases, our independent decision makers have reviewed their cases and taken the decision that their final orders should be allowed to lapse when they expire.

Engagement with the sector

It is important for us to continue engaging with the profession to help those involved to better understand our role to protect the public. By continuing to engage with social workers, as well as sharing information and data in our annual report, social workers can be better informed about what constitutes a concern, how they are investigated and the different outcomes. It's also a way for employers to be able to learn how to help social workers understand professional boundaries and best practice to uphold professional standards and ultimately helps social workers better understand the fitness to practise process.

The fitness to practise employer workshops we run help social workers, and their managers, to better understand the process before a concern might be raised. This helps them feel better informed and prepared for the fitness to practise process.

Case study

Anonymised feedback from fitness to practise workshops with employers and social workers:

"Really informative, definitely a must for all new starters or those new to a more senior role."

"As a HR colleague, I thought it might not be as relevant as it was, but I'm really glad I attended. It was well delivered, clear and has really helped my understanding of when to refer. I have encouraged colleagues to look at any future dates and attend."

"I found this event really helpful – especially the details about what concerns Social Work England can or cannot investigate – this is really useful information. The event was well presented."

"Really enjoyed this workshop, time well spent and good to collaborate with Social Work England and other external colleagues – thank you."

Some social workers have spoken to us about the impact that a high turnover of agency staff can have on managing concerns about a social worker's practice. Employers manage appropriate practice issues locally within organisations. However, with increased movement of agency social workers on short-term contracts, this could result in practice issues going unaddressed as social workers move from post to post. We are starting to collect data through our fitness to practise process to explore what, if any, risks the nature of agency working pose.

Further insights

As we now hold diversity data for the profession, we will be analysing our fitness to practise processes and will in future years be able to share further insights into the diversity of social workers going through our fitness to practise process.

Career-long learning



A social worker's learning begins with their initial education and training. It is the first step in a professional commitment to learning that continues throughout their career. After graduating, social workers continue to develop their skills and knowledge. Continued professional development is important for all social workers to ensure that they continue to meet our professional standards by keeping their practice up to date, looking for opportunities to improve existing skills and learn new ones, and staying abreast of the latest developments and best practice in their field. It also helps to maintain confidence and credibility in the profession, and provides opportunities to specialise.

Newly qualified social workers

The first years of practice are crucial to a social worker's development. They are the years where a social worker has qualified and is registered to practise, but has the least amount of practice experience to draw from.

All newly qualified social workers should receive additional support from their manager. Currently, some social workers take part in an assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE). This ensures that newly qualified social workers have protected caseloads for the first 12 months of their employment as well as close and frequent supervision. There is also an assessment against post-qualifying standards. This is intended to provide newly qualified social workers specialist tailored support to help put their education and training into practice. Although this is a great opportunity for newly-qualified social workers, it is not a set requirement.

Case study

Newly qualified social workers starting on their ASYE programme share how they are feeling at the start of their social work journey:

"Confident."	"Overwhelmed at times, it's a big learning curve but I'm enjoying it so far."
"Well looked after."	
"Excited."	"Overwhelmed, but excited I'm actually doing the job I studied for 3 years."
"Optimistic. I am growing in confidence every day!"	
"Initially a little overwhelmed, but I'm feeling calmer now."	"I feel great because I am having lots of different experiences with the families I am working with."

We have heard some great examples of how employers support their newly qualified social workers through those initial years of practice. For example, we know that in some places multiple trusts have collaborated on a shared programme that has been developed with social work leads across the trusts. In others, local authorities have created specialist groups to encourage and support newly qualified social workers. In addition to the Skills for Care framework, some have chosen to include an enhanced focus on certain areas of practice, such as mental health within a health led setting.

In the second chapter of this report we highlighted known issues around vacancies, recruitment and retention in the workforce. We will continue to collect and analyse data to provide further insight into this and we will also commission research in 2023 to understand workforce trends across the whole profession.

Key to improving retention is ensuring that all newly qualified social workers receive the best support to transition from their initial education and training into the workforce. Though we have shared some examples of where newly qualified social workers are supported as they make this transition, we know that this is not consistently the case for all.

Given the importance of both public protection and professional confidence in this transition, we will look to introduce requirements that provide mandatory protected time in practice and professional development for all new social work graduates across England, and equity of training across the profession. This will ensure that every newly qualified social worker has access to consistent high quality training to support them as they join practice, make them feel prepared and confident and want to stay.

