

2023 Survey of Chief Social Work Officers across Scotland



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*I still believe that **social work done well with passion** actually can and **does make a difference**. You know, sometimes you have to look for that difference you're making...and it's still there. And **that's what gets me out of my bed each morning** to come into work and keep me going. Absolutely.*

1. Executive summary

Social Work Scotland (SWS) is the professional leadership body for the social work and social care professions, and a core part of its role is to represent and support social work leaders. It also hosts the Chief Social Work Officer (CSWO) committee, a peer support network for CSWOs. This strategic forum considers national developments, issues, and social work practice within the remit of the CSWO and the wider profession.

Social Work Scotland commissioned The Lines Between to research the experiences of those in the Chief Social Work Officer role. The methodology included an online survey, plus one-to-one and small group discussions with CSWOs. Both the survey and discussions achieved participation from all 32 local authority areas.

The following summarises the key findings from the research.

Pathways into the CSWO role

Most CSWOs described careers spent entirely within local authorities and social work, with the majority having moved through posts of increasing seniority within children's services. Most typically, a Head of Service or Lead Service Manager role was held prior to progressing into the role of CSWO. While there was some experience of acting as deputy CSWO before taking on the CSWO role, this was relatively uncommon. Previous experience in senior leadership roles or having held the CSWO role on an interim basis was perceived to help transition into the role.

Realities of the CSWO role

CSWOs noted their understanding of the role's statutory requirements, guidance and standards. However, they also reflected that this does not fully convey the experience, demands and requirements of the role, which was described as high pressure and high responsibility, constantly managing a high volume of work, and dealing with competing demands and priorities. The leadership, partnership, and political environment that CSWOs navigate, as well as the governance structures in which CSWOs operate within, are often unique to each locality. This environment is often complex and challenging, with CSWOs having variable levels of influence and authority, coupled with variable levels of understanding of the CSWO role and social work more widely across those structures.

Most CSWOs reported that expectations of the role were unrealistic. All reported working beyond their contracted hours, with some questioning the impact of this on their wellbeing and acknowledging it was a wider issue across social work. For CSWOs, a significant contributing factor is that the majority hold other senior roles that involve significant workloads and responsibilities alongside that of the CSWO role.

While CSWOs acknowledge the importance of effective workload management and prioritisation, they also reported that they cannot give the appropriate level of attention to everything that is required. Those with greater experience in the role spoke about the need to set realistic expectations and accept that you are unlikely to do everything you would like. Aligned with this, CSWOs reported a range of operational and strategic areas they would like to spend more time focusing on. One of the most reported areas was connecting with, supporting and developing staff and teams. They wanted to give more time to developing relationships with teams, supporting professional and practice development, and providing the rounded and holistic support required to work effectively.

CSWOs provide the critical functions of leadership and quality assurance, support professional standards, and the effective delivery of social work functions and services. The role is held in high regard by those who hold it, with some describing it as a privilege.

Challenges faced by CSWOs

The challenges CSWOs face are many and varied, and they are influenced throughout the year by changing demands, priorities and circumstances. CSWOs explained that the workload, complex operating environments, and competing priorities and demands on their time were the most common challenges they face, and a constant source of pressure, stress, and, for some, anxiety.

While most CSWOs confirmed they were heavily or fully involved in budget setting, the extent of influence they felt they held varied. The financial climate, with a constant drive for savings and increased efficiencies, makes budget setting challenging and frustrating. Aligned with this, reductions in resources significantly impact future planning. It also increases the challenge of ensuring social work can meet its responsibilities and deliver the expected quality in the context of increasing demand for services and increasing complexity of need among those accessing services.

The level of responsibility that CSWOs hold and their role in decision-making can weigh heavily. Many CSWOs acknowledged the importance and pressure, of ensuring they are getting decisions right, particularly those that affect individuals and families. Inspections or investigations into potential failures are also sources of pressure and stress.

Line reporting

CSWOs described differing and, at times, complex line reporting and governance structures. Most commonly, line management for CSWOs is provided by their Chief Executive, , deputy Chief Executive, Executive Director or a Chief Officer. They often also have a different line manager for the role they hold alongside their CSWO role. For some, these dual reporting structures can create additional challenges alongside additional demands on their time. In contrast, others highlighted the benefits of multi-line reporting, such as providing access to different decision-makers and leaders.

CSWOs reported that line management arrangements were effective when managers gave them autonomy; had confidence in them; understood social work and respected their opinion; were supportive; were flexible around meeting times; provided constructive challenge and feedback, were responsive; and prioritised their meetings.

Extent of influence held by CSWOs

The level of influence that CSWOs can exert varies. While some feel that social work has a strong voice within their local authority, others had a contrasting view. CSWOs identified a range of factors that helped to enhance the level of influence they had, which included having access to, and the support of, the Council's Chief Executive or senior leadership team; being present at the necessary leadership meetings; mutual respect and understanding amongst the leadership team; and having a high enough level of seniority. Relationships were also described as critical, with some explaining that they worked hard to build trust and credibility and gain the confidence of other local leaders.

However, there were also a range of factors identified which can be a barrier to CSWOs having the level of influence they need. This included siloed working and a lack of holistic thinking, competing demands and priorities across the organisation, a lack of understanding and appreciation of social work and the role of CSWO, and the low priority given to the social work agenda.

Support in role

While some CSWOs felt they had adequate support, most identified gaps or suggested improvements. Peer support from other CSWOs was identified as one of the most critical and valued forms of support. Connecting with others who understand the role and its pressures provides a safe space for sharing difficulties and offloading, learning and reflection, and constructive challenge. While several explained that the time to harness the

opportunities to do this was difficult, there were calls to enhance peer support and learning networks for CSWOs and a suggestion that Social Work Scotland could structure meetings to help formalise links between CSWOs and facilitate access to the most relevant learning.

Some identified Social Work Scotland's CSWO meetings, subgroups, and papers as a vital source of knowledge and for providing valued opportunities to make connections and access peer support. Social Work Scotland was described as "holding everything together" and enabling CSWOs to remain updated with national legislation within a busy policy landscape. Participants also appreciated being able to contact SWS staff directly for support and guidance on a variety of areas and issues.

At a local level, CSWOs reported seeking advice and guidance from, establishing positive working relationships with, or building a support network of non-CSWO peers and leaders. This was perceived to facilitate operational and strategic understanding, embed with teams, and enable local influence. Some participants felt strong administrative and business support was also critical.

CSWO development

CSWOs own continuing professional development is an area that is often neglected. However, this is not because they do not value development or recognise their development needs; it is because they often do not have the capacity or opportunity to explore these comprehensively or formally. Some CSWOs acknowledged that they had gained significant personal development from learning 'on the job'.

Several CSWOs described their personal development as less of a priority because of the responsibility and workload of their roles. Their professional development is often self-directed and in response to meeting a pressing need or priority rather than being proactive and planned.

Rewards of the CSWO role

While CSWOs acknowledge the challenging and high-pressure nature of their role, it was also seen to be greatly rewarding. The common themes were the connection with social work values, supporting staff development, the opportunity to work with and lead supportive teams, and the support, commitment, and inspiration from colleagues in social work. Some CSWOs found the level of influence on the system and the strategy for their area a rewarding element of their role.

Those in the CSWO role are committed, dedicated, and passionate about social work and the values and purpose that underpin the sector and profession. They recognise the importance of the role to the profession and in affecting positive change to ensure quality services for those accessing them.

“ *The values of social work that keep me in the role...to try and improve the lives of the most vulnerable members of our society. Absolutely, they are the values and that social justice element of social work is absolutely, you know, that's the passion for me. (Extract from CSWO response)*

“ *Folk are just desperate to do the job well. They really are. Stuff gets in the road of that all the time, but people really are passionate about doing the right thing for others... I know that if something goes wrong, and inevitably it will, it'll not be because people haven't cared about it, and it'll not be because people haven't tried, and I think you can't really ask for more than that.*

“ *I think the ability to continue to promote moral and ethical services that are so high quality, that individual human rights and respecting dignity at the centre is*

important. Protecting the vulnerable community, but also protecting their workforce is something else that keeps me in the job.

2. Introduction

- 1.1. Social Work Scotland (SWS) is the professional leadership body for the social work and social care professions, and a core part of its role is to represent and support social work leaders. It also hosts the Chief Social Work Officer (CSWO) committee, a peer support network for CSWOs. This strategic forum considers national developments, issues and social work practice within the remit of the CSWO and the wider profession.
- 1.2. In 2019, Social Work Scotland established an annual survey of the 32 Chief Social Work Officers (CSWO) across Scotland. The survey included questions about the CSWO role, experiences and professional development. While results are anonymised, the data enables Social Work Scotland to benchmark issues across the country and provides a snapshot of the challenges CSWOs face. It complements the report published by the Office of the Chief Social Work Advisor, which covers local service provision and the national overview.
- 1.3. Research by Social Work Scotland has established that CSWOs face numerous challenges, including an expanded scope of social issues and needs, changing delivery models, stretched resources, recruitment barriers, and workforce development.
- 1.4. For 2023, Social Work Scotland commissioned The Lines Between to undertake a new approach to the survey. The methodology included an online survey, plus one-to-one and small group discussions with CSWOs.
- 1.5. The online survey was a shortened version of the previous year's survey and focussed on the specifics of the CSWO role such as areas of operational responsibility, reporting and line management arrangements, hours worked and salary levels. One-to-one and small group discussions with CSWOs provided the opportunity to explore in-depth, the experiences of CSWOs in delivering the role, the environments in which they operate, challenges they face, and the support they have available to them. Both the survey and one-to-one/group discussions secured participation from all 32 local authority areas. Further details of the methodology and participant roles are provided in Appendix 1.
- 1.6. This report presents the study findings and is structured as follows:
 - Chapter Two discusses the career pathways taken by CSWOs, their motivations for coming into the role and how equipped they feel for the role.
 - Chapter Three describes the realities of the CSWO role and the expectations that are placed on them.
 - Chapter Four covers the challenges CSWOs face, and the rewards of the role.
 - Chapter Five presents CSWO views on reporting and operating structures, their access to leaders and their ability to influence.
 - Chapter Six discusses the support CSWOs have access to and any perceived gaps.
 - Chapter Seven explores CSWOs' views about their development needs, and how they are identified and met.
 - Chapter Eight presents the conclusions.

