

Setting the Bar for Social Work in Scotland

Supplementary Focus Group Report

Background

The **Setting the Bar** project aimed to establish an evidence-based indicative caseload limit for social work staff in Scotland and consider how this might be used. The project included a policy and legislative context analysis, Rapid Evidence Assessment around caseloads and workloads more broadly, and a bespoke survey of Scotland's public sector social work staff, generating 1588 responses (more than a quarter of the workforce).

The [Setting the Bar](#) (STB) report was published on 1st June 2022, advancing an indicative caseload limit to help inform workforce planning and capacity considerations¹. In so doing, it stressed the caveats surrounding the use of caseload limits, particularly at an operational level, and highlighted a series of wider issues and questions about the current state of social work in Scotland that must also be addressed.

Since the report's publication, conversations have continued with a wide variety of stakeholders. These conversations underscored the salience of the conclusion that, alongside more manageable caseloads, a stronger voice for social work is needed if staff are to feel valued and able to improve outcomes for people, and the profession is to be better understood. Consistent with this, further in-depth work with social work staff was carried out to explore some of the key questions that arose from the **Setting the Bar** survey, particularly regarding workload manageability and staff wellbeing. This supplementary focus group report presents the findings.

What We Did

In September 2022 we facilitated four focus groups, allowing for a maximum of ten participants per group. Each group lasted 75 minutes and included a brief introduction and reminder of key points from the **Setting the Bar** research. While in no way intending to ignore the challenges, over the course of the four groups we wanted to add to what was already known by identifying solutions and building on the recommendations of the original report. The emphasis was on working out what is already in place to support workload manageability and staff wellbeing and identifying what else needs to happen. This intention was set out in the focus group *Information Sheet* and at the beginning of each focus group and is encapsulated through the notion of '**Taking the Wheel**'.

¹ These were 11- 15 cases (children) for Children & Families social workers and 20 -25 cases for Adult and Criminal Justice social workers

The initial focus group involved the most open discussion, with much of the time used to hear social work perspectives on the STB report findings. Each subsequent group began with a summary of key points to emerge from the previous group discussions. The latter groups were a little more directed to achieve the desired breadth and depth of discussion overall, while attending closely to participants' motivations for taking part.

The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed by the researchers and then destroyed. No personal information other than email addresses was stored after the focus groups. Pseudonyms were used in the transcripts, with all names and identifying information withheld and purposefully loose identifiers² used in this report, to protect the anonymity of participants. Consent to use the transcripts was obtained in advance and the draft focus group report was sent to all participants when completed to ensure they were happy for the content to be released more widely.

The Focus Group Participants



Figure 1: The focus group participants

Participant Numbers

As above, the aim was for a maximum of ten participants per focus group, slightly higher than the customary limit of six to eight participants, anticipating a level of attrition due to emergent work issues. The focus groups were advertised by Social Work Scotland and all groups were quickly fully subscribed, but with some staff then unable to take part on the day as expected.

There were **29** participants in total over the four groups, with between six and nine in each group (one participant had to leave early into the Group 4 discussion).

[Group 1: 9; Group 2: 8; Group 3: 6; Group 4: 6 participants]

² Due to the diverse mix of participants and the small group sizes, each participant is identified by group number and role type (senior / social worker) rather than creating a unique identifier, which could risk accidental identity disclosure.

Geographical Representation

The focus groups were held online to ensure a good geographical spread and staff from **15** local authority areas took part, representing rural, urban and mixed geographies:

| | | | |
|---------------------|---|-------------------|---|
| Aberdeen City | 2 | Fife | 3 |
| Aberdeenshire | 2 | Glasgow City | 1 |
| Angus | 4 | Highland | 3 |
| Dumfries & Galloway | 1 | North Lanarkshire | 2 |
| East Dunbartonshire | 1 | Perth and Kinross | 1 |
| East Lothian | 3 | Renfrewshire | 1 |
| Edinburgh City | 3 | Scottish Borders | 1 |
| Falkirk | 1 | | |

There was a good **mix of local authorities** in each focus group (between five and seven) and many participants had previously worked in one or more other localities and were therefore able to draw comparisons.

Social Work Role

Of the 29 participants, (**4 Male, 25 Female**), **one** was an experienced Social Care Worker now studying Social Work, **2** were Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) and **15** were Social Workers, with the remainder comprising Team Leaders / Senior Social Workers (6), Senior Practitioners (4) and one Consultant Social Worker. There was a **mix of social work roles** and experience within each group, with at least one senior staff member and a maximum of four in each group, and those studying / new to social work spread across three different groups.

Social Work Specialism

The 29 participants represented all three umbrella social work specialisms and each specialism was also present in each focus group (Children and Families, Adults and Criminal Justice). Several participants self-identified as working in a specific area within these specialisms such as care and procurement, permanence, older adults, learning difficulties, physical disabilities, domestic abuse, care home review and duty teams. Some senior practitioners were working across specialisms and several participants highlighted that they had prior experience of working within a different specialism to that of their current job, often drawing upon this in the discussion.