Continuing professional development

Each year, social workers are required to demonstrate that they are maintaining their learning and development, and therefore remain fit to practise. They do this by recording continuing professional development (CPD) with us.

Our model for CPD, developed in consultation with the public and profession, supports a culture of regular reflective learning and recording on subjects that are relevant and valuable to a social worker's individual practice. Our vision is that CPD becomes a continuous process of learning, reflecting and recording across the year – ongoing, sustained and embedded in practice and a valued part of professional life.

Learning from CPD

In the 2021 to 2022 registration year, we asked social workers to record at least 2 pieces of CPD in their online account. As at 30 November 2022, social workers on the register had, between them, uploaded 220,937 pieces of CPD. This is an average of 2.3 pieces of CPD per social worker. This has remained consistent over the first 3 years of our regulation.

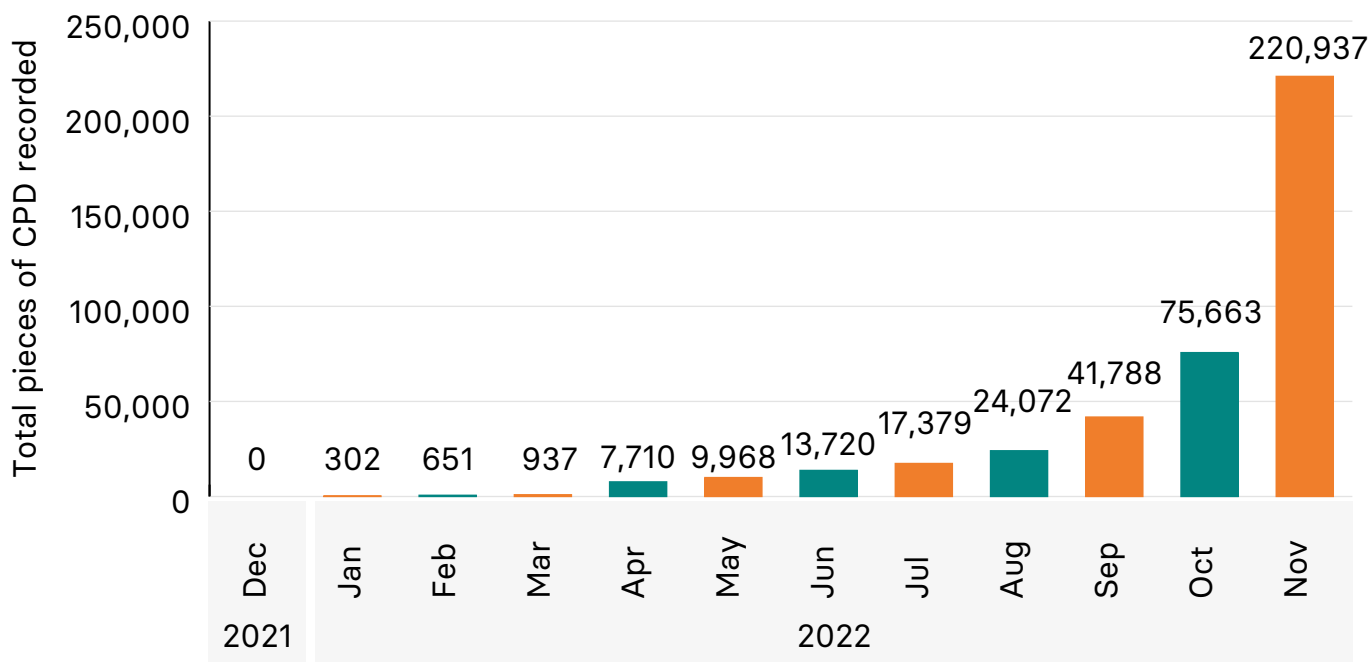
220,937

individual pieces of CPD
recorded

2.3

pieces of CPD on average
per social worker

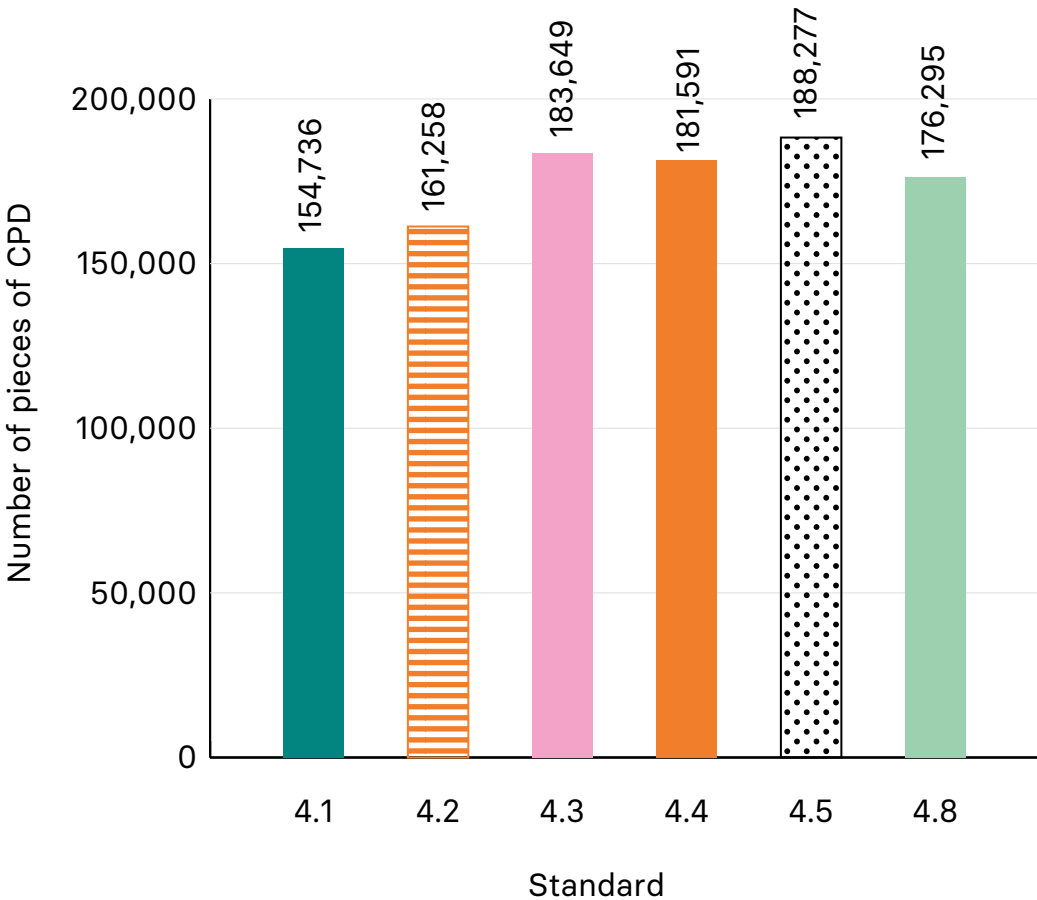
Graph 12: Number of pieces of CPD recorded by month in the 2021 to 2022 registration year



Note: The CPD system was closed for updates during December 2021, so no CPD could be recorded during this period.