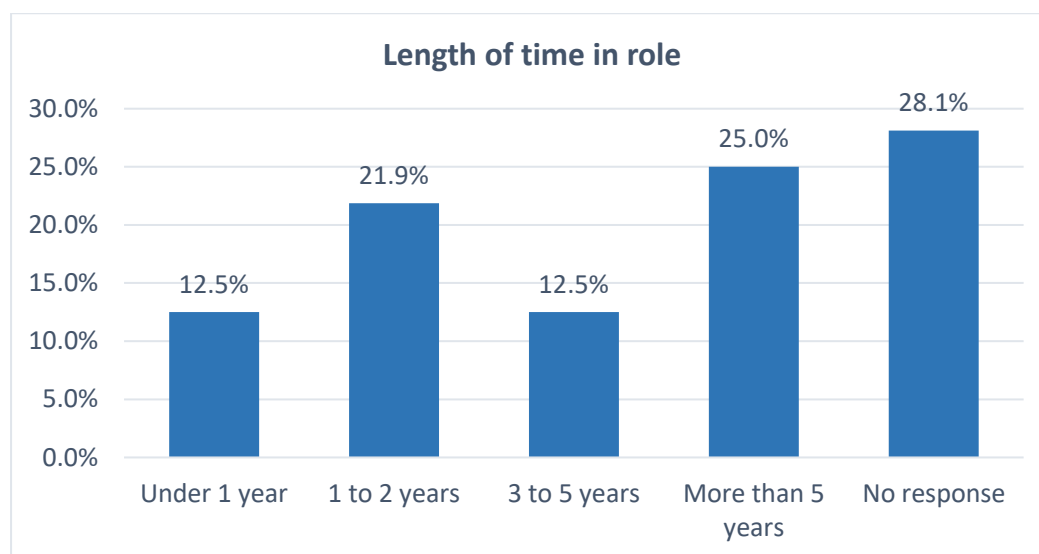
3. Pathways into the CSWO role

- 2.1. This chapter describes pathways into the CSWO role, including motivation for pursuing the post and influences on career progression. It explores how equipped CSWOs felt for the role and the advice they would give others new in post.

Career pathways and time in the CSWO role

- 2.2. The length of time in the CSWO role is shown in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: Almost half of all responding CSWOs have been in post for five years or less (n=32)



- 2.3. Only a quarter of CSWOs have been in post for over five years, with a quarter having less than two years of experience. We note, however, that over a quarter did not respond so the actual picture may be slightly different.
- 2.4. On pathways into the role, most participants described careers spent entirely within local authorities and social work. The majority had moved through posts of increasing seniority within children's services, or, occasionally, had held previous roles in other areas such as justice. Some staff had specialised roles in these areas, such as child protection.
- 2.5. A small number of survey respondents described other roles before the CSWO position. These included roles in policy, social work within a hospital setting, with the Care Inspectorate, and one who had worked in the private and third sectors.
- 2.6. While there was some experience of acting as deputy CSWO before taking on the CSWO role, this was relatively uncommon. A few had initially acted up or held the job on an interim basis. It was most typical for Head of Service or Lead Service Manager to be the career step prior to becoming CSWO.
- 2.7. Those who described the smoothest transition into their CSWO role had previously held a senior leadership role through which they had developed some understanding of the CSWO role, or had initially performed the role on an interim basis.

“ It was an opportunity; it was almost like trying before you buy...you had an opportunity to see if it's something that you were able to do. Did it feel comfortable? Were you able to meet the requirements of the folk around you in terms of the ask? But also, I always think particularly management jobs, they're like icebergs. So when you're in the receipt of support from your manager, you

see some elements of that role. But what you don't see are the things that they do when the door's closed.

- 2.8. In interviews, CSWOs described a wide range of responsibilities besides their CSWO roles. Nearly all held other senior positions, many with significant workloads and responsibilities, such as Head of Service.

Motivations for pursuing the CSWO role

- 2.9. Various motivating and influencing factors affect career pathways to becoming CSWOs. Those who reflected on personal ambition highlighted the impact that the role could achieve, and a belief that they could make a difference in people's lives by supporting service development and practice within the profession. Some described a motivation to gain more comprehensive experience and/or to work in a role that had more systemic and national influence than practitioner-level. Others shared a desire to further their career and follow a natural progression through senior roles.

“ *I wanted to move into a bigger local authority to experience that diversity of experience and certainly got that. The motivation thereafter was again to work in a promoted post to get that experience of that second tier of management and to see how that felt in terms of a more strategic approach.*

“ *I am passionate about social work, always have been, always will be, and if I lose that passion, energy and drive, I'll retire...I'm passionate about trying to enable people to have the best possible outcomes, particularly vulnerable people who we work with.*

Influences on career pathway

- 2.10. Additional factors which encouraged CSWOs to pursue the role included inspirational leaders, job locations, and posts becoming available, sometimes unexpectedly. Examples include:

- Connections to a particular location or desire to move nearer to extended family.
- Managers who inspired others through ideas, approaches and leadership style.
- Study which provoked a broader understanding of and interest in the role.
- By invitation, for example, being asked to perform an interim CSWO role or to consider taking on the role of CSWO when a vacancy arose. Some CSWOs felt they were in the role by default rather than through a route they had actively sought.

The extent to which individuals feel equipped for the CSWO role

- 2.11. The majority of CSWO's previous experience centred on children's services. They described a significant understanding of this area of social work, but less knowledge and experience of adult social work.

“ *If I've been 20 years now in social work, it comes as second nature around justice and children and families, but having to bring the adults and learning disability side into things - it's a bit of a wake-up call into how little I actually do know across the whole breadth of social work.*

- 2.12. A few reflected that older people's care was their biggest knowledge shortfall, while others described work with asylum seekers as a quickly unfolding new area of responsibility they had been tested with.

- 2.13. CSWOs described coping with the complexity of their role and any potential gaps in knowledge with the assistance of senior colleagues in their teams and peers in other

local authorities. They stressed the need to draw on skills developed in different work areas, apply transferable risk-management principles, and take an open and honest approach with those they were working with.

“ *I'm a big believer in risk assessment principles. You know, they do work in different arenas. If you understand risk and risk mitigation and all of those things, you're applying the same principles to a different situation.*

“ *I'm not over-confident and under-competent...I don't mind at all reaching out to other people who've maybe been through certain things. So that Chief Social Work Officer network is really important for me.*

- 2.14. Two CSWOs described consolidating their experience through background reading or more formal study, noting that the postgraduate diploma for CSWOs had helped them cope with the diversity of tasks and challenges they experienced in their new role.

“ *You have to do the good old-fashioned thing - you have to go and read and go and learn and go and be proactive in your own understanding of what you're responsible for. Not expect somebody to come and tell you.*

Advice for others coming into the CSWO role

- 2.15. Reflecting on their experience of entering and delivering in their role, CSWOs shared advice for others coming into the position. The main themes are presented in the graphic on the following page:

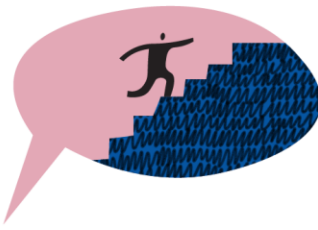
1

Gain experience in all aspects of the profession



2

Ensure social work values, principles and standards underpin all work



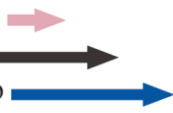
3

Have realistic expectations - decide what matters, and focus on that



4

Set short, medium and long-term objectives and keep referring to them



5

Build strategic networks of support and invest time in developing solid trust-based relationships with people who can help the CSWO role



6

Be visible, and take time, be humble, listen, observe and learn



7

Be confident in realising you know the 'business' and have the skills

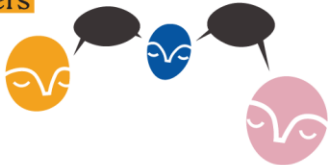
8

Be prepared to take risks, as the CSWO's role is not simply to maintain what is there



9

Recognise that the role can be isolated; find a mentor and supportive CSWO peers



10

Self-care - protect time in and out of work. Set this agenda from the beginning



“

“Make relationships with the right people. Understand the governance structures and what reports into where and who reports into where and who's got influence so that you can use that to better shape your opportunities around the role. Oh, I wish somebody told me that at the beginning!”



“

“Be visible amongst your workforce and your workforce need to know who you are and what your role is - understanding that the Chief Social Work Officer is there to support them, supporting them to do their job as best they can.”



“

“Remembering you're a social worker ...because are some pretty strong voices in some of these areas - you are going to have to be ready to battle on behalf of your profession... Be really ready for some of these complex decisions - even if you're not making them, you're going to have to be saying whether you believe as Chief Social Work Officer they are safe professional decisions.”



“

“Find some Chief Social Work Officer pals so that you can pick up a phone and have a chat, even if the only outcome of that is realising that your problem is the same as somebody else's problem, because knowing that is heartening in and of itself, even if neither of you have solved it.”