Setting the Scene

Before presenting the key themes to emerge from the focus groups, consideration will be given to how they arose, setting them in the context of the original **Setting the Bar** (STB) report. **In focusing upon specific issues, it is important not to lose sight of the wider messages and findings of the original report, all of which remain significant.**

As indicated in '**what we did**', our intention in conducting the focus groups was to augment the findings and conclusions of **Setting the Bar**, with an emphasis on working out what is already in place and what else needs to happen. This was not intended to deny the challenges social work staff face, downplay other aspects of **Setting the Bar** that resonated mostly strongly with participants, or neglect their shared or individual motivations for taking part and the issues they wished to highlight. This supplementary report attempts to give weight to all of these elements.

First, it should be noted that participant hopes and reasons for taking part in the focus groups were universally aligned with bringing about positive change. They included giving social workers a voice, wanting to learn from / share with others and feel less alone, a desire to avoid "**reinventing the wheel**" and "**to be part of something new from the grass roots**".

It should also be noted that the concept of '**Setting the Bar**' itself resonated strongly with focus group participants, with several citing this as their reason for taking part. Consistent with the original STB report findings, the need for an indicative caseload limit for workforce planning purposes and to help remedy to unfeasibly high caseloads many social work staff now hold was both pressing and qualified with concerns that, at an operational level, caseloads should be assessed on an individual rather than crude numerical basis; several participants also lauded their local caseload weighting approaches.

Social Work Scotland was asked to explore administrative pressures in more detail following publication of the original report in Summer 2022. This is therefore the first topic to be considered in reporting the focus group findings.

This is followed by a revisiting of several themes identified in the original **Setting the Bar** report. Many participants identified strongly with these themes and spoke so passionately about them that they demand another look. These mainly focus on challenges currently faced by social work, adding stories and examples to illustrate those challenges from exchanges of personal experiences within groups.

This report then turns to our concern with workload manageability and staff wellbeing, offering fresh insights. The STB report considered a wide range of inter-connected influences. The focus groups put the spotlight on a subset of these factors, giving more detailed consideration to individual social worker, team and organisational attributes, notably cultures, and the interplay between them.

Foregrounding considerations of wellbeing and manageability is the pressing concern for the social work workforce in Scotland (as across the UK) as it faces escalating retention and recruitment challenges. Several recommendations emerged from the survey results. The STB report highlighted that the distinctive contribution of social work is not well understood outside of the profession. The focus groups considered what contributes to this lack of understanding in different constituencies, the consequences, and the inherent tensions in trying to address this. The importance of relationship and strengths-based practice was a significant theme in the survey. The focus groups considered what can help and hinder practice development, calling particular attention to support for students and newly qualified staff and the important contribution of universities and placement experiences.

A further critical point to emerge from **Setting the Bar** was the expectation that social work could continue to absorb complex policy demands and the fallout of unprecedented socio-economic challenges, characterised by a reluctance to say “no” at multiple levels. This supplementary focus group report documents the findings regarding the need to extend the concept of “setting the bar” to include “setting of boundaries” by the profession – as one participant said: ‘drawing a line in the sand’.

In reporting the focus group findings, longer than usual quotes which seemed to illustrate key themes particularly well have been highlighted in boxes, with shorter, standalone quotes included in the text.

This report considers each of the above themes before turning to the notion of ***Taking the Wheel***, summarising existing positive practices, offering recommendations and outlining remaining issues and questions that demand urgent attention. This first involves considering responses to a specific question raised by stakeholders.

Understanding Administrative Pressures

In response to stakeholder interest, participants in focus group one were asked to say more about the nature of administrative pressures

As reported in **Setting the Bar**, lack of administrative support often resulted in social workers spending considerable time carrying out basic administrative tasks, often after hours. In some services, local admin teams had moved into a business support function and whilst time had been devoted to automating tasks, this was reported as being carried out without consideration of consequent extra time demands on social work staff.

Some participants were able to draw comparisons across different services and settings, with the significantly reduced volume of admin and paperwork required on moving job from a team with statutory responsibilities to one without, highlighted as a palpable relief:

Don’t get me wrong – there is a lot going on [in my new role] but the paperwork is much less and it is so nice (laughs). Sorry, but it’s so lovely. I have the space to phone people – less admin, less report writing. So that’s one thing that has been really lovely (Group 1, SW).

This reinforces findings from the original STB research on the need to consider the weight of reporting requirements as well as the need for administrative support. Specific examples of the nature of the tasks social workers were routinely carrying out and their consequences were offered by several participants:

I was committed to not being one of those who sits at the computer on a Friday night. We virtually do everything now. I feel I am admin (others nod). I've come out of an adult protection case conference and I had to do a recording of that, save it to an i-drive, then send it to admin. It's ridiculous the demands on people (Group 1, SW).

One thing to point out is about when we apply to the weekly funding group – for example one case last week involved 7 pieces of work. There was the full single shared assessment, the adult carer support plan, support plan, budget sheet, funding sheet (authorisation sheet) the Indicator of relative need and a respite scoring tool. That's before I get it to funding. Then we wait for the outcome.

I do my assessment – I can gather the info in a day or two –including meeting the person and maybe the family - in order to submit a support package. But it takes the best part of a week to do the paperwork. A lot is to do with stats, to justify public funding. It takes 28 days to complete assessments. You can have 5 cases jumping at a time. At the back of your mind you're thinking about all those other backlogs. But my big thing is paperwork; that is too much.

