



Department of Health strategic statement for social work with adults in England 2016-2020

Social work with adults – our vision

Our vision for adult social work is for a highly skilled, capable and confident profession, which is clear about its role in working with people to empower, protect and promote their wellbeing and inclusion and its contribution to supporting people across the wider health and care system.

Why social work?

Every day, social workers deal with complex and challenging situations. They play a unique role in supporting people, often at the most difficult times in their lives. To do this successfully, they require a distinctive set of skills, knowledge and values to enable social workers to work with children, families, adults and their communities and with professionals across a range of sectors, including in health, housing and the legal system. To do their job well requires compassion, empathy, analytical thinking and an understanding of the positive impact they can have in people's lives. They work with complexity, uncertainty, risk and conflict within a complex legal framework. They are required to use sound professional judgement in balancing needs, risks and resources to achieve the right outcome.

Done well, social work can improve people's opportunities and quality of life, enabling them to lead the lives they want, as best they can.

Social work has a vital role to play in realising our commitment to deliver seven day services and an integrated health and care system, using strengths and outcome focussed approaches to support people's independence and wellbeing, seeing the whole person, not just a list of conditions. Social workers are central to that ambition, working in multi-disciplinary teams, enabling and working alongside people to develop the right solutions to help people stay well, live independently and, where they do require hospital treatment, helping ensure people are discharged and receive on-going care and support appropriate to their needs.

This is a challenging environment for adult social care as a combination of an aging population and increasing demand and expectations, create further demand on social care and social work services. To put the scale of activity into context, in 2014-15, there were 1.8 million requests for local authority adult social care support, with people aged 65

accounting for over two thirds (72%)¹ and this will only continue to grow as our population ages and people live longer with more complex conditions.

Raising social work's profile

Social work should be a well understood and highly respected profession, but this is often not the case. The public know what a doctor, a nurse or a police officer is and what they do - they are valued and respected as professionals. They know the hard choices they can face on a day to day basis and that those choices can have an irreversible impact on people's lives. We want this to be the case for social workers.

However, raising public awareness and understanding, alongside the very real pressures social workers face, is a considerable challenge. The profession is often blamed when things go wrong, which in turn reinforces staff feeling undervalued and overlooked and a loss of confidence in the sector. This impacts on recruitment and retention, as well as the quality of social work provision. We aim to raise awareness and understanding of the invaluable role that social workers play in adult social care and health, recognising that is often overshadowed by child and family statutory social work.

Increasing public engagement, promoting the professional role of social workers and the wider social services sector, encouraging the sector to be more confident in promoting what it does well and the contribution it makes across a wide range of services and partnerships, are all vital to our vision of creating and sustaining a skilled, educated and confident profession, able to rise to the challenge of modern social work and the integration of health and social care.

As part of this agenda, we are working with the Department of Education (DfE) to develop joint communications emphasising our departments' shared goal to raise the quality and status of the social work profession. The key aim will be to create pro-active, rather than just reactive communications, to ensure messages are accurate, relevant and delivered at moments that matter to our audiences.

We are continuing to lead an ambitious programme of social work reform which will support and enable social workers to be the best they can be.

To deliver this we are:

- Ensuring social work is maintained as a single profession, with a common core set of values, skills and knowledge.
- Establishing a dedicated regulator for social work focussed on raising the quality of education, training and practice.
- Ensuring a sustained focus on continuous professional development to support retention and progression.

¹ Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC), 2014-15

- Ensuring consistency in the support offered to newly qualified social workers through improved arrangements for the Assessed and Supported Year of Employment (ASYE).;
- Developing options for the accreditation of practice supervisors and practice educators.
- Considering options to set standards for specialist and advanced roles in social work with adults.
- Consulting on how best we can use funding for social work education in the future.

Some of this is already under way, but there is more to do. In the following pages, we set out what DH is doing to deliver our vision to create a highly skilled and confident profession, which has practice excellence at its heart, from initial education and training through to the different stages in a social worker's career.

Areas for action

Social work education

The education social workers receive provides the building blocks for their careers. This must be the best it can be. That is why the proposed new regulator will have an absolute focus on driving up standards of education.

What have we done?