4. Expectations and realities of the role

- 3.1. This chapter describes CSWOs' prior knowledge and expectations of the role, the scope of responsibilities in the post, the realism of their own and others' expectations, remuneration and working hours, activities which absorb their time and what they would like to spend more time on.

Expectation versus reality

- 3.2. The role of CSWO is described as high pressure and high responsibility, constantly managing a high volume of work and dealing with competing demands and priorities. The operating environment and governance structures in which CSWOs operate can be complex and challenging, with variable levels of influence and authority. While the role can leave people feeling isolated and exposed at times, it is also held in high regard by those who hold it; some described it as a privilege. CSWOs noted they provide the critical functions of leadership and quality assurance, support professional standards, and the effective delivery of social work functions and services.

“ *I can't think of a better job if you're a professional social worker to do because you're engaged in the complexity of it. The reflections around the job, the making it better, the strength in the workforce, the leadership of the profession.*

- 3.3. Prior expectations of the role were greatly influenced by previous levels of exposure to the role. Those who had worked closely with a CSWO, held deputy or interim positions, or experienced the role in a different local authority, had a more in-depth understanding of the role and described a better grasp of what to expect.

- 3.4. While CSWOs noted their understanding of statutory requirements, guidance and standards, they also reflected that this can seem overwhelming and does not fully convey the experience, demands and requirements of the role. The variability of operating environments and governance structures is a major influencing factor.

“ *I mean, I definitely, having recently been studying the chief social work officer standard, when I first read that, I felt quite panicked. I'd read it before, but not in the context of being a potential chief social work officer. But when you read it and you're in the role, it does feel incredibly overwhelming. And you do think how on earth are all these functions the responsibility of one person?*

- 3.5. For some, the increase in seniority was daunting. Those in the role often have to be involved and make critical decisions in areas of social work that they lack extensive experience of. Sound leadership support in these instances was highlighted as critical.

“ *And she [chief executive] lets me talk it through. She's a safe space to have that difficult conversation. And while she would never direct me, she almost empowers me to come to that decision in a safe place. And I think if I didn't have that, I might be having a very different opinion about what it's like to be the most senior social worker in an organisation.*

- 3.6. The leadership, partnership, and political environment that CSWOs navigate and operate within can also be a revelation to those with less direct experience in the role. A significant component of this is the lack of understanding of the CSWO role and, sometimes, that of social work more widely.

“ *There is a failure from others... and indeed within the Council at times as well, to fully understand the role and the responsibilities and the duties that sit under the Chief Social Work Officer.*

- 3.7. Aligned to the above, given the seniority and critical nature of the role, the level of influence, or the time required to exert influence, can be a surprise and source of frustration for some. However, it should be noted that this can vary significantly from area to area, though the ability to be brave and have a strong voice is viewed as critical.

“ *I think probably what's surprising for me is the lack of power that you actually have as a Chief Social Work Officer, but how you need to keep trying to edge into the agenda so that you're heard.*

“ *I think it is an essential role... the organisations are, they're big bureaucratic monsters irrespective of the size of your local authority and they are dominated by accountants and legal and the popular services or those services that are much more visible... So, education being one. Whereas social work is often unsighted until people need it or something goes wrong. So, you do need a strong voice there.*

- 3.8. While not entirely unexpected, the demands on people's time as CSWO, which for most are coupled with a significant workload associated with the role they hold alongside that of CSWO, can prove challenging. The level of responsibility and risk that the individual is managing grows considerably, as does the level of scrutiny and complexity.

“ *Much more political scrutiny, there's much more scrutiny from the chief executive.*

“ *Those decisions, particularly around things like the removal of young people's liberty through decisions about secure care, the welfare guardianship legislation, the use of the, the sort of giving advice and guidance to the Chief Executive and the most senior officers in the council and challenging them about the adequacy or inadequacy of funding of social work services. So that is not an easy thing to actually do.*

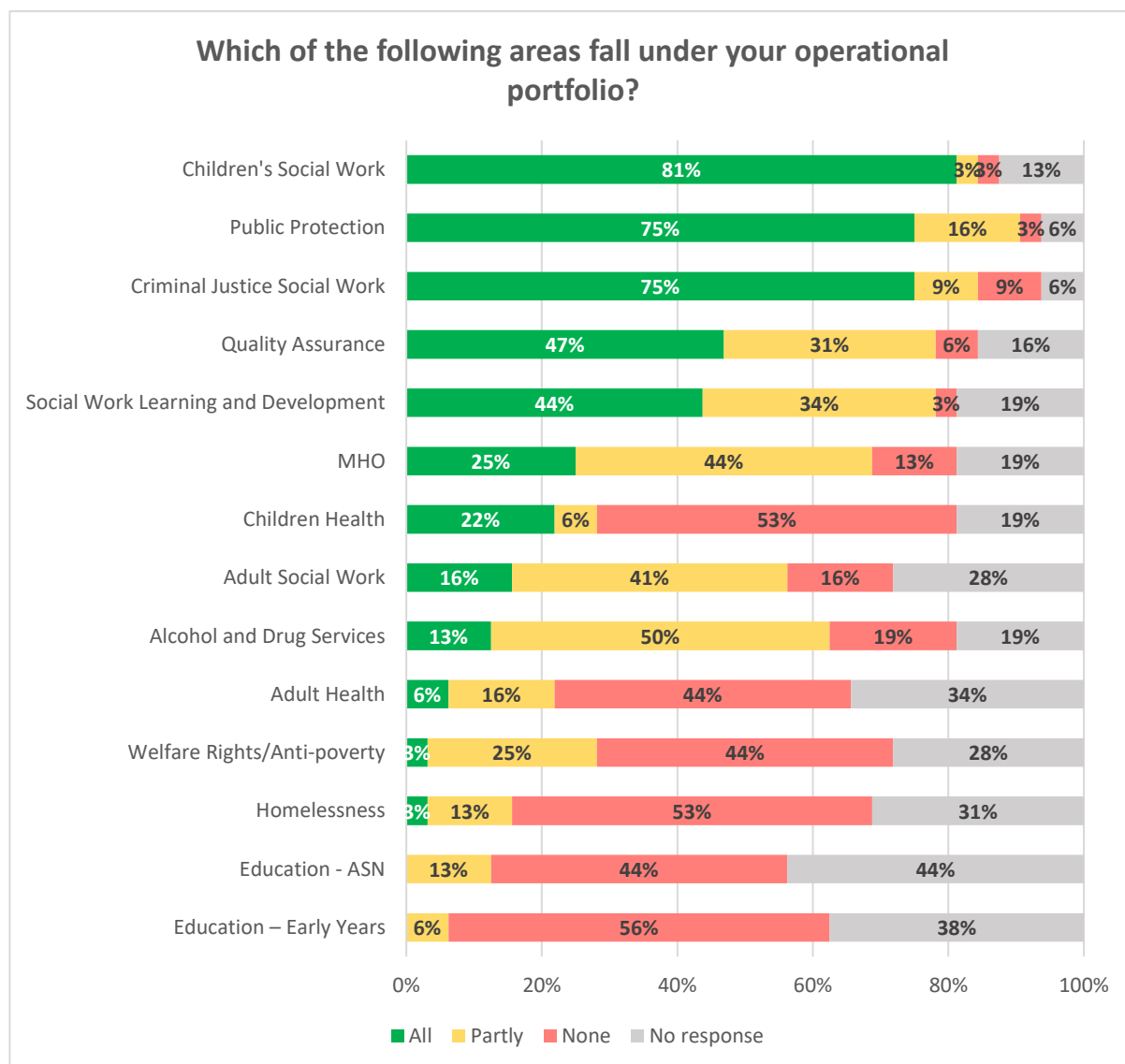
How realistic are the expectations placed on the role?

- 3.9. In short, most CSWOs described the expectations of the role as being unrealistic. Some questioned how one individual could hold the level of knowledge and expertise required to have oversight of all social work practice and legal frameworks. However, this was not wholly attributable to the CSWO role in isolation, but rather when it is viewed in the context of also holding another senior role alongside that of CSWO.

“ *Completely unrealistic... So there's the legal responsibilities which were spread thin - how can you possibly in the very complex legal world have an in-depth knowledge of guardianship, and adults with incapacity and drug testing orders as well as having an in-depth understanding of MAPPA as well as having an in-depth understanding of the ups and downs and rounds of child protection. So it goes on and on and on and on and on as we go.*

Figure 3.1 demonstrates the expansive nature of responsibilities that sit within the remit of CSWOs. (n=32)

3.10. When viewing the role in isolation, without holding another senior social work role alongside it, expectations of the CSWO position are seen as being more realistic. While the same challenges can be experienced, they are less difficult to navigate and manage due to the additional capacity of not holding another role. However, several CSWOs explained that although it's challenging holding another role alongside that of CSWO, maintaining a level of operational involvement can be beneficial when carrying out the CSWO role.



“ So I do feel whether maybe Scotland want to be asking “is it right that our cohort of chief social work officers are also responsible, operationally responsible for services? And is that the best, are we getting the best out of that cohort because of the expectations that are placed on them?

“ So that's maybe me saying that and somebody from another authority would say it would be fantastic just to be the Chief Social Work Officer and not get sucked into, you know, a child needs to be looked after today. Whereas I think

the fact that I'm embedded in practice means I understand what it is to be a Chief Social Work Officer.

3.11. The individual operating contexts and current needs and priorities can also influence understanding of the reality of the CSWO role. For those working in an environment of significant change, development and improvement activity, this can significantly add to the pressures and expectations of the role.