The extracted account above gives a sense of the volume of paperwork for one case, the disproportionate amount of social worker time consumed by tasks ancillary to the assessment itself and the delays tied up with securing and justifying funding. For this participant, while the cumulative effect of the delays were significant, the amount of time spent on paperwork was the greatest source of dissatisfaction. Tasks where help was most needed included:

- Letter printing and posting letters – could batch
- Sending out reports to families
- Scanning documents
- Booking rooms
- Collating materials for groups
- Inputting data on the systems
- Locating support packages and respite options
- Recording case conferences

Fresh Insights from the Focus Groups

Understanding and promoting social work

I've no other word to use, but it is an insult to workers and team leaders when you are getting complaints from councillors, MSPs and MPS to answer why you have not arranged a respite placement or...a package for an individual. And it is sent down the way and then back up the way. What is really frustrating is maybe even if these individuals spent one hour in one of our services, they would understand why we cannot get those care packages, those supports in place. What that really shows, across the board at a higher level, they have no understanding of social care or the health system and what individual workers do.... [Group, Snr SW]

The need for better understandings of social work had been a strong theme in the STB survey results. Across focus groups, this need was amplified. There were many reasons given, including the

importance of improved public perceptions in facilitating effective working relationships; improved inter-agency working through greater clarity of purpose; political understandings of what is possible to achieve in the role; and recruitment of new staff. Social workers also want to be able to positively identify their job in social situations, rather than it being a conversation stopper. The media were mentioned as reinforcing negative stereotypes: “I get really annoyed when I watch things on TV that have a social worker bumbling around with bits of paper flying everywhere, being really quite incompetent looking”.

One team manager specifically highlighted a need for improved understanding within the children’s hearings system of the pressures on social work staff. She used the terms “morale crushing” in terms of the impact on staff, adding that there could be a tendency to ‘belittle’ social work staff in hearings, which had become increasingly litigious. This was again at least partly associated with a lack of understanding of the circumstances in which social workers are trying to support families, particularly in the current context of severe restrictions in the wider services landscape. Alternative examples are considered in the next section on defining social work.

Three examples of the wider (not always predictable) role of social work:

So I have one member of staff who is up to their neck with adult protection, but the ward staff have said a patient would benefit from having a CD player so they are trying to fit that in too. (Group 1, Snr SW)

I once got a phone call when I was the senior at [X] Sheriff Court and it was a farmer who had just been jailed for quite a considerable period of time. And I was asked what I was going to do with a field of 300 cows. I was like, they never taught me that at University, I don’t know! (Group 4, Snr SW)

But then one of the things... was helping a young service user to wash and blow dry her hair, to get a picture for her Young Scot card to go and visit her partner in custody. In any role definition that would never come in (Group 4, SW)

When we asked two sets of focus group participants how they might define the social work role, there was an initial silence followed by voicing of reservations about what could be lost through definition. The three examples in the panel above were offered as examples of social work activity which link to individual wellbeing, relationship building and even animal welfare, and which might be ruled out in any tight specification. The participant who shared the third example went on to tentatively consider an ‘articulation’ of the role while further explaining her concern:

Maybe a very broad articulation...but you are working with people, with humans, you are trying to be really responsive, working with people in crisis...you could end up passing the buck

Cautionary notes were sounded about the risk of social work becoming strictly defined by task and time, particularly as the cost-of-living crisis continues to bite. It was identified that some social care agencies have been pushed by commissioning approaches into delivering very short blocks of time with tightly defined tasks. It was highlighted that it was very difficult for staff working under such conditions to focus on outcomes for people: “I would hate for social work to be like that.” Again, this was seen as standing in contradiction to the examples in the box above.

An example of the complexity involved and the often hidden nature of the work, came from a team manager who highlighted that a lot of social work time is now invested in supporting care providers with support and supervision of their staff, as some do not have capacity to do this themselves. While this was not part of the social work role, gaps and errors in care provision were leading to Adult Support and Protection referrals, which themselves carry concerning implications for outcomes for people and additional burden on social work staff. It is important to note that there was also recognition that care service providers 'came into their own' during the pandemic, in 'going the extra mile' for people. However, as with the wider service landscape, there are current gaps in some of those care services and this can also add to the workload of social work.

Conditioning for stress and being mindful of language

The University itself was really supportive, it has a good reputation... It's just this culture that I think exists in anyone linked to social work, whether that's lecturing or working in it, even down to our clients as well. You are almost conditioned to be stressed. Like you're told, this is a hard job, you will be stressed, you will be this, so when you qualify you almost already have that sense of panic, I'm not going to manage this, because you've been conditioned over your 4-year course, you're not going to manage it. (Group 2, SW)

I didn't really get that from the University as such, but it was more from my second placement, which was with a third sector organisation. My link worker within the organisation had previously worked as a statutory social worker within children and families and they hadn't liked that role and had moved into the third sector. The constant messaging that I got through that entire placement was statutory social work is high pressure, it's intense, you'll always be running late, you'll be overwhelmed and you'll get burnt out in a couple of years. And it was such a negative experience that I fed that back to the University at the end of the placement and I said I don't think the placement was appropriate for a final year's Master's student because I genuinely feel that I didn't learn anything... if I'd been younger when I'd done my degree or if I'd been more impressionable, his message would potentially have been enough to put me off going into practice and coming back to finish my degree. It was a very unpleasant experience actually. (Group 2, SW)

Focus group participants exchanged experiences of being “**conditioned for stress**” at different stages of their career, often starting in the university and in placements. The dialogue above illustrates how this messaging for students can result in low expectations and increased anxiety about the job, and could potentially discourage students from entering the profession. Other participants identified examples of reassuring students and newly qualified staff that the work could be rewarding.