When recording their CPD, social workers are asked which CPD standards they feel they are demonstrating. They can select multiple standards for the same piece of CPD. During the 2021 to 2022 registration year, excluding standards 4.6 and 4.7 as they are demonstrated in every piece of CPD, we can see that standard 4.5, which states 'contribute to an open and creative learning culture in the workplace', was most often demonstrated (188,277 pieces of CPD). Standard 4.1, which states 'incorporate feedback from a range of sources', was demonstrated the least (154,736 pieces of CPD).

Graph 13: Number of pieces of CPD submitted by CPD standard in the 2021 to 2022 registration year



In the 2021 to 2022 registration year, we also made some changes to our CPD recording system, including asking social workers to record the type of CPD they had carried out. Training continues to be the most common form of CPD (31.8%), followed by learning from a case (11.7%), and on the job learning/experience learning from a case (11.0%). Whilst we want social workers to choose CPD that's relevant to them and their practice, we would also encourage them to seek out new and innovative ways of learning and development.

Graph 14: Percentage of pieces of CPD recorded by type in the 2021 to 2022 registration year



Peer reflection

For the first time, in the 2021 to 2022 registration year social workers were required to record at least one peer reflection as part of their renewal requirements. Peer reflection means discussing the content of a CPD activity with a peer, manager or another professional.

It's important to have a safe space to be able to share your experiences with others, to focus on understanding rather than solving, and be honest about the challenges you faced. It also provides the opportunity to learn from the experiences of others as you consider how to improve your practice in the future.