“ *The responsibilities [that I hold] as the Chief Social Work Officer are really quite significant... But where there's a need to really shift a culture and the kind of knowledge and skills and practise... So when you've got such a significant amount of change, for that to be an add-on to your role ,I just think it's just not possible.*

3.12. CSWOs who were newer to the role also spoke about the breadth of the role and the development of knowledge and understanding that is required to perform effectively in the role. They are more often than not working across areas of social work that they have less, or in some cases, no prior significant experience or exposure to. Additional national pressures and demands from the Scottish Government were also seen to add to the unrealistic expectations of the role.

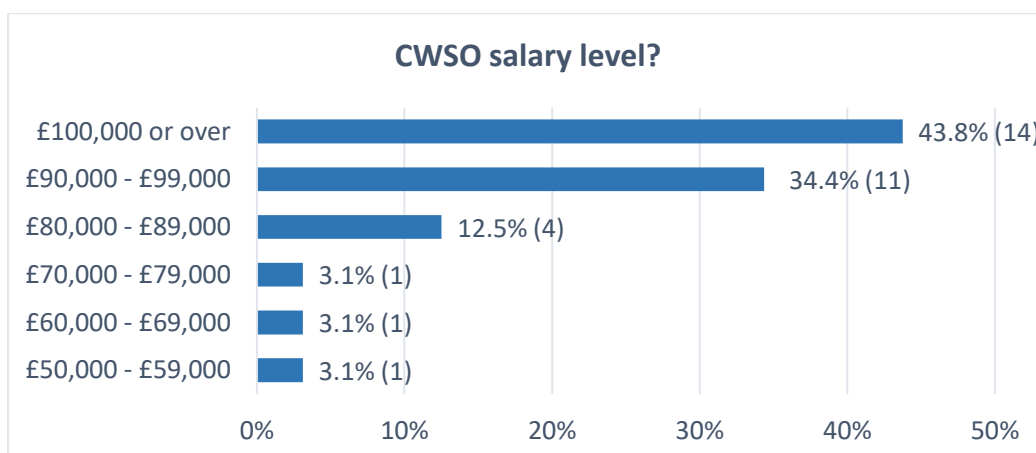
“ *Everything comes in as a top, as a new top priority. And I'm saying that's fine, but somebody needs to decide which of the top priorities are the top priorities, which of the top priorities aren't the top priorities and which of the old top priorities we can stop doing because we've now got a new top priority because you can only get a pint into a pint pot, not a quart.*

3.13. Reflecting on the demands placed on the role by others, some CSWOs also commented on the expectations that CSWOs place on themselves. Those with greater experience in the role explained that there is a need to set realistic expectations, and accept that you are unlikely to do everything that you would like to. A few also commented that they felt unable to do either of their roles as well as they would like.

Remuneration and work patterns

3.14. Nearly 80% of survey respondents reported a salary of £90,000 or over, as demonstrated in figure 3.2. Furthermore, approximately a third of respondents (34.4%) confirmed that their salary includes a supplementary payment for being CSWO.

Figure 3.2: What is your salary level? (n=32)

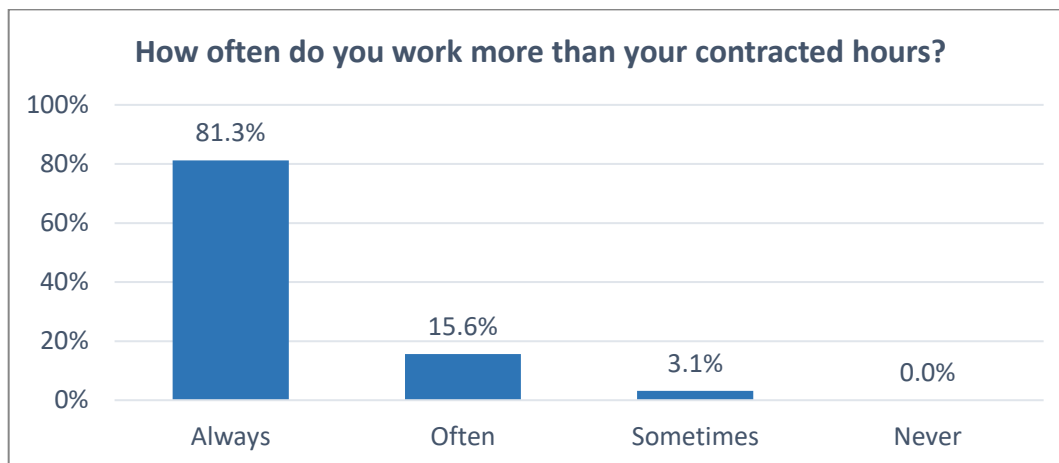


3.15. Almost all (97%) CSWOs reported that they ‘always’ or ‘often’ worked more than their contracted hours, with only 3% reporting that they ‘sometimes’ did. Most had a fairly set routine to manage their working hours and patterns, however for some it would fluctuate based on demands and priorities at any given time.

“ Get up at half six, seven in the morning, and I’ll log on to the computer then, and I’ll start doing my emails while I’m having breakfast... I’ll do two or three hours of an evening. I try not to do anything on a weekend, but Sunday evenings tend to be, oh, I might as well do a couple of hours to prep for the week. And that’ll vary from week to week, and I was gonna say some weeks I’ll do zero additional but can’t remember when that last was.

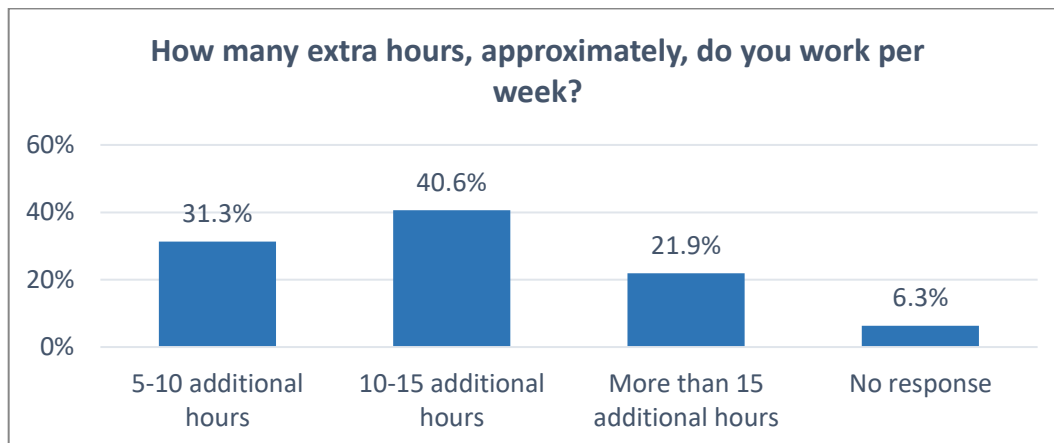
3.16. The frequency in which CSWOs work beyond contracted hours can vary though, as demonstrated in figure 3.3.

Figure 3.3: Over 80% of CSWOs reported always working beyond their contracted hours (n=32)



3.17. The number of hours that CSWOs work over and above what is contracted varies, and ranges from a minimum of 5 additional hours through to 35 being the highest reported.

Figure 3.4: Over a fifth of CSWOs work more than 15 additional hours per week (n=32)



3.18. As demonstrated in figure 3.4, almost two thirds of CSWOs work on average 10 hours or more per week than they are contracted to do. During interviews some CSWOs raised

concerns about the impact on wellbeing, and how sustainable the hours worked by those in the CSWO role, but also that of the wider staff in the profession.

“ *But I know that I work every weekend, every night, every... it's crazy, right? I don't think that's acceptable for anyone to have to do that in order to keep their head above water... it's been really difficult to last in a job this length of time because of that. So what you have is, and this is across social work, right? I've got a real bee in my bonnet about it. But what we have is the normalization of exhaustion in our profession. It needs to change frankly.*

“ *I'm sure it is impacting on my life. I've always worked that way and I've always needed to do that. That's not peculiar to being a Chief Social Work Officer. You know, most, you know, within social work in general, you're often working over your time because you have to do.*

3.19. However, CSWOs also emphasised and acknowledged their own responsibility to, and importance of, managing their workload and being disciplined about working patterns, delegation and being effective in prioritising the 'must do's' while accepting that you cannot do everything that you would like to.