However, there were also several examples of this stress messaging being reinforced and amplified in the workplace. Many participants had worked in different local authority areas and/or third sector settings, and could compare how this messaging could influence their way of thinking about the work, with conditioning for stress being deeply embedded in organisational messaging in some cases. This could include stigma about asking for help or being seen to seek out emotional support:

We need to offer emotional support. If you work in public protection in [our authority] you get 4 counselling sessions a year. Before, we were offered that in child protection, but nobody took it up because of a stigma. Only me and one other took it up and it kept me afloat. There are things that could be buffering some of this but there is an image issue there as well.

The following participant reflected on the need to change the language and expectations:

The rhetoric that we use is that we are all busy, we are all stressed. We say it because most likely it's true, but – you know it was nice to hear about people going for a walk together – that should be the norm. For me, there needs to be a change to make it more this is a job that is going to be stressful at times, but it does have its advantages, and it's not always like that. (Group 2, Snr SW)

In short, along with the need to promote a better understanding of social work externally, there is a need for de-conditioning for stress both inside and outside the job.

Preparing for life as a social worker

Students who have been training during Covid are at a real disadvantage. When I'm supervising students I notice that gaps in their learning have become more pronounced...In any case there needs to be more of a practical focus on preparing someone for day-to-day social work – about how to have difficult conversations, how to manage someone's emotions, how to cope when someone is being aggressive or is going to be reluctant to let you into their house.

In addition, there are the practicalities of writing in social work: how a report would differentiate from how you write an academic report or how you would structure a court report versus a report for a children's hearing. That's something that I missed out on, and when I'm supervising students that's something where I feel they've not had those inputs. They find it incredibly difficult to report write and I would have thought students could maybe be prepared a bit more for that. [Group 4, SW]

As was evident in the survey results, there was interest in three of the focus groups in how social work students are prepared for the job. A key concern, which as noted in our earlier report, and has been more widely recognised, was that pre-existing pressures to find suitable practice placements increased hugely during the pandemic. While acknowledging that university courses have a great deal of material to cover in the social work curriculum, several participants expressed a desire for more preparation for the practical and emotional aspects of the work for students.

It could be argued that at least some of this practical and emotional preparation for the work should be provided in placements. However, given the limitations there, this was identified as a continuing gap to address, which could help to improve retention rates.

A further concern was raised in group four, where there was a view that some students are coming into the job with a 'terror of children and families work.' The same worker commented:

My opinion is that it's very misrepresented at University. Quite often the students come out and say 'that isn't as bad as I thought it was going to be'

This worker and others in the group thought that the way children and families work was presented might prevent new workers from ever wanting to work in that specialism.

Setting the Bar at all levels

Here the importance of and possibilities for setting the bar at four levels are considered; individual, team, organisational and beyond

Individual wellbeing and boundaries

The mental health and wellbeing of social work staff was identified as a key concern in the first focus group in particular. Five of nine participants in this group discussed having experienced at least some degree of mental distress related to the workplace. This open discussion of mental health was prompted by a very experienced social worker from a rural area introducing herself by saying she was on a phased return to work following a mental health crisis. She argued for the continuing need to 'draw a line in the sand' with regard to workloads in the profession, identifying that her caseload had more than doubled prior to her becoming unwell.

A more recently qualified social worker informed that she too had had over a month off work due to distress at not being able to have face to face contact with vulnerable young people during lockdown and depletion of suitable services and resources (including housing), exacerbated by the pandemic. This had negatively impacted on outcomes for homeless young people she was working with, with one coming to harm. Both workers described feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility they felt for the wellbeing of the people they support, and deep concern about not being able to support them effectively. Another worker in the final focus group commented on the Catch 22 situation which can arise when the 'door never shuts', at the individual staff member level: **"you need to take time out but taking time out makes you more anxious"**.

Several staff, including the two above, described different examples of how they were striving to create or find more manageable spaces at work. This could relate to day-to-day self-care, including taking lunchbreaks and going for walks during the working day. A few participants also identified that they felt confident about setting a bar in relation to limiting their own workload, in being able to say 'no' to additional work, when they were at capacity. This was far from universal however, with some noting that the wider culture in their team/organisation did not encourage this, or a sense that if they limited their workload, that this would have implications for colleagues.

At the next level, individuals were setting the bar by moving into less crisis-oriented roles, sometimes with an explicit aim of being able to do relationship based and preventative work. One social worker commented of his move to a throughcare role: **"You have time to reflect, get to know your young people and work with them effectively"**, in contrast to the role he had before.

There are also clearly limits, however, to how far self-care and switching roles can sustain practitioners in their roles, particularly given concerns discussed in our opening section about the continued erosion of those preventative services.

Team culture and leadership

The idea of a local 'culture of busyness' surfaced during the first focus group, but it was during the second focus group that the concept of 'team culture' was advanced. This was identified as having a significant influence on an individual social worker's happiness, wellbeing and work-life balance.