In the 2021 to 2022 registration year, those on the register had, between them, uploaded 130,970 pieces of CPD that included a peer reflection. This is an average of 1.3 pieces of CPD with a peer reflection per social worker.

130,970

Individual pieces of peer reflection recorded

1.3

pieces of peer reflection on average

Case study

Meeting the peer reflection requirement of CPD as an independent social worker:

What is an independent social worker?

"An independent social worker offers social work services on an independent basis. My role covers a range of services, including independent assessments for a local authority, or the court of protection, and undertaking the role of best interest assessor for the deprivation of liberty safeguards."

Peer reflection process

"I was given the opportunity to record a podcast on safeguarding with a barrister who I had worked with previously in the court of protection. Whilst there is research and writings about contextual and transitional safeguarding, there is little information available about how this research is weaved into practice in times of serious safeguarding situations involving the courts.

"I knew that I would gain a lot from being able to talk about a complex social work issue with a colleague from another discipline. Being a podcast, this also offers a continuum of learning each time the podcast is downloaded by someone who also wants to contribute their thoughts.

"The collaboration between the 2 professions in the context of a peer discussion supports further learning and perspectives, as we become challenged increasingly by more complex needs and decreasing resources. Discussing the dilemmas of practice, the legalities, and the ethical challenges these situations pose and offer professionals to be able to use the knowledge shared to inform their own practice is a key requirement of social work.

"I support the use of the peer reflections for social work. I was pleased that it offered the opportunity to use disciplines outside of social work, as we learn from each other and not just from within the field of social work."

Independent social worker

CPD review

Shortly after the end of every registration year, we carry out a review of a selection of CPD recorded with us. This allows us to confirm that social workers are meeting the requirements and helps to assure public confidence in the standard of practice being delivered by the profession.

To carry out the review, a group of independent assessors made up of social workers and lay professionals look at a 2.5% sample of CPD records recorded during that registration year to check that they have met our CPD requirements.

Due to the timing of the review, the learning we share here is from the review of the 2020 to 2021 registration year (which required social workers to record at least one piece of CPD only). From February to March 2022, CPD assessors reviewed the CPD records of 2,354 social workers. They gave an 'accepted' outcome to 2,225 social workers (94.5%). An 'advice given' outcome was given to 129 social workers (5.5%). These figures are similar to our first CPD review.



The assessors felt that the range of CPD was broader and the quality higher in the 2020 to 2021 registration year than in the 2019 to 2020 registration year. They observed a bolder and braver approach from some social workers, with a willingness to reflect on events and practice where something had not gone to plan. They also felt there was evidence of social workers investing more time and effort when recording CPD, and saw more creative types of CPD, such as podcasts, articles and discussions. They observed an increase in peer learning, even though the requirement to carry out and record a peer reflection was not introduced until the 2021 to 2022 registration year.

From the review we know that references to COVID-19 in CPD records have reduced, but many social workers reflected on the ongoing impact of the pandemic. This included giving examples of the personal support needed to manage their work and the anxieties they were experiencing.

Where advice was given by the assessors, they felt that social workers had not given enough detail on how their CPD had impacted on their practice. To help support social workers with their CPD, we hold regular workshops hosted by our regional engagement team.

Advanced practice

Once qualified, social workers are able to take on roles in certain areas of practice that can be particularly complex or higher risk. Sometimes these roles require prescribed training and additional registration requirements, such as the annotation of a professional's entry on our register.

We currently hold responsibility for 2 such roles with annotations. These are in mental health – the approved mental health professional, and mental capacity – the best interests assessor.

Mental health and mental capacity

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

Part of the role of an AMHP involves undertaking assessments whereas, ordinarily, AMCPs will not carry out assessments. They will receive and evaluate the assessments made by other professionals, and give a direction to the relevant organisation about whether a person's detention is lawful and in their best interests.

In that respect, the AMCP role goes beyond that of the BIA, requiring professionals to show advanced skills in assessing, weighing risk and making determinations that carry greater weight. The AMCP function will also cover 16 and 17 year olds.

In 2022, following consultation we published new education and training approval standards for both AMHPs and AMCPs which we will use to approve and monitor courses leading to the award of these qualifications. We will implement our new AMHP standards during 2023 and we will work with the Department of Health and Social Care on the implementation of the liberty protection safeguards system – the legal framework which surrounds the AMCP role.