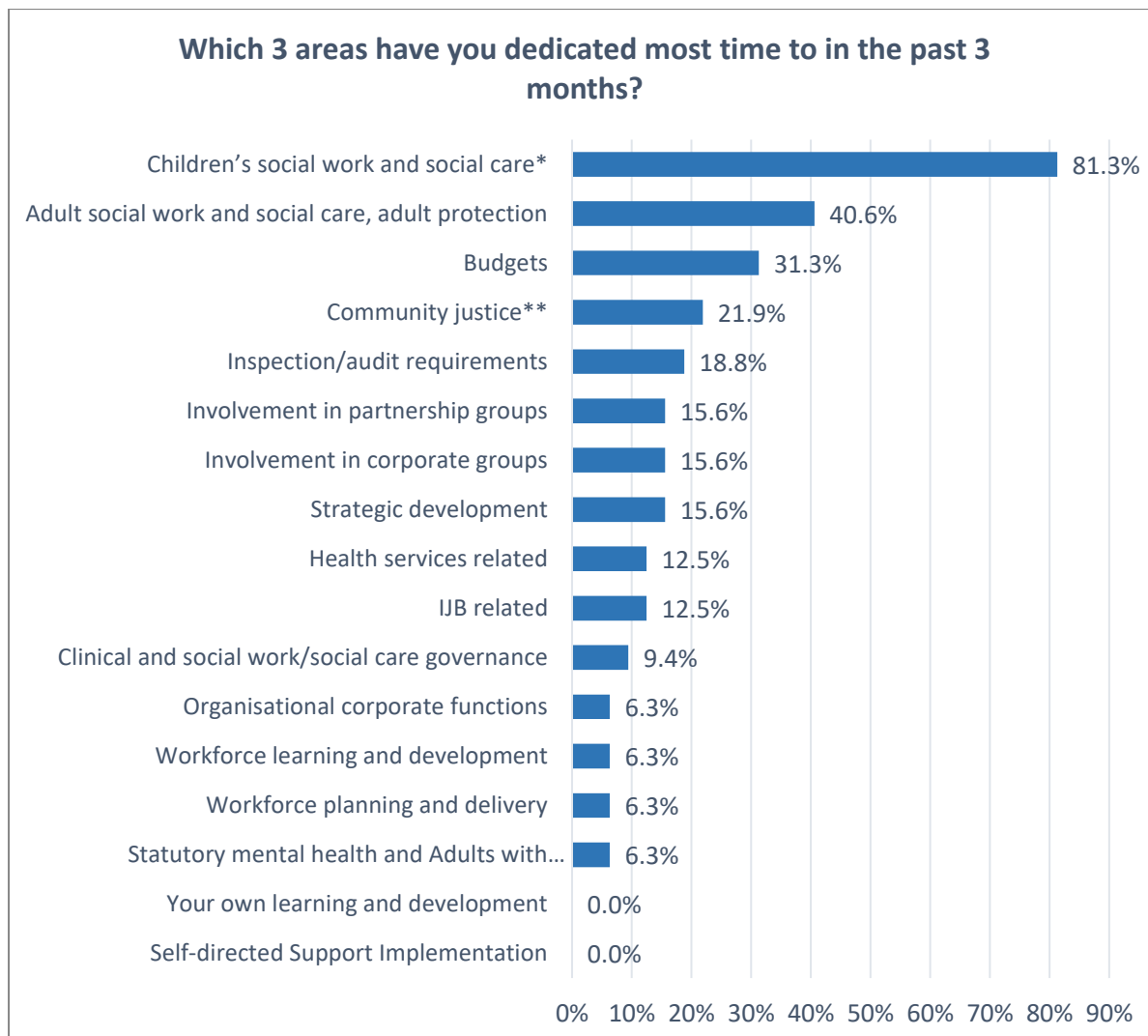
“ *But it's about prioritizing time and what you do and what you don't do. And sometimes there might be three or four meetings in the diary that all require representation. So I've got to make sure that I delegate appropriately to the most skilled person to be in those different spaces for me, but it is a challenge. And I do believe the role of the chief social work officer in practice now is as busy as it's ever, far more busy than it's ever been for me, just because of all of the different demands.*

“ *But, you know, there's a responsibility on all of us to kind of manage our workload. And, you know, if it becomes too much, you're very clear about picking up conversations with the people you need to pick up conversations with or you re-prioritise.*

Activities which absorb the most CSWO time

3.20. The CSWO survey asked respondents to state which three areas they had spent most of their time in the preceding three-months. Figure 3.5 provides a breakdown of responses.

Figure 3.5: Just over 80% of CSWOs had dedicated most of their time to Children’s social work and social care (n=32)



*This label has been shortened for the purpose of the graph. The full label used in the survey was: ‘Children’s social work and social care, child protection, fostering/adoption, statutory responsibilities for Looked After children & young people, secure accommodation authorisation.’

** This label has been shortened for the purpose of the graph. The full label used in the survey was: ‘Community justice, offender management, MAPPA, management of Drug Treatment and Testing Order, management of Supervised Release Orders’

3.21. As discussed in chapter 2, the career pathway of most CSWO’s has been through children’s services, and this is also the area in which they had dedicated most time to in the preceding three-months (81.3%). This was followed by adult social work and social care (40.6%) and work related to budgets and budget setting (21.9%).

3.22. Themes in discussions with CSWOs about how their time is spent reinforced the survey findings. Several CSWOs reported that they had observed an increase in the time on

adult social work, and particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. The time of year in which the survey was administered and interviews undertaken also meant that finance and budget setting were a significant focus.

“ *Most of it is children's and that's absolutely fine because of the levels of risk involved there and just because in this role people should feel that they are able to come to you with really complex situations that they need advice about... But in terms of the actual time involved, the finances are a biggie especially this time of year. And that's also the sleepless night stuff because you end up being the one that has to see which services could be cut and that's really, really tough.*

3.23. CSWOs were asked about the extent to which they were involved in budget planning activity. While most confirmed that they were heavily or fully involved, the extent of influence they felt they held varied. Several reported that they had limited or no involvement, and at best were asked to provide their perspective on the risks associated with planned cuts, again with variable levels of perceived influence.

3.24. The fluctuating and cyclical nature of where time needs to be focussed and given at different points was highlighted by CSWOs, who explained that this would change depending on the time of year they were asked, and the priorities and demands present at that point. A range of different activity and tasks were described as taking the majority of CSWO's time, including:

- Attending corporate, partnership, committee and governance meetings, plus local and national steering and working groups and various partnership working activity
- Work on out-of-authority-placements
- Governance and governance structures
- Unaccompanied asylum seeking children
- Change, improvement, policies and procedures
- Investigations and inspections
- Providing advice and guidance, and professional leadership

“ *You're sometimes in a position where you've got a lot of reactive things to deal with, and that can fluctuate and that can be politically, strategically, but it can also be just periods where operationally in a way that other chief officers of other sorts of services might not have to handle, you're really involved in decision making about particular high-risk situations or cases... There's the budget cycle and having to deal with that, around workforce issues. There's a cycle around committee and, you know, feeding the machine in terms of the governance and committee and partnership structures... And then there's the sort of wider professional and strategic stuff as well as sort of day-to-day service operations. At this time of year, you can be drowning in budget things, and therefore there's quite a big lead in time in relation to that as well.*

Areas CSWOs would like to commit more time to

3.25. CSWOs acknowledge the importance of effective workload management and prioritisation in ensuring they spend time where it is needed. However, the overriding message was that there is simply not enough time to give their attention and focus to

everything that needs it, or at the very least, not to the levels and standards they would like to. This is largely exacerbated by holding the CSWO role alongside another role such as head of service, and the many demands placed on each role.

“ *A lot of my energy, I feel, gets taken up by the bureaucracy and council business of trying to convince people why we cost what we cost. And that's really, really difficult. And every ounce of energy I'm spending on that is energy I'm not spending on being in the right places where I want to be as chief social work officer.*

3.26. More specifically, some CSWOs identified a particular area of social work where they would like to focus more of their time and attention. These tended to be areas where they had least former experience or responsibility.

3.27. CSWOs repeatedly emphasised a desire to spend more time on connecting with, supporting and developing staff and teams. They wanted to be able to give more time to developing relationships with teams, give attention to professional and practice development, provide the rounded support, space and opportunity for reflection, and provide the constructive challenge that enables the effective delivery of services. The importance of ensuring staff understand the role of CSWO was also highlighted.

“ *The task is so stretched that as the current Chief Social Work Officer, the disappointment for me is the lack of time available to think about and work with the staff teams on things that are about ongoing professional development within teams.*

“ *One of the areas that I would really love to spend more time is that engaging with the workforce. So I engage with my teams but the wider workforce is much more challenging... even talking to people about social work practice, talking to people about some of the dilemmas that they encounter, having those professional discussions, you would want to do that in a much more regular basis and it's incredibly challenging to do that as well as everything else that is required of me...*

3.28. CSWOs reported wanting to be able to give more time to strategy and policy development, strategic planning, quality improvement and service development activity. They explained that these activities often needed significant space and time; a rarity when reacting and responding to demands in the moment.

“ *I guess developing the model of social work for the local authority and health and social care partnership and that oversight. I'd like to spend more time scrutinising and being able to see better the performance that impact outcomes, those things. That's what I would like to spend more time doing. And what's preventing that from happening is having the head of service role as well.*

“ *It's that development work... but also how we can plan forward around strategy. So I manage that within the week but I think that looking forward and strategic planning and what do we need to change in the system to highlight some of the current issues. So that's probably what I would say I would like to spend more time if I could and I'm trying to build that in.*

- 3.29. Having time to read, reflect, think and plan was also reported to be difficult for CSWOs, which can leave them feeling exposed or underprepared. A few spoke about having to do this outside of work, to ensure they can keep up with everything they have on.

“ *[Having the time to] give things the consideration and the thought, and be able to participate in some of the discussion that's really required to make really sound judgments about where collectively we think we should be going and I think that's been lacking for quite a long time.*

- 3.30. The value of professional support from peers was repeatedly expressed by CSWOs. However, several also explained that the time to harness the opportunities to do this was difficult. Aligned to this a few CSWOs also expressed a desire to be able to commit more time to engage in national meetings and working groups alongside their peers.

“ *I think there is a bit about developing peer relationships, ideas, networking, some support from a profession, your own profession that understands some of the challenges. So I think at times, for me, it can, you know, I know I can feel it can be an isolating role.*

- 3.31. Some CSWOs described the tension around how much and well they could deliver everything they needed to in the time available. They also described depending on others, who are equally stretched, which adds further pressures.

“ *I think sometimes it's hard to feel that you're that you're being able to do as many things well as you want to do. So being more proactive in relation to the development of the social work workforce in relation to, you know, making some real positive practice changes that you think will create the conditions to deliver better outcomes for people. It's hard to do all elements of that as well as you would want to all the time.*

5. Challenges faced by CSWOs

4.1. This chapter describes CSWOs’ views on the challenges of the role and aspects of the job that create pressure and stress, factors which influence CSWOs to leave or consider leaving their post, and rewarding aspects of the role.

Workload and competing priorities

4.2. The numerous challenges faced by CSWOs are varied and intertwine with the aspects of the job that were reported to create pressure and stress. These relate to areas where they give their time and attention, and also other activities they recognise as important, but are unable to give time to.