Many participants had worked in different teams, social work specialisms and localities and were able to offer comparisons of positive and less positive cultures. For some participants, the role of the team manager in creating the conditions for a positive culture and being prepared to take a stand when unrealistic demands were made of staff was pivotal, as illustrated below:

It's largely influenced by the team manager and what their personality brings can really be make or break. I've worked under some really good team managers and some not so good. I think when you have a team manager who acknowledges how challenging the work can be and the toll it can take on you and encourages you to set healthy boundaries and limits – that's a good team manager. Certainly in C&F I could work 24 7 and I still wouldn't be ahead of the game. There are lots of time when you've come home from a day at work, you bed your kids and then you open up your laptop and you're writing a report at 10, 11 at night. And a good team manager would say, no you don't have to do that, we'll put the review back. I want my staff to be healthy, I want my staff to be well and if you are working til 11 or 12 o'clock at night, that's okay in the short term but I'm not going to have a healthy workforce and I don't want that.

Whereas I've had other team managers who've said if that's what you need to get it done, that's what you need to do. So I think that management can sometimes be that buffer between senior management and us. And a good team manager will say no, this is unrealistic. If you've got a good team manager who is nurturing and encourages you to prioritise looking after yourself, that's when you're going to get the best out of your workforce. [Group 2 SW]

Another participant pointed out that in their locality the emphasis was placed on locating 'leadership' within the team rather within the team manager or senior manager, "so it's more about how we can support our colleagues".

Several other participants also stressed the centrality of 'supporting each other' within a 'good culture' and reinforcing norms around working practices, including working hours. Certainly, there were others who highlighted the role of the team more generally in helping them to get through challenges: "the difference having a supportive team around you actually makes – it makes you get through those really tough days."

Being physically located with colleagues was vital to practices such as protecting lunch breaks, taking lunch together and going for walks, discussed further when considering the importance of the physical environment and organisational decision making about returning from home to office or more hybrid working.

Organisational culture and leadership

While the team manager had a pivotal role, there were also limits to how much they could do, if the wider systems and processes in the organisation were not conducive to a supportive culture. One locality had introduced a robust supervision pro-forma that did not make provision for capturing “life issues”, suggesting failure to recognise their importance at an organisational level:

And as a (team) manager I do care about my staff on a really personal level, and if they're having a really bad time at home or they are stressed at their work, I need to hear that, I need to recognise it and I need to then look at how I can relieve some of that stress and pressure, but the pro-forma that we use for the new supervision policy has nothing to do with that. So, not that I would write all of it down, but some of it I can't even justify [Group 2, Snr SW].

The limits to what could be done at team leader level to mitigate the adverse circumstances which have cumulated in the past few years were also emphasised by a few participants. One team leader for example expressed frustration that she has been reporting crises on the ground through escalation reporting within the HSCP for two years. She did not express a view as to how this should be resolved but was clear that at operational level, this had made no difference [Group 1, Snr SW]. Many participants had worked in different social work specialisms and localities and were able to offer comparisons of positive and less positive culture.

The culture in my current job is positive, but I used to work in Children and Families in a different local authority and I found the complete opposite. Where you were made to feel guilty if you left on time at the end of the day, you felt like you weren't doing your job. It was quite a cliquy environment rather than a supportive environment where staff would think the other ones maybe weren't coping. There were quite a few staff that actually went off on sick leave through stress and rather than it being about why are they off on stress leave, what is it about the systems or the support network, the attitude was very much that they couldn't hack it. You know some of them were newly qualified and it was like oh they've only been here a year and they are already off on stress leave, they clearly can't hack the job, it's obviously not for them – rather than how can we support this person and why are all these people going on sick. ...Culture's so important – when it's positive [Group 2, Snr SW].

This represents an example of the impact of a toxic culture on staff wellbeing. The social worker describes her former working environment where responsibility was placed on the individual to keep coping regardless. Returning to the concept of ‘conditioning for stress,’ this example takes that concept to another level, with a competitive culture promoting survival of the fittest, devolving responsibility for working conditions onto workers.

The social worker had gone on to work in her current setting which she described as a complete contrast. There were also other examples of positive investment in some areas in culture and processes. A Children and Families worker in a semi-rural location described a positive shift in culture prompted by recent national policy changes: “In our area with the Promise, there is a real shift in terms of how we are being more trauma informed and relationship based which is our bread and butter and there is a focus on that just now”.

Our culture has shifted a lot since I first worked at the council. I would say there used to be a lot of fear of making mistakes or getting the blame for things and there's been a huge shift in that regard from our senior managers so that the culture now is quite positive and we are a learning

culture. It's okay to make mistakes and learn from them. That's certainly something we promote a lot in our service area. I would say for the council as a whole, there are pockets where it's really strong, others not so much [Group 4, Snr SW].

Clear examples were identified of how leadership at the local level could mitigate some of the challenges faced, through listening and responding to staff and setting the tone for an emotionally attuned and responsive culture. There was also a focus on the physical environment at work.

At the policy level, there is a need to stop making social workers and the profession as whole responsible for wider resource shortages and lack of services. This includes political representatives who escalate complaints from the public despite knowing the restrictions faced, and overly critical and blaming behaviour by other national agencies, which were referenced by focus group participants.

The importance of the physical environment

When I do work from home on occasion, because we are now doing hybrid working, I do feel that my decision making as a social worker is impacted by the environment that I'm working in, being at home, because I'm isolated and if I'm in an office environment I'd be more likely to turn around to a colleague that's sat next to me and say can I just run this past you, like get a second opinion. Whereas if I'm working from home on my own I'm far less likely to contact a colleague for advice or a second opinion because I'm aware that they are really busy and might be in and out of meetings that I don't know about. What I'm trying to get across is that the environment that we're working in is so important and the impact that can have on our decision making.

