

Setting the Bar for Social Work in Scotland

Supplementary Focus Group Summary Report



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The [Setting the Bar](#) report was published in May 2022, advancing indicative social work caseload limits¹, stressing caveats surrounding their use and highlighting a series of wider questions about social work in Scotland that must also be addressed. In September 2022, four further focus groups were carried out to consider some of these questions. 29 social work staff from 15 local authority areas took part, representing rural, urban and mixed geographies across Scotland, with a good mix of localities, social work specialisms, roles and experience in each group. While in no way intending to deny current challenges, the emphasis was on what is already in place to support workload manageability and staff wellbeing and identifying what else needs to happen. This emphasis is encapsulated through the notion of ‘[Taking the Wheel](#)’² and summarised through the following five improvement spokes.

Promoting a better understanding of social work

The focus groups amplified messages from ‘[Setting the Bar](#)’ that the distinctive focus, responsibilities and inherent complexities of social work need to be better understood (and appreciated) in different constituencies outside the profession. Reasons included the value of improved public perceptions in facilitating effective working relationships, recruiting new staff and being able to positively identify as social workers in social situations; enhanced inter-agency working through greater clarity of purpose and better political understandings of what it is possible to achieve in the role. While keen to advance a better understanding, participants expressed reservations about defining the role and what might be lost through tight specification, notably relational and responsive aspects. Navigating this tension and finding an articulation of social work that upholds its values is critical to future efforts to make workloads more manageable in ways that enhance staff wellbeing, and merits further consideration.

Challenging unreasonable expectations

The notion of “setting the bar” to help manage the sheer volume of work coming through resonated strongly with participants, with several citing this as their reason for taking part. Indicative caseloads were recognised as necessary as part of this, again qualified with the proviso that they should be used to limit the pressure on the workforce and leverage additional funding for more social workers, while still allowing flexibility for the local team manager to decide the actual caseload with an individual worker. Several participants also lauded their local caseload weighting approaches.

The focus groups elaborated upon the need to broaden “setting the bar” to encompass “setting of boundaries” at multiple levels; individual worker, team, senior leadership and the profession as a whole. This included challenging unreasonable expectations with regard to working hours as well as workloads, with individual ability to voice concerns or even change jobs highly context dependent. Participants also stressed the need to challenge the expectation that social workers should ‘be admin’ and restore some of the support dramatically reduced in recent years, offering specific and often easily remedied examples. They also challenged the downgrading of preventative work, relationship building

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

²The supplementary focus group findings are reported in full at [[Link here to full report](#)]

to 'non-essential' in face of resource pressures, providing poignant illustrations of the consequences for members of the public falling through cracks and for staff forced into involuntary discrimination.

Creating a positive working environment

Team culture emerged as having a significant influence on an individual social worker's happiness, wellbeing and work-life balance, with many participants drawing on contrasting experiences. There was clarity about the qualities and type of team leaders most valued, namely leaders who are nurturing, appreciative, emotionally attuned, and who encourage staff to look after themselves and support their colleagues. There were recognised limits as to how much team leaders could do in the absence of conducive organisational supports, with specific examples of positive investments in organisational culture and processes advanced. These included a greater focus on being trauma informed and relationship based in response to 'The Promise' and a purposeful shift from a blame culture characterised by fear of making mistakes to a learning culture. Other suggestions included recognising unhealthy cultures through mandatory reporting on exit interview findings. In terms of the physical working environment, specific attention was given to the benefits of being co-located with colleagues for staff wellbeing and decision making, particularly in light of the return from home to hybrid working models and office closures. More broadly, noisy, open-plan offices and hot-desking were identified as problematic, particularly for workers with neurodiversity, while being able to return to your own desk and own things after difficult meetings was deemed important for everyone.

Better preparation and support for the role

Social work demands a specific skill set, plus time and support to nurture and practice those skills. The focus groups highlighted the need to revisit University curriculums and practice placements to provide more practical content and experience, notably in report writing and dealing with emotional issues and conflict. Enhanced support for Newly Qualified Social Workers was a key concern, recognising the diversity of work and life experiences they have, the responsibilities they are expected to assume and the level of expertise within the team as a whole. A number of existing mechanisms were advocated, such as a mentoring programme run by senior practitioners / practice educators, coupled with the use of group supervision to facilitate learning about other services. Ways of better supporting social work staff throughout their careers and in times of need were also discussed, including better career progression opportunities, enhanced support for learning within the role, offering fair pay across localities, providing additional mentoring to staff at risk of burning out and reviewing co-working, supervision and return to work policies through a staff wellbeing lens.

Changing the way we talk about social work

While pride in being a social worker was evident in the focus groups, concerns were expressed about the way social work is often talked about within the profession. Specifically, participants exchanged experiences of being "conditioned for stress" at different career stages, often starting with University and placements, lowering expectations, increasing anxiety and potentially discouraging students from entering the profession. There were also examples of this messaging being reinforced and amplified in the workplace, and even being deeply embedded in organisational messaging. This influenced ways of thinking about the work, which could include stigma about asking for help or seeking out emotional support. Changing the way we talk about social work does not mean ignoring the particular challenges facing social work at present or de-emphasising the unique role profession shoulders in times of crisis. However, 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.

This work demonstrates that social work staff are committed to addressing the challenges facing the profession constructively. It also underscores that systemic barriers, policy tensions and increasing resource deficits are resulting in the values that attract and hold social workers to the job being compromised. This must be acknowledged and discussed in efforts to make the job manageable and

stem the current exodus of staff. It is noted that there is already work underway on several of the above themes and strategies. Continuing dialogue is necessary to harness the knowledge, skills and values of the workforce in Taking the Wheel and determining its own way forward.