“ Do I have enough capacity to do a bare minimum and try and keep everything spinning? Yes. Do I have access to the resources that I need to properly lead the social work and social care workforce, you know ensure they've got professional development opportunities and you know all of those sorts of things. No, those services have been centralised and decimated over the years before I came here but also since I came here.

4.3. The survey asked for three areas of work which cause the most pressure and stress at an organisational and individual level, with responses shown in figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1: Budgets and the area of Children’s social work and social care are creating the greatest pressure amongst CSWOs (n=32)



**This label has been shortened for the purpose of the graph. The full label used in the survey was: 'Children's social work and social care, child protection, fostering/adoption, statutory responsibilities for Looked After children & young people, secure accommodation authorisation.'*

***This label has been shortened for the purpose of the graph. The full label used in the survey was: 'Community justice, offender management, MAPPA, management of Drug Treatment and Testing Order, management of Supervised Release Orders'*

- 4.4. During interviews, CSWOs explained that the workload, competing priorities and demands on their time, alongside the responsibility that the role carries were the most common challenges, and major causes of pressure and stress. They described feeling unable to do all aspects of the job to the level and standard they would like to.

“ *It's the volume of work. That's what causes me the most stress. It's my inability to do my job well because I've got too much to do. So I have, I don't know how different I am from other people to be fair. But I have got back-to-back meetings every day from now I think for the next six months, I'm probably almost fully booked [every day] from 8:00 in the morning until quite often 8 at night. And in that time I might get 300 emails. And so I physically cannot work enough hours to keep on top of all of that.*

“ *And I think that just, yeah, the anxiety, my anxiety levels are really high as a result of that because of the heavy responsibility.*

Staffing issues

- 4.5. Staffing was another commonly cited challenge for CSWOs, particularly staffing levels and recruitment challenges, and ensuring staff have the necessary support and resources needed to meet required standards of practice. Interlinked with this, CSWOs expressed concern about the pressures in the wider workforce, and the impact on recruitment and retention, and therefore service delivery.

“ *I would say the pressure, the biggest pressures in the role really are not having enough qualified staff with experience to feel at all comfortable sleeping at night about the standard of practice that you've got and an insufficient capacity to provide them with the support that that they might need to become those practitioners.*

“ *Workloads of almost every social worker across the country are far too high and in some cases they're very, very, very high. So the lack of human beings to do what we need them to do and the significant and chronic financial pressure around resource for local authorities and other sectors as well is a worry.*

Resources

- 4.6. The financial climate, with a constant drive for savings and increased efficiencies, makes budget setting challenging and frustrating. CSWOs noted this resource reduction has a significant impact on future planning, and increases the challenge of ensuring social work can meet its responsibilities and deliver the expected quality, in a context of increasing demand for services, and increasing complexity among those accessing services. For some CSWOs the lack of understanding and appreciation of social work, alongside the risks generated through reductions in funding, add to this challenge.

“ *Despite all of our best efforts, the role of my best efforts, the corporate management team still doesn't quite at times understand the significant work*

that we do and therefore can't understand why we don't make savings in the same way that everybody else does. And it's that constant arguing of the balance of risk versus the, you know, what level of risk do you want to operate to get a small saving?

- 4.7. CSWOs role in decision-making can weigh heavy. In interviews, many acknowledged the importance, and pressure, of ensuring they are getting decisions right, particularly those that affect individuals and families. Inspections or investigations into potential failures can also have a significant impact on the pressure and stress experienced.

“ *I always take this back down to the human level because that's why I'm here, that's where my passion comes from. And if there's a vulnerable child who is in the community whose behaviour is escalating or the family situation is breaking down and we have to find a different kind of resource which just doesn't exist in Scotland at the moment or in England or Northern Ireland or Wales, then I worry that harm might come to that person or others and that's my biggest individual worry..... and it's when I have to authorise or not secure care because there's risks both ways there. So that's the bits where I'll spend most of my time worrying.*

“ *I mean the stress in the job comes more from high profile investigations and injury whether that be to adults under adult protection or children so those are the bits that cause you stress.*

“ *Again, I think it's because we've well this year alone we've just had three more inspections so that side of it it does it just takes over to be perfectly honest that's probably where the pressure has been.*

- 4.8. A few CSWOs expressed frustrations with a lack of cohesion at a national policy level, explaining that different aspects of social work can sit in or straddle across different policy areas. They argued this creates a disjointed landscape with competing priorities and tensions. Furthermore, new legislation and demands from the Scottish Government were also reported to be a source of ongoing challenge.

“ *The positioning of government around social work at a national policy level... the lack of integration, the lack of joined up thinking around social work is really very disconcerting and at times frustrating. You know you've got elements of social work sitting with the justice minister, you've got elements of social work sitting with the education, culture and learning minister. You've got elements of social work sitting with the health minister, and others as well. And I suppose for me, there's not a coherent voice at a national government level around social work. And actually what the Minister for Education says is sometimes contradictory and conflicting with the Minister for Health.*

- 4.9. Other national level influences and challenges were also raised, including a lack of a cohesive approach across the country to how specialist provision is utilised, and the uncertainty in relation to the National Care Service.

“ *We are all within our own local authority areas at times looking about the country for a placement for somebody or for the right service for somebody or might even be looking cross-border because we're out of options. This feels*

incredibly disorganised to me and makes it very difficult for us to deliver on the principles of care closer to home for people where they can't be in their own home. And I think we need a single kind of approach to how we manage the specialist resources that are available across Scotland... It feels like we disrupt families, we disrupt community connections, and we disrupt people from the places where they belonged because we are looking for specialist services that are dotted about the place... So, I think I'm frustrated by what feels like a lack of organisation in a very small country.

- 4.10. Wider commonly reported challenges related to the operating environment and governance structures that CSWOs have to work across and within, and also the availability and provision of various support functions and structures. These are discussed in detail in Chapters Five and Six.

Factors which influence CSWOs to leave or consider leaving their post

- 4.11. Several CSWOs will leave post in the coming months; a mix of retirement, transferring the role, or taking on new posts. None attributed this to their experiences of being in the CSWO role. Those who are retiring generally feel they had served their time and want to focus on other areas of their life outside of work; likewise, the CSWO moving into a new role did not attribute this to any dissatisfaction with the role. Another explained that while they were in a position to retire, they felt there was still work to do before they would be comfortable leaving the role for someone else to step into

“ *It's not to get away from what I'm doing now because ultimately I'm taking responsibility for that with me anyway, one way or another, So, you know, I think for me, you know, the opportunity around the [new role] is about trying to do what we can with the meagre resources that we've got, you know, to focus on the things that really matter to people.*

“ *I've had a long time to reflect on my career but I mean I can honestly say I don't think there is anything I would have rather done in my life in terms of career choices.*

- 4.12. Most CSWOs acknowledged the challenging and high-pressured nature of the CSWO role and suggested there can be days when they felt they had had enough. However, they understand the importance of the role and are passionate about their profession. They observed that the role of CSWO gives them opportunities to positively influence and support the sector, profession and the services that are accessed by people most in need in society.

“ *And every time I thought about leaving, I thought, no, you're not in the job to do what's best for [local authority]. You're in the job to do what's best for children... So the real reason I'm in the job is because I'm a social worker. Not because I'm a council officer... So I've stayed in it because I've known, well to walk out wouldn't be the right thing to do, because all we would do is make things worse for children. Somebody else would come in, they would have the same problems. There would be more turnover.*

“ *I mean, of course there's been days where I thought I'm going to Jack this in or I'm going to do this or I'm going to do that. But as a genuine sentiment, you've got to be tough to manage these roles and jobs. And if you're tough, you're not*

going to walk away from something really in the middle of it. You're going to be managing it to whatever end you can really.

- 4.13. Two others who described plans to leave the post explained that it had never been their intention to be the CSWO. One has been having ongoing discussions with their line manager to facilitate this transition, while another explained that the CSWO role was not compatible with the role they had alongside it.

“ *Bearing in mind I was not trying to be the Chief Social Work Officer. So it is my aspiration to pass the role on to somebody within my team, because there is a fundamental problem with being [titles of the two roles held]... I'm supposed to represent what social work needs. So when we're getting to the tough decisions about how much money there is to allocate to what, everyone else has got a separate professional person who is able to speak for that profession. I can do that but ultimately I also have to balance it for everybody and that's fundamentally not right.*

- 4.14. One CSWO reflected on the level of turnover in the role over the past few years, and said they believed the pressure, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, had influenced people's decision to leave the role.

“ *I was at the Social Work Scotland AGM today and I noted that there had been 20 changes in Chief Social Work Officer post holders since April 2020. So there are only 32 of us in Scotland.... so four (of those changes) are still Chief Social Work Officers but they're in different councils now from where they were originally. But 20 changes, that's significant. And a number of the people who have left over the past two years were completely burnt out because of the intensity of the work through the pandemic. And I suppose some of that has lessened, but not all.*

- 4.15. A few CSWOs commented on the impact of the role on their health and wellbeing, and how that influenced their thinking about remaining in post.

“ *Yeah, I think about it all the time. And I will leave that's the thing. That's my intention because it impacts on my own kind of sense of well-being.*

- 4.16. A few CSWOs looked to the future and spoke with concern about the National Care Service and the potential impact on their peer's decisions about continuation in the role.