We have made significant progress in raising the quality of social work education and training, including:

- Building on the Professional Capabilities Framework, published a Knowledge and Skills statement for social workers in adults which is informing qualifying and post qualifying programmes.
- With DfE, supporting the development of Social Work Teaching Partnerships bringing together universities and employers to ensure students are fully prepared for frontline social work.
- Developed the Think Ahead fast track graduate programme for mental health social work, helping create future leaders of the profession, who can meet our goal of delivering parity of esteem between mental and physical health as part of an integrated health and care system.
- Laid the foundations for the creation of a new social work regulator that will take over the accreditation of HEI courses to ensure they are, and stay at, the highest standards. The new regulator will replace the HCPC and is anticipated to begin operating in 2018.

What are we are doing?

- Working with DfE to establish a new specialist regulator for social work. The new body will set new standards for, and accredit, all qualifying education and training

programmes which enable registration as a social worker, based on new standards of professional practice as advised by the Chief Social Workers.

- Committed to funding social work education over the current Parliament (2020). Ministers and the Chief Social Workers are clear that we need to ensure that we maximise this funding to drive up the quality of entry, maintain supply and ensure value for money for the taxpayer. We have announced our intention to consult on how we can best utilise resources to deliver these outcomes in the NHS Bursary consultation and further details will be announced in due course.

Post-qualifying training and Continuous Professional Development

Continuous professional development (CPD) raises the quality of social work practice and responds to meet the changing contexts in which social workers operate. It is critical if we are to create and retain a highly skilled, professional workforce which inspires public confidence in social workers' on-going fitness to practice. The need for a clear framework for continuous professional development was a key recommendation of the Croisdale-Appleby review and our reforms will ensure we create standards for the profession that increases the consistency of CPD activity and supports a practice-based career pathway.

What have we done?

- Invested over £6.5M in supporting 4,435 newly qualified social workers on the Assessed Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) programme since 2012. The majority of employers are now providing newly qualified social workers in both child and family and adult social work with additional support as part of the programme of induction and consolidation during their first year in practice.
- Continued to promote social workers as lead professionals in Approved Mental Health Professional (AMHP) and Best Interest Assessor (BIA) roles in adult social care, with accredited statuses recognised through the new agency.
- Published tools and resources to raise the quality of social work practice with people with autism, dementia, carers, older people and those who lack capacity.

What are we doing?

- Further supporting the critically important roles of AMHPs and BIAs. A new, bespoke system of social work regulation will achieve greater recognition for social work's professional contribution and expertise, through the use of annotations to denote practice specialisms, including social workers who are AMHPs and BIAs, so that those with specialist expertise and at different career stages are recognised as such.
- Develop further specialisms and advanced practitioner statuses, ensuring social workers' role in adult social care is given greater profile and visibility in improved arrangements in key areas, including learning disabilities, dementia, autism, palliative care and forensic social work.
- Working to raise the standard and quality of supervision to focus relentlessly on practice improvement and the ability to support and challenge decisions with other

professionals. We will do this by working with DfE, the sector and with people who use services and their carers, to design a model of reflective supervision which puts people with lived experience at the heart of modern social work. This will build on the approaches to practice observation in current ASYE arrangements and those being developed in child and family social work, to enable the highest standards of continuous professional development. This is vital if we are to sustain a key position for social work in integrated health and care services.

Supporting the workforce

Government is committed to ensuring we have a sufficient supply of high quality social workers. This will be achieved through support for qualifying programmes and improving recruitment and retention through raising the status and standing of the profession, helping create the optimum conditions for social work practice and career development.

Social work is a unique and challenging profession. It requires a range of skills and the ability to take difficult decisions. We have high expectations of social workers and expect them to take the right decision 100% of the time, which can undermine positive risk taking in supporting people. However, innovative and creative solutions, when used appropriately, can support better outcomes. We therefore want to create an environment that enables this, whilst at the same time maintaining responsibility and accountability where things go wrong.

More widely, retaining experienced staff and recruiting the right people in front line practice is crucial to delivering excellent social work, but is widely recognised as a significant challenge. Good supervision, continuous professional development, manageable workloads and career pathways need to be in place across the social work profession, both to equip people for their current roles and prepare for future careers. Ensuring that appropriate learning and development opportunities exist for the whole workforce will encourage career progression and support people working in the wide variety of roles, now and in the future. Raising the status of the profession so that it is well regarded and supported by a clear professional development framework is the overarching aim of our reforms, which together, will help increase retention in a profession where the average social work career is less than 8 years, compared to 16 for a nurse and 25 for a doctor.²

For employers, improving recruitment and retention can lead to significant benefits in respect of time and cost through reduced turnover, as well as improving consistency and continuity, which people who use services cite as being the most important factor in determining how they experienced social work support.

