

The impact of 'Setting the Bar'

In June 2022, we published 'Setting the Bar', a research report which sought to address some fundamental questions voiced by our members. Namely, can our workforce realistically work with people in the way that they're trained to do, and in line with the aims of Scotland's legislation and policy? How much work is too much for social workers? Where's the line?

The timing of publication was intentional and critical, with the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill about to begin its parliamentary journey, renewed emphasis being given to deliver of The Promise's 2020-23 plan, and discussions about a National Social Work Agency and national approaches to social worker's terms and conditions beginning. We want to situate social work, and the reality of being a social worker today, at the heart of these developments. The picture that emerged from Setting the Bar was serious, sparking extensive engagement with social work employers, policy makers, politicians and other professional groups. The research provided a clear evidence base from which to consider the issues impacting on the workforce, and it helped us to better articulate the specific social work issues within the various crises that Scottish public services now face.

Setting the Bar gave us some evidence to say what 'enough' is; generating thoughts about indicative maximum caseloads and prompting discussion about empowering social work leaders to set a bar, below which we know social work no longer supports people as it's supposed to. That line can help better articulate the conditions and workforce necessary to do what social work is entrusted and required to do.

In getting to those indicative caseload numbers, the report exposed the factors inhibiting social work professionals from using their skills in the right places. Setting the Bar's 1,588 respondents (just over 25% of the social workers employed by Scottish local authorities) overwhelmingly talked of frustration that their time is consumed by administrative tasks, which have accumulated as budget cuts have done away with business management staff and other key support roles. This was just one of the challenges identified, and one of many which are being addressed.

This supplementary report develops these lines of enquiry further. Through four focus groups, with participants representing the diversity and depth of the social work profession, our research team was able to interrogate key themes from Setting the Bar, and provide further context, insight and, where possible, identification of potential solutions. It aims to keep the realities of social work at the forefront of people's minds, and provide organisations and leaders with some practical actions to implement; some longer-term, but some which can begin to be addressed immediately.

Leadership at all levels

Although the focus groups highlight and illustrate further some of the issues raised in the first Setting the Bar report, what's striking is that participants are really committed to the profession and wanting to create positive change. It peels back the most commonly reported

deluge of change, caseloads and pressures to show us a workforce who care passionately about the people they support and the professional skills they've honed.

Within the key themes of the findings are a variety of proposals and suggestions which range from the short to the long term and from the personal responsibility to team and organisational levels. Social workers are keen to make change, to 'take the wheel' both for themselves and the profession, and their enthusiasm and experiences have resulted in many opportunities for change. There is much we can all act on immediately.

In '**Changing the way we talk about social work**' for example, there are rich resources to draw on from reframing work already happening in Scotland, and indeed taking root in social work. Each and Every Child's work on reframing care experience, and related work on poverty, has taught us much about the power of language to shift perception. Social Work Scotland is committed to this work, and recognise that this power sits with every single one of us talking about social work – to our colleagues, to our partners and children, to friends and family and most critically, to the individuals we support.

All the discrete issues raised in this report lend themselves naturally to leadership at all levels, and there is much to reflect and learn from within the '**Challenging unreasonable expectations**' theme for social workers in leadership and managerial positions, as well as those on the frontline. These are not new issues, but the focus of this report is on practical changes that can be made, and we recognise that without the enabling context of social work leadership higher up – even just at line management level, some of these changes can be daunting and difficult. In fact, as well as the three tiers of taking the wheel, we believe there's a fourth tier, which is responsible for implementing these changes through **national** conversations, representation and voice.

Social Work Scotland's role in this is an important one; as a leadership organisation it's clear that we will continue to support Chief Social Work Officers and our members to implement and support the changes recommended in this report, but also it's our role to highlight and challenge the unreasonable expectations which are placed on the profession nationally.

We also believe that some of these changes should be considered by the proposed National Social Work Agency and other leadership programmes which support the wider health and social care sector – whilst change can come from within the profession, it doesn't work in isolation, and Social Work Scotland and our partners have a key voice in influencing across the wider sector, as so much change is being planned.

As ever, we can't do it without you. This report highlights the importance of professional leadership at all levels of social work, and as a membership organisation we encourage you to use your professional voice at every opportunity and to be emboldened by this report, its findings and the common threads that run across the profession.