“ *I think the NCS debate is going to be an enormous watershed for a significant number of people, if it's the shambolic meandering mess that it could well be. You know that when the legislation's implemented, it was always talked about 2-3 years, but now talking about full implementation in eight to 10 years. But I think there's a number of us, we'll probably go, OK, that's two years, we're in our 60s, is it worth carrying on? Is this just going to be the same meandering mess for the next eight years or is there are opportunities within it. So, I think there's a massive watershed coming up in the next couple of years which could fundamentally shape what a number of us do.*

Rewarding aspects of the role

- 4.17. Participants shared similar views on aspects of their role which they valued, enjoyed and encouraged them to remain. They reflected that while their role was very challenging, it was also rewarding, and fundamental drivers around connection with social work values, the support of colleagues and the difference they were able to make to people's lives from their strategic input were common themes. Many articulated their passion for social work and the desire to continue ensuring that these values are brought to the challenge of addressing disadvantage.

“ *The values of social work that keep me in the role...to try and improve the lives of the most vulnerable and you know the most vulnerable members of our society. Absolutely they are the values and that social justice element of social work is absolutely you know that's the passion for me. You know the, you know the impact of poverty, the impact of generational the impact of of those, you can just see it.*

- 4.18. Working with and leading supportive and experienced management teams, as well as helping staff develop in their roles, were also important drivers. Generally, CSWOs described a high level of support, commitment and inspiration from colleagues in social work.

“ *It is a privilege to lead your profession.*

- 4.19. Many participants also articulated a fundamental desire to help people and the opportunities CSWOs had to make a difference in vulnerable people's lives. Some CSWOs found the level of influence on the system and the strategy for their area a rewarding element of their role.

“ *In the Health and Social Care Partnership, you're doing a different influencing but also being able to be clear about whether or not the proposals are ethical or moral in terms of budget decisions. So I think the ability to continue to promote moral and ethical services that are so high quality, that individual human rights and respecting dignity at the centre is important. Protecting the vulnerable community, but also protecting their workforce is something else that keeps me in the job.*

“ *I think there's a bit for me that at the heart of that is I'm having the right conversations with people, I'm in the right groups that I need to be in, that can help inform and actually have an influence within the profession and within the area I'm working in. It doesn't get much bigger than that... there's a real pride in there.*

- 4.20. In summary, despite the many challenges of their role and the constant pressures they face, CSWOs spoke clearly about the positive and rewarding aspects of holding the role.

“ *I still believe that social work done well with passion actually can and does make a difference. You know, sometimes you have to look for that difference you're making...and it's still there. And that's what gets me out of my bed each morning to come into work and keep me going. Absolutely.*

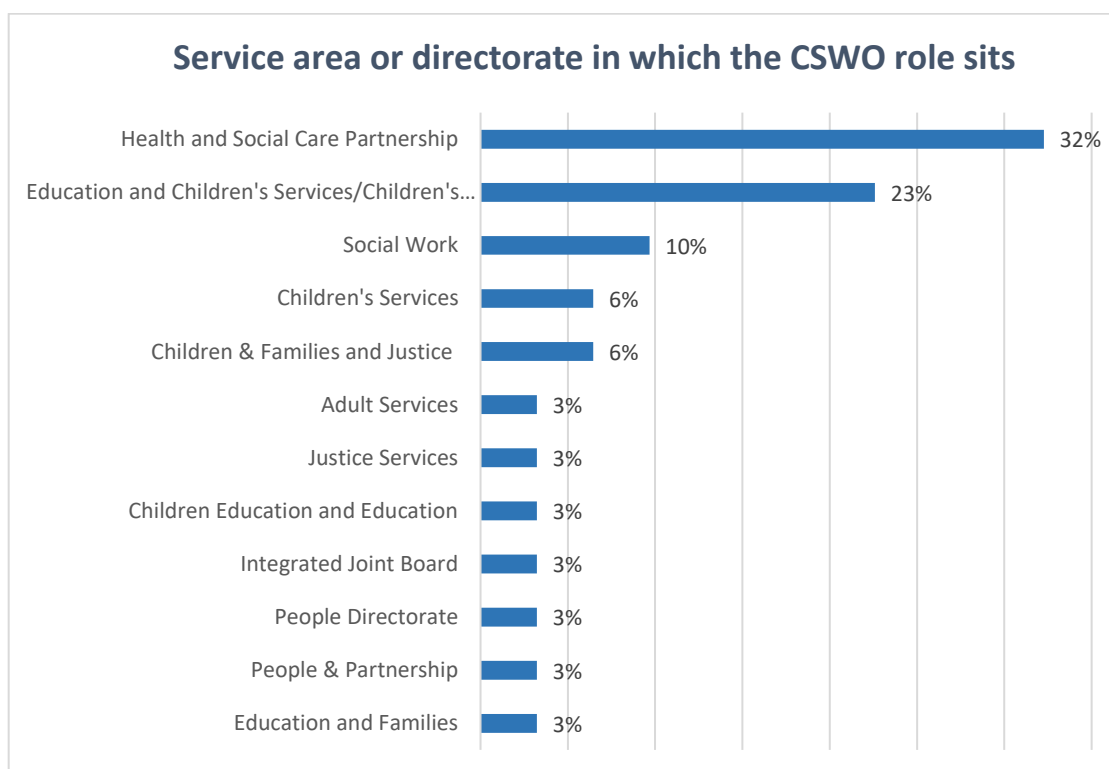
6. Reporting and operating structures

- 5.1. This chapter outlines views on reporting and operating structures, including service area or directorate of CSWO role; line report arrangements and effectiveness; reporting to groups and committees; challenges in reporting and operating structures; access to leaders and influence; and management and leadership of others.

Line report arrangements and their effectiveness

- 5.2. CSWOs sit in varied service areas or directorates in different local authority areas, as demonstrated in chart 5.1.

Figure 5.1: Over 40% of CSWO roles sit in service areas or directorates that include children’s services.



- 5.3. While 32% reported that the CSWO role sat in the local Health and Social Care partnership, 41% reported that it sat in a service area or directorate that included children’s and families’ services. This again potentially reflects the career pathways of CSWOs and the roles they hold alongside their CSWO role.
- 5.4. Just over half (56%) of those who responded to the survey reported that other colleagues in their organisations also held responsibility for the professional oversight of statutory social work functions in their local authority or partnership area. This included those in the roles of Chief Officer (various), Deputy Chief Social Work Officer, Head of Partnership, Head of Service/department/integration, Lead Social Worker, Executive Director, and Chief Executive.
- 5.5. Line manager arrangements also varied across CSWOs, though most commonly line management was provided from their Chief Executive, a Chief Officer, deputy Chief Executive or Executive Director.
- 5.6. CSWOs discussed differing and, at times, complex line reporting and governance structures. Examples of reporting arrangements included to local authority Chief

Executives or Deputy Chief Executives, Directorate Chief Executives, Chief Officers, Health Board Chief Executives, Service Directors, Directors of Health and Social Care partnerships, Elected Members, and Leaders of the Council. Some report to multiple people via attendance at executive and leadership meetings.

- 5.7. Those they report to look for professional advice and guidance on aspects of CSWO responsibilities, statutory duties, decision-making, or strategic issues. “Reassurance” on frontline service developments, including being informed of risk issues or high-profile incidents, is often sought. The participant below also discussed reporting successes, which they saw as important to support staff recruitment and wellbeing.

“ I meet with (an Elected Member) and flag what's working well, what's not... Usually, it's things that might be hitting the media or incidents that I think, 'our elected members will need to know about this'.

“ And critically, I also report success to [CEO] for staff... So you know, presenting those successes as well because too often we report all the things that are challenging as opposed to all the things that are rewarding... And if we look at the messages that came from our frontline staff in the Taking the Wheel report in particular, we heard from them that even at university people were being traumatised about children, family, social work, saying difficult it is... So it's about the positives of that and what we can celebrate.

- 5.8. CSWOs highlight aspects that they valued about line management and reporting arrangements, included managers who: gave them autonomy; had confidence in them; respected their opinion; were supportive; were flexible around meeting times; provided constructive challenge and feedback, were responsive; and prioritised their meetings. A small number raised the personalities of those they report to as a critical factor in the effectiveness of line report arrangements, with the participants below highlighting the importance of this relationship.

“ If you don't feel (line manager's) confidence in you, that can be the biggest risk to your confidence as a decision maker... So (their) confidence in me, (their) ability to hold me to account and ask the right questions in the right way is critical.

“ I don't wait till (scheduled) meeting if there's things coming through. I will email (them)... I don't feel that I'm left on my own - I can contact the Chief Exec when I want.

“ I would move to have that right person... I went to (local authority) because of the person I would be reporting to.

- 5.9. Conversely, some participants highlighted challenges with reporting arrangements or barriers to their effectiveness. These included: not being afforded autonomy; difficulties making their voices heard: inconsistent staffing; and those they report to having competing priorities and limited availability, “interfering”, not understanding CSWO roles or not considering social work a priority.

“ The chief officer's priority is (different sector to social work). That is clear.

“ We've got these interim posts, there's been a lot of changes of staff... and interim chief officers coming in and rightly... asking lots of questions. There's a lot going on just now.

- 5.10. Some described difficulties with reporting to more than one person. CSWOs with dual roles, for example, might report professionally to one manager or area and operationally to another. Participants described challenges operating across different arenas and or navigating cross-team dynamics. The time demands in multiple reporting lines were also highlighted, with one participant feeling dual reporting is “unnecessary”.

“ *The chief exec is more aligned to the political arena. You have to share information in a way that gains traction... There's a bit of an art to spinning things... it might be easier if I didn't have two different tones of line management.* ”

- 5.11. A small number of CSWOs highlighted blurred reporting lines between their roles. Speaking with “different hats on” or maintaining a clear divide between activities for each role were identified as helpful strategies to manage this. Other ways to mitigate the complexities of multi-line reporting included working to a defined agenda, being clear about the different reporting requirements for each meeting and ensuring consistency of messaging for everyone reported to.