Ensuring social workers are supported by strong professional and organisational leadership, centred on driving up the quality of social work and which enables career progression in frontline practice, is integral to our reform programme across both children's and adults services and is, arguably the most important issue to address if we are to see health and care systems deliver the best outcomes for people.

² Curtis, L et al (2010) The expected working life of a social worker, BJSW

What have we done?

- Implemented the Care Act which places professional social work practice at the centre of adult social care.
- Made clear the role of the Principal Social Worker and the support required by local authorities to enable them to operate effectively, through revised statutory Care Act guidance.³
- Started to re-model mental health services to include a greater emphasis on social models of support, alongside clinical approaches to mental disorder, including a new strategic focus on mental health social work in NHS England's Mental Health Five Year Forward View and the "Social Work for Better Mental Health" initiative.
- Supported implementation of employer "health checks" to provide DH with a national picture of social work across adult social care.
- Continuously engaged the sector through the Chief Social Worker role, motivating and challenging senior leaders and social workers to create and set standards for excellent practice.

What are we doing?

- Collaborating with Health Education England (HEE) and Skills for Care (SfC) to continue the provision of intelligence to support workforce planning across the sector.
- Working with DfE and the Local Government Association (LGA) to deliver a 'Return to Social Work' pilot programme in response to the high vacancy rates in statutory social work roles. The pilot will support an initial pool of 30 experienced social workers through a 12-week training programme designed to provide them with the tools they need to successfully return to employment, helping improve the capability and confidence of the existing social work workforce.
- Delivering a tailored professional leadership development programme for Principal Social Workers, focusing on the live issues and leadership challenges they face, to further develop their confidence and capability as leaders of professional social work practice.

Improving use of evidence and research

The creation and use of research and evidence has a central role in the development and improvement of social work and professional practice. We need to know that the support and care which people receive is appropriate to their needs, is effective and leads to the right outcomes. There is a key role for both government and the sector to develop, coordinate, disseminate and implement research and evidence, so that it informs both service users and carers in their choices and practitioners and managers in the

³ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/care-and-support-statutory-guidance/general-responsibilities-and-universal-services>

improvement of social work. Investment in research and evidence of what works is therefore, vital to improving the focus and quality of practice.

Through the Chief Social Worker, DH's research programmes and engaging other research funding programmes, we will continue to promote high quality research that makes a difference across health and social care.

What are we doing?

- Testing provision of a named social worker for people with learning disabilities, autism and mental health conditions, alongside independent evaluation to provide a clear picture of social work practice and service design in this crucial area.
- Assessing the impact of social work interventions for older people with complex needs, including dementia, to identify the most effective use of social work resource in the overall system of care and support for older people.
- Increasing practice and supervision which is person-centred and reflective, through the involvement of people with lived experience in shaping approaches.
- Encouraging a stronger focus on research as part of the ASYE programme and in enhanced CPD arrangements, in line with recommendations in the Croisdale-Appleby review.

Making our vision a reality

This strategic statement sets out the actions and commitments required to deliver our vision to raise the quality and status of social work with adults. Although the adult social work workforce is comparatively small in relation to the size of the overall adult social care workforce, it punches above its weight and is central to delivering our wider goals for health and care, including wellbeing, co-production, the delivery of seven day services, the integration of health and social care and parity between physical and mental health. All of this requires strong primary and community services and social workers are leading the way in creating community based solutions to meet people's needs.

Achieving our vision, however, will depend on the support and commitment of government at national and local level, our partners in health and care and other areas including housing, education and the police, where social workers collaborate, coordinate and challenge other professionals, to ensure services are being delivered in a way which best meets people's needs.

The Department will develop, agree and take forward an action plan and associated timeline for actions highlighted in this statement, in collaboration with the sector and in line with arrangements for the new regulatory agency. Progress against the actions will be reviewed through the Chief Social Worker for Adults Stakeholder Advisory Group which meets quarterly, with an update provided in the Chief Social Worker's annual report in spring 2017.