Case study

Co-producing advanced practice training

"I am part of a group of experts by experience who co-produce modules, teaching and training, as well as delivery with a university. One area of involvement is in the AMHP courses, on both the pre-AMHP and AMHP course, as well as involvement in the AMHP admissions interview process and decision making.

"In my view, if we are to improve academic modules in higher education institutes and universities, then 'authentic co-production' in academic modules is key. This means I am able to bring the nuances and specific lens that I have, through my significant, wide-ranging personal lived and learned experience.

"To improve care and make studies more relevant and well informed, we must understand the subjective experience. Research should be done in collaboration with service users and students to deliver richer, more authentic and real life scenarios and lived experiences, which therefore prepares the student to be more ready as future AMHPs."

Member of a service user and carer involvement group

What we are learning about advanced practice

AMHPs, like all parts of the mental health system, are under substantial pressure arising from workforce issues, including recruitment and retention. Through our engagement with AMHP groups, some have told us that due to staff shortages some local authorities are having to share AMHPs. We are engaging with a number of key stakeholders to identify ways in which we can effectively support work to meet these growing challenges.

The key challenge facing the mental capacity workforce relates to the transition between the 2 legal frameworks. The first being the existing deprivation of liberty safeguards system, which includes the BIA role, and the second being the planned change to liberty protection safeguards which will bring in the AMCP role.

Advanced practice regulation in the coming years

We continue to hear from a range of stakeholders and from the sector about challenges across advanced practice, not just among AMHPs and BIAs.

Over the next few years we will look at the social work post qualifying career. We will explore where greater regulatory involvement is likely to be a proportionate, effective and appropriate response to increased risk.

We will look to other regulators' models where they already regulate advanced practitioners, but will develop a social work specific approach. This approach will create supportive regulatory frameworks for advanced practitioners, not simply additional standards requirements.

Our vision for 2023 and beyond for post-qualifying social work training and advanced practice is for a regulatory framework that is:

- an appropriate and effective response to risk which gives assurance and upholds standards and quality in advanced practice areas
- able to lend credibility and authority to practitioners
- proportionate
- developed in close collaboration with the sector including those with lived and learned experience of social work, and employers of social workers

Regulating through engagement and co-production

We are committed to engagement and co-production. We believe that people who are affected by our work as a regulator should have the opportunity to share their views and help shape our work as well as our policies and procedures. We also work with representative bodies to co-produce our work.

Co-production helps the social work profession be the best it can be and ensures ongoing learning and inclusion. One of the ways in which we champion co-production is through our National Advisory Forum that is made up of people with lived and learned experience of social work. They act as a critical friend and help shape our regulatory work, such as helping to develop our strategy, auditing fitness to practise decisions, reviewing publications, supporting recruitment of board members and leadership team, and organising and speaking at our events. We want to act as an example to the sector and support the embedding of co-production across the profession, who we encourage to use co-production to develop best practice. It also helps to ensure an inclusive lens to the development of organisational policies.

Case study

Turning 'us and them' into 'we':

Social worker:

"I am a consultant social worker and trainer for a charity which supports children who have experienced sexual abuse, display harmful sexual behaviour and are at risk of, or being exploited. The charity planned to deliver a virtual webinar to multi-agency professionals discussing the barriers boys may face when speaking of, and seeking help for their experiences of sexual abuse.

"Authenticity has always been a core value within my work, so approaching the co-founders of a lived experience organisation to collaborate on the webinar was imperative to be able to ensure legitimacy."

2 people with lived experience:

"We are the co-founders of a lived experience organisation providing training and consultation. Our main focus is to create an interactive learning environment which will inspire confidence in practice and look at recovery from trauma through fresh eyes.

"Before agreeing to collaborate we needed to consider if the charity was worthy to stand alongside and the project itself would not exploit our vulnerabilities and gain at the expense of our trauma. We spent a lot of time together getting to understand one another and where we were coming from. We thought let's turn all the stuff we know, think and feel into something positive and practical that can change practice.

"We all agreed we could deliver a project which had a blend of understanding gained from experience, validation and intertwining of theory."

Co-producing the project

Social worker:

"For co-production to occur, trust, respect and partnership needs to be earned. Understanding a situation and being guided by the child's voice is at the forefront of my practice. I recognised that by involving adult lived experience, it makes it possible to identify what children need from those around them now, and who can have the most impact in ensuring their safety and starting the healing process.