And we've had this conversation within our team as well, when you're working from home and you're having those difficult conversations with clients on the phone, I know myself, I do have mental health issues and I've got clients that have quite severe mental health issues and will quite often phone me in distress, telling me what they are intending to do to harm themselves and when I'm dealing with those sorts of phone calls myself at home, I live on my own, I don't have a support network there to support me so that can have a detrimental impact. Whereas again if I'm in the office you come off the phone and straight away there's somebody there who will turn to you and say that sounded like a really tough phone call, are you okay, do you need a catch up, do you need anything and that makes a huge difference [Group 2, SW].

Being located with colleagues was vitally important, with participants highlighting isolation and impaired decision making amongst the detrimental impacts of prolonged home working during the pandemic.

Many organisations were now looking to move from working at home to more hybrid working and several participants spoke about the need to get the balance right when making this transition.

I think we need to have, I guess some kind of wider discussion with local authorities about what kind of evidence is there, what research has been done during the pandemic about people's wellbeing with regards to their working space [Group 2, Snr SW].

Key concerns included being repeatedly asked if you actually needed an office, resultant anxiety around the potential loss of office space and, in some cases, having to fight for office space.

Home working was recognised as having a place, but for staff who want to work at home most of the time, concerns were expressed about how healthy that actually was, with people perhaps not realising how important it is to try to be around colleagues for their own wellbeing. Other benefits of physical co-location included having discussions and learning about processes, being able to share ideas and sound off when things have been difficult, especially for newly qualified workers.

The counter argument was made that being located with colleagues doesn't necessarily ensure colleague availability. One participant cited previous jobs where all interaction was through MS Teams and they'd been able to communicate well. Less disputed was the need for rooms that people can come into, notably those whose previous offending behaviours meant meeting in community spaces was inappropriate.

More broadly, noisy, open-plan offices and hot-desking were identified as particularly problematic for social workers with neurodiversity and it was argued that ensuring people with specific needs had fixed desks and comprehensive needs assessments was 'part and parcel of being able to look after staff' and should happen everywhere. One instance of staff from the same team having to hot desk across different offices was highlighted as detrimental to practice and morale. Ultimately, having your own desk was flagged as important for all staff:

I would argue that everybody needs their own desk and there's something so nice about – you've got your own space, you can leave your stuff there and you've not got to pack it all up or clean it all up and then unpack it all the next day. I think it's important when you come out of a difficult meeting to have your own space, your stuff's there, your coffee cup's there [Group 2, SW].

Being appreciative

A final point to emerge through the focus groups was the importance of taking time to reflect on and appreciate the positives. This ranged from personal development and growth over time, through the specific achievements of team members to the positive aspects and contributions of social work as a profession. This was salient in a line of work where "we don't get enough of that."

I did my first placement about 20 years ago and I remember just looking the social workers in absolute awe and it was the multi-tasking. They were typing and they were on the phone and talking to a colleague all at the same time. And I remember thinking, wow, they are amazing and I don't think I'll ever be able to do that. And then you find yourself now, a couple of decades down the line thinking wow – I'm doing this. And when I was writing reports I used to look and try and see what other people have written and copy it slightly, now I just make it up myself.

It's just to reflect I don't think we give ourselves enough credit for just how bloody marvellous we are [Group 2, Snr SW].

In addition to establishing and reinforcing team norms about positive working practices such as limiting working hours and protecting breaks, taking time to be appreciative of each other emerged as an essential ingredient in maintaining staff morale and a positive team culture.

Team managers were contributing in different ways, notably during supervision:

I think particularly with supervision, supervision can be quite sort of what you've not done focused, and I think it's really important that supervisors make space to talk about wellbeing and talk about what you're doing well and to congratulate. And we have supervision every month and always look at what you've done brilliantly and it should be part of management's responsibility to do that [Group 2, Snr SW].

Another team leader agreed wholeheartedly, adding that taking time outside of supervision to appreciate the hard work and dedication of staff was also indispensable:

If I chair a meeting, if a social worker has done something really well, written a great report, I will go out of my way to say, read your report, wonderful report, you evidently have a really good relationship with the young person [Group 2, Snr SW].

The need to extend this appreciative tone when talking about social work within the profession was also suggested, namely changing the conversation from one that conditions social workers for stress to one that recognises that it is a job that will be stressful at times, but has advantages. Although there were hesitations in defining social work, participants in group 4 identified qualities required of a social worker, including compassion, commitment, strength, robustness and good boundaries.

Finally, returning to the early concern with understanding social work, implicit within the discussions was the need for greater appreciation of social work outside of the profession, extending the concept of greater public understanding of social work to public appreciation, analogous to other professions. The need to challenge stereotypes and move beyond lip service to promoting the profession is now considered alongside what else needs to happen in 'Taking the Wheel'.

Taking the Wheel

When participants were asked what had motivated them to join the focus groups, the most common responses was that people wanted to contribute to positive change, being “part of something new from the grass roots”, while also wanting to avoid “reinventing the wheel.” The expressed need to find a way forward is explored through the five spokes of the wheel illustrated below.

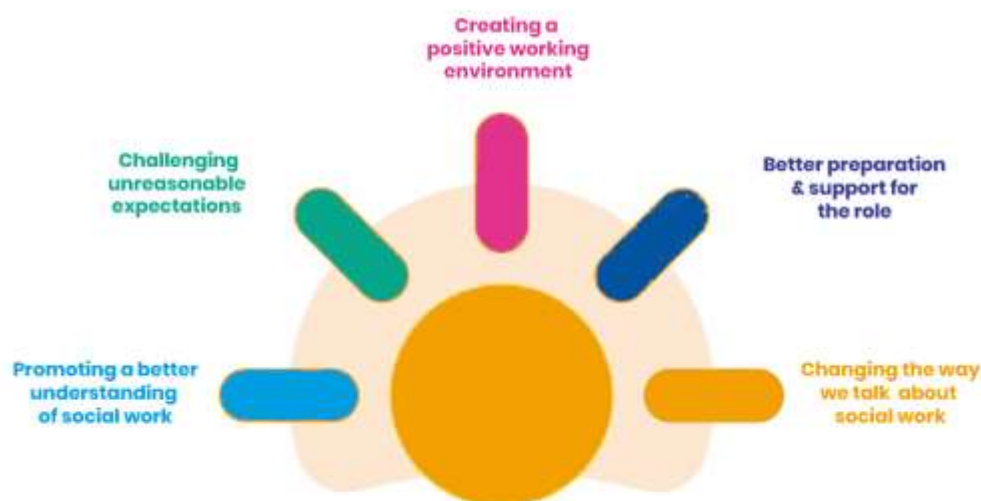


Figure 2: Taking the wheel

Promoting a better understanding of social work

The focus groups amplified earlier messages from the survey undertaken in early summer 2022 for **Setting the Bar**, that the social work profession carries unique responsibilities to preserve public safety and manage risks while focusing on the human rights and outcomes for the people they support. The earlier STB report also identified that the profession is also perhaps uniquely holistic in focus – engaging with a much wider range of disciplines than most. This complexity needs to be understood better outside social work. As with the survey results, focus group participants expressed solidarity with health colleagues with regard to the current pressures being faced. Nonetheless, the current crisis brings new urgency to an existing gap in understanding of what social work is.

This new understanding is needed to provide a strong basis for bringing about much needed improvements in workload manageability in ways that will be welcomed by the profession and enhance staff wellbeing. While participants were keen to promote a better understanding of social work, they also expressed reservations when the question of defining the role was raised. This seems to relate to fears of the relational and responsive aspects being lost and of being measured against task and time in a way that potentially undermines the values they hold dear. This creates a tension around being able to explain social work and merits further consideration. Ultimately, there is a need for a better appreciation of social work, analogous to other profession. Finding a way of articulating the unique contribution of the profession which is consistent with social work values presents as a necessary task.

Challenging unreasonable expectations

Staff wellbeing and workload manageability are the pressing concerns for the social work workforce in Scotland (as across the UK) as it faces escalating retention and recruitment challenges. A majority of participants in our first group had experienced absences from work due to distress caused at work. The findings from the focus groups relate to the need to extend the concept of “setting the bar” to include “setting of boundaries” by the profession – what one participant called ‘drawing a line in the sand’.

There is a need to challenge expectations at multiple levels; individual worker, team, senior leadership and the profession as a whole, including working hours and the nature of work undertaken. While there will be exceptions from time to time, there is a need to discourage the norm of working excess hours and to protect lunch times. Some workers have resolved their personal situations by setting their own bar, which is context dependent, or by moving role, which necessarily meets limits in terms of options available.

There is the need to challenge the expectation that social workers should ‘be admin’ and restore some of the support that has been dramatically reduced in recent years, constituting a false economy. There is also the expectation that preventative work and relationship building should be downgraded as ‘nice to do’ in face of resource pressures. This represents a misunderstanding of how things are held together, and the consequential involuntary discrimination that can lead to moral distress.

Some of the practical suggestions to emerge from focus groups:

- Managers taking more account of annual leave / other commitments in workload allocation
- Offering more flexibility in working hours such as compressed hours and a 9 day fortnight

- Establishing the type of team leadership that attends to staff wellbeing rather than getting the work done at all costs as the norm.

There is however a more fundamental question about the sheer volume of work coming through, the statutory nature of most of it and the continuing erosion of relational and responsive work that staff report as necessary for outcomes and wellbeing. Something needs to give.

As a statutory service we can't close the doors, we have to find somewhere for the work to go. We don't have the luxury of saying no, sorry, we don't have capacity for this, so how can a bar be set? [Group 3, Snr SW]

It was in response to concerns such as those expressed above that an indicative caseload limit was advanced in the original Setting the Bar report, to be used with caveats and not in isolation from other information. Specifically, it is intended that the indicative numeric serves as a tool to limit the pressure on the workforce, and to leverage that number with the call for additional funding for more social workers. After this, at an operational level, the flexibility remains for the local team manager to decide the actual caseload with an individual worker. This includes looking at workloads holistically, considering the complexity of individual case complexity, attending to staff wellbeing and using locally tried and tested weighting approaches as appropriate.