"It is not the child's responsibility to stop their own abuse, as professionals we need to go beyond waiting for that verbal disclosure, we need to use all of the evidence that the child is offering through trying to communicate their trauma."

2 people with lived experience:

"We shared our experiences and what was needed which was then translated through a theoretical lens. This not only increased understanding for both parties but informed guidance on what the practitioner could do to best support the child.

"Together we put together a trauma informed webinar which is something we never thought we'd do, but is the best thing we've ever done. Through the social worker's trauma-informed approach and hearing, listening and feeling what we said, we were able to come up with a plan for change. This would have a huge impact on how children's experiences are understood and responded to. You can see that from the footprint we have left with those we have delivered training to together.

"We have continued to collaborate on many events including, conferences, trauma informed master classes and providing consultation for individual children. It is a mutually respectful and empowering partnership that is committed to continuing the embedding of trauma informed practice."

Consultant social worker and co-founders of a lived experience organisation

Social Work Week

One of our key annual moments for engagement with the sector is Social Work Week in March, which is timed to coincide with the worldwide World Social Work Day. Our Social Work Week programme and individual sessions are co-produced with the National Advisory Forum and other people from across England with lived and learned experience of social work. The sessions provide a unique space for discussion on best practice in upholding professional standards, key themes that social workers are seeing in their practice and the ambitions social workers have for the profession. It is an opportunity to meaningfully connect with other social workers, and those who use social work services, and share experiences through reflection.

Sessions hosted during the week also help us to understand the feelings and experiences of people with lived experience and social workers. It also helps social workers to understand our commitment to learn from the profession and improve our communication and processes.

After the success of the first Social Work Week in 2021, social workers, organisations and members of the public were invited to design and run their own sessions at the second Social Work Week in March 2022. Of the 13 sessions curated and co-delivered by Social Work England, 3,220 people attended, with an average of 240 attendees per session. [You can view the variety of topics from Social Work Week 2022 here.](#)

Case study

The success of Social Work Week 2022:

"Nice to feel a little more connected to the regulator."

"Really insightful and great to hear from experts by experience!"

"The session was thought provoking and reaffirmed to me the need for excellent communication, listening and co-joined working with the people we support but also colleagues."

"Brilliant session. I feel more confident talking about my autism with colleagues."

"Great reminder of the importance of co-production and collaborative working."

"Our organisation felt proud to be able to host an event that was promoted by Social Work England. It was great to be able to offer our webinar to a wide demographic of social workers."

"I welcomed the invitation to join with a community reflecting on what social work has been through as a profession in the last two years – it was also a part of honouring people that I have worked with in this time."

"Great to reach so many social workers outside of our normal sphere of interaction."

The third Social Work Week in March 2023 will once again be co-delivered by Social Work England, the social work sector, and people with lived experience of social work. The themes for 2023 are:

- **Learn:** the breadth of social work: lived, learned and professional experiences
- **Connect:** social work identity and sharing best practice
- **Influence:** looking back at the past 3 years, and looking forward to what's next for social work in England

Looking to the future

This third report, and first of its kind in social work, is a valuable opportunity to share the culmination of our learning from our first 3 years as the regulator. Thanks to those who contributed, we have been able to share a picture of the state of social work in 2023.

The data we've shared gives an update on the figures we shared in our first 2 reports and considered comparisons across the 3 years where we found potential emerging trends. We've also drawn on the research, data and learning from across the sector. The experiences that people have shared demonstrates the commitment, dedication and resilience of social workers across the country.

Though our evidence base is growing, there is much more data and insight we need to gather to transform the profession. As part of our strategy for 2023 to 2026, we will continue to learn through collecting and harnessing the data and insight we hold, and conducting research to gather a deeper understanding of the profession.

Our experience over the last 3 years has shown us the value of an increasing focus on prevention and impact. With this, a strengthened evidence base, and continued determination, we hope to bring about a better balance in social work so that many concerns are prevented from happening at all.

We will also continue to engage and co-produce with stakeholders across the sector, including people with lived experience, who share their own experiences to deepen our understanding of social work.

Reflecting on our experiences of these first 3 years as the regulator has been invaluable and helps inform our work going forwards. Our ambition as an organisation has always been about driving positive change and making a difference to the profession and the public. With the publication of our strategy for 2023 to 2026, we will set out how we will address some of the issues identified in this report.



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