Creating a positive working environment

This relates to what is needed alongside workload / caseload considerations in terms of both culture and the physical environment. Suggestions were advanced by participants to help contribute to a more positive working environment, some of which were also identified in the earlier survey:

- Understanding the value and necessity of maintaining opportunities for co-location with colleagues when considering office closures and introducing hybrid working models
- Better support for all staff (including fair pay across localities, better career progression opportunities and enhanced support for learning within the role, such as that exemplified in recent work on reconceptualising workforce learning for social workersⁱ)
- Bringing the notion of 'being appreciative' into the mix – including into supervision policies and taking time to acknowledge 'just how bloody marvellous' social workers are
- Addressing unhealthy cultures:
 - Considering again the type of leadership desired at team and organisational level
 - Organisations accepting responsibility for working conditions versus shifting this onto individual workers
 - Drawing on specific examples of steps taken to address a culture of fear / blame and providing mentoring for staff at risk of burning out
 - Challenging hostile cliques and taking time to understand and support difficulties experienced by individual workers versus branding them unable to 'hack it'
 - Implementing co-working policies that enable workers to go to their manager and request this without having to make the case or feeling judged
 - Making it mandatory for Local Authorities to offer an exit interview and provide that information 'upstairs', to better understand reasons for staff leaving and help avoid the continuing exodus of staff.

Better preparation and support for the role

The distinct nature of social work demands a specific skill set and the time and support to nurture, develop and practice those skills. The following steps were advocated through the focus groups, striking many strong parallels with the conclusions of the recent NQSW reportⁱⁱ and new model placement reportⁱⁱⁱ :

- Revisit gaps in the University curriculum and practice placements – crucially to develop a way of providing more practical content and experience, particularly with regard to report writing for different audiences, and dealing with emotional issues and conflict.
- Revisit the entry qualifications, criteria and minimum age of student social workers.
- Draw on examples of partnerships between specific services and Universities to offer tailored final year placements.
- Consider existing positive support mechanisms such as the newly developed mentoring programme for NQSWs run by senior practitioners / practice educators in some localities, coupled with the use of group supervision to facilitate learning about other services.
- Recognise the diversity of work and life experiences that NQSWs will have, particularly those moving into their second year, when considering the nature and number of cases that they are allocated.

Changing the way we talk about social work

This is purposefully depicted as the final spoke of the wheel and it relates to language and talk within the profession, particularly the need to address the ‘conditioning for stress’. This does not mean ignoring the particular challenges facing social work at present. Indeed, it is important to emphasise that the profession shoulders a unique role in times of crisis. It should also be emphasised that pride in the profession was still evident in the focus groups. The idea of ‘changing the way we talk’ links again to the notion of ‘being appreciative’ but goes further; the other spokes of the wheel need to be in place to facilitate change in the way we talk about social work in an authentic and meaningful way:

- There needs to be a better understanding – and appreciation of social work
- There needs to be an articulation of the role of social work, including consideration of related work going on elsewhere e.g. on community social work in Scotland^{iv}
- There needs to be a line drawn in the sand about caseloads, workloads more broadly, working hours and the nature of work carried out - and a resolve to challenge the expectation that social work will pick up the pieces when other services are cut
- There needs to be a positive working environment for social workers throughout their careers
- And there needs to be better preparation and support for NQSWs

Conclusion

There is a danger that we are being ground down by this when in fact we need to get together and be active in terms of a) what we can deal with and what we can put up with but also b) as you say try to come up with positive ways of dealing with it [Group 1, SW].

In considering the challenges currently faced by social work, a range of strategies have been identified by social work staff through the research for Setting the Bar. There is already work underway on several of these themes. It is worth noting that far more people wanted to take part in the focus groups for this research than was possible to include. This level of interest reaffirms the need to involve the workforce as much as possible in determining the priorities for social work. Public engagement should be part of this too, providing an opportunity to improve understandings of social work at the same time.

Participants identified how staff shortages and a steady drift away from preventative work are already resulting in members of the public falling through the cracks, including people moving into higher risk situations through lack of support and staff being forced into involuntary discrimination. Social workers strongly emphasised the importance of their values in both the survey and the focus groups, indeed identifying their values as a key reason for staying in their jobs. Attention needs to be paid to the fact that systemic barriers, policy tensions and increasing resource deficits will result in values being compromised. Navigating these tensions and complexities is a hugely important part of the work which needs to be acknowledged and discussed to make the job manageable. Should the current exodus of social workers continue, the wider health and societal implications will be significant, throwing the public protection aspects of the role into sharp relief.

Some of the strategies identified in this focus group report can help. Continuing dialogue is also necessary to harness the knowledge and skills of the workforce in determining its own way forward. While space and time to talk are easily side-lined in difficult times, the need for dialogue is urgent, and necessary, as succinctly put by the participant above. This would also respond to one of the key themes from the original Setting the Bar report, which was the need for a stronger voice for social work.

ⁱ Ferguson, G.: *When David Bowie created Ziggy Stardust: The Lived Experiences of Social Workers Learning Through Work*, EdD thesis The Open University
<http://oro.open.ac.uk/77930/1/Gillian%20Ferguson%20theses.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Grant, S., McCulloch, T., Daly, M. Macleod, M. and Kettle, M. (2022) *Newly Qualified social workers in Scotland: a five-year longitudinal study*: Final report, Dundee: SSSC

ⁱⁱⁱ Gordon, J., Brown, A., Dumbleton, S. and Dunworth, M. (2022) *Evaluation of a pilot of 120-day practice learning contingency measures in Scotland during the Covid-19 pandemic*, Dundee: SSSC

^{iv} Turbett, C. and the Community Social Work Team (2022) *Social Work off the Books: Kirkaldy's Community Social Work Team*, Kirkaldy: Fife Council