- 5.12. Despite the challenges, some felt multi-line reporting works well or highlighted the benefits of this, such as giving direct access to the decision-makers. The importance of CSWOs having individual direct access or a ‘dotted line to’ the Chief Executive, separate from other line report arrangements, was raised. This was seen as necessary because of the unique professional advisory role of the CSWO and the influence this affords.

“ *The CSWO should be reporting direct to the director in terms of statutory duties and also report to the chief executive of the council... If I were reporting to a Head of Service, for example, I'd be worried that some stuff gets diluted or how some stuff is represented.... It's an absolute strength.* ”

“ *The confidentiality of [CSWOs having a dotted line to the chief exec] can be helpful because the HSCP is its own structure, but the council is wider than that... You've got that joint reporting, that oversight as to what else goes on... There's a degree of autonomy that is very particular to the role that separates you from just within your own organisation - that's helpful.* ”

Line managers' backgrounds

- 5.13. Some mentioned benefits of those they report to having a social work background or described challenges where this was not the case. They shared that managers can lack operational knowledge and awareness of “what we deal with”; for instance, managing risk or complaints, the complexity of social work interventions and change processes, or the need for trauma-informed working arrangements. This leads to limitations on how supportive the relationship can be for CSWO, the potential for role creep, and insufficient scrutiny of practice.

“ *Staff are relocating to a corporate building (with open plan offices and hot desks)... I say to them an important part of social work is having a safe space when you return to the office if you've just been out where someone's poured out their...distress and their trauma. You don't need to come in to say, “Can I book a hot desk?”. They don't understand that.* ”

“ *There's things that are happening in practice that (my chief officer) doesn't know are an issue because (they) don't have the knowledge... Often the same managers are looking for me to do something about it because they don't know how to take it forward. So, you're not just doing that advisory role.* ”

5.14. However, others described benefits to those they report to coming from different professional backgrounds or felt that despite this, there was a good appreciation for the role of CSWO. Factors identified as facilitating this, included managers who:

- come from a background that has a “natural allegiance” with social work;
- are interested in and curious about social work;
- understand the CSWO role, “*delegated responsibilities and decision making and the legal aspects of the role*”; or
- trust CSWOs to make decisions.

Reporting arrangements to groups and committees

5.15. Participants also attend executive and leadership meetings, committees, and governance groups to report to these or in an ‘advice and guidance’ capacity. Examples include elected member committees, Integrated Joint Boards (IJBs), Health and Social Care Partnerships, and Improvement boards.

“ We have an extended leadership team. I attend these meetings, which the Chief Exec chairs, along with the directors and the Chief officer from the IJB... Collectively, we try to do our business through that agenda.

“ I'm a permanent invitee... to the management team for the HSCP. But I've been very clear I'm not a member of it. I'm just 'a for information' person, and I reserve the right to turn up and say, "What is that paper all about?"

5.16. Issues reported at these meetings and committees include: service pressures; local authority statistics; risk and risk management; providing opinions on budgets; national policy updates; and celebrating successes and good practice. A distinction was drawn between the types of reporting in different arenas, with council meetings being less concerned with the “operational level of detail”. The benefits of CSWOs attending committees with elected members in terms of influence were highlighted.

5.17. However, there are time demands linked to attendance at multiple meetings. To manage this, a small number of CSWOs discussed arranging meetings to avoid duplication of work or streamlining their meeting attendance.

“ I (am) a 'copy to' member of all the Protecting People Committees. I get all the papers and could attend if I wanted to. But our services are also independently represented... We agreed with the chairs that I would always be available to them, but I don't sit on the committees every time now. That's been helpful in terms of making other people step into that space.

Further challenges of operating and reporting structures

5.18. A small number of CSWOs raised challenges linked to reporting social work aims and outcomes, which can be less tangible than those of other service areas such as Education. CSWOs reflected on the complexity of the work that social workers carry out and the difficulties that this creates for identifying, measuring and communicating the impact of their work. As a result, they often “fall back on” reporting processes, procedures, timescales, etc, which do not convey impact. One suggested using more creative methods, such as vignettes and case studies, to better evidence social work intervention aims and outcomes.

“ (I've been asked) why I couldn't provide the same data you get in schools about attainment. And I'd say, 'Because there's standardised testing for schools'. How

do you measure the changes required and impact for a family with parental substance use, physical assault... poor mental health... And that's before you get into things like poverty... All those things are a real challenge to report.

- 5.19. Others expressed concern about reporting and governance linked to health and social care integration, such as: unintegrated IT systems, overly complex bureaucratic structures, confusion surrounding the CSWO role, lack of clarity around responsibilities for service delivery and improvements, and loss of social work leadership positions. They felt this had led to an increase in leaders without a social work background who may not understand the nuances of social work's role and function. One suggested that understanding social work, social care, and the CSWO role should be demonstrated in leadership recruitment processes within integrated services.

“ *Instead of the word 'integration', we should use the word 'complication'. What service users want is coherent services talking to each other. They don't give a toss about the bureaucratic structure, but we spent an awful amount of time looking at how we integrate bureaucratic structures.*

“ *With our adult protection arrangements, there was an inferred expectation that I would miraculously fix that with my children's services workforce. I had to point out that the people available and skilled to do that sat within the purview of the chief officer, and they could direct them to improve those services... There is confusion around accountability for service delivery and professional accountability. It is still subject to interpretation and gets in the way sometimes of us being able to drive things forward.*

“ *In the HSCP... you need to be quite far down operationally in the structure to have any core social work understanding around practice, person-centred care, good conversations, (the need to be) speaking to people in their communities and their homes, and how you undertake an assessment. I feel sad that social work has become consumed within a much bigger health agenda.*

- 5.20. A couple of participants raised siloed services and a lack of holistic thinking and collaborative working as barriers to integrated working and the influence of CSWOs.

“ *The care inspectorate said it lacked confidence in the partnership because of lack of collaborative leadership... All routes led back to 'this is about children at risk of harm, this has nothing to do with education, nothing to do with how it all sits within the HSCP, so you sort it'... people not believing that they have a role in that wider partnership context to support aspects of service delivery.*

Access to leaders and influence

- 5.21. There were mixed views about CSWOs' power to influence. Several felt that social work had a strong voice within their local authority or that they could affect what they needed to. Examples included influencing service delivery structures, protecting social work services from budget cuts, and successfully advocating for additional resources.
- 5.22. Factors identified by participants as enablers of influence included: having access to, and the support of, the Council's Chief Executive or senior leadership team; being present at the necessary leadership meetings; mutual respect amongst the leadership team; and having a high enough level of seniority.

“ Without a doubt, I'm able to influence and have those conversations... It's part of being systems leaders that we're all in this together and have a part to play... It's important to have that strong leadership within an organisation and everybody having respect for each other.

- 5.23. Relationships were also described as key, with some explaining that they worked hard to build trust and credibility and gain the confidence of other leaders. One participant felt positive working relationships were aided by knowing the limits of the CSWO role and being transparent about decision-making implications in a non-threatening manner.

“ I'm conscious my position isn't to decide how a budget is allocated, my position is to alert to risks and implications of a savings cut or a change... you're not threatening them, you're saying 'you have the elected responsibility to make decisions, but here's the implications of that'.

“ It takes a lot of groundwork to get into a position where you have the connections, both partnership-wise and in the organisation. Some influence comes with role, but it also comes with relationships you develop over time.

- 5.24. Other ways that CSWOs have found to increase their influence include:

- supporting others to understand the role of social work and the pressures facing frontline services, with clear and open communication around risk; and
- leading on broader initiatives at a local or national level or promoting awareness of national-level policy agendas.

“ (There is) a programme of work, looking at the bigger aspirations of the local authority. I have chosen to lead one of those programmes, which is extra work but also extra influence.

- 5.25. Some participants, however, shared that they felt unable to influence what they needed to or highlighted barriers or threats to the influence of CSWOs. These included not being copied into, kept informed or consulted appropriately about developments; not being included in leadership meetings; confusion surrounding the role of the CSWO or social work amongst other leaders; issues with integrated governance structures (see 5.15); and wider political dynamics or budget constraints.

“ The social work voice isn't respected... I offer professional advice and my thoughts and views, but they're seldom listened to or dismissed as... inconsequential.

“ I don't go to meetings that I think I should be going to because it sits with the head of service - but they are not a social worker. There were things I wasn't included in and I should have known about.

“ With finance... trying to get information from them, it's like getting blood from a stone... They just forget to share with me because they'll share with their leadership team... It's the bit about where I fit - a recognition of my role to help me do it the best that I can. Sometimes that gets lost because of the structures and governance across the health and social care partnership where I don't sit.

- 5.26. Competing demands, a lack of holistic thinking, and the low priority given to the social work agenda were also raised as barriers to influence by some. One participant advocated for changing the alignment of social work in their local authority to ensure they are not disadvantaged within budgets.

“ *The Committee is a (another sector) dominated committee, with social work, at times, feeling a bit of a tag on. We've got roles to play in that, but elected members' interests are around (other sector).* ”

“ *There's significant investment in... education and attainment. Rather than looking more holistically around the need for kids to be safe and well in their homes, communities, and times they're not at school... They see young people as learners there to attain, and if they're not learning... it's a social work problem.* ”

- 5.27. A small number suggested that CSWOs not operating at a high enough level of seniority has led to a dilution of influence. This was linked, in part, to the erosion of Director of Social Worker posts in the context of integration.

“ *Social work is such an important profession, such an important function of the local authority, we should have directors of social work. CSWOs used to be directors, and we moved away partly because of integration... I believe that voice of social work needs to be stronger and more consistent across all local authorities in Scotland.* ”

Line management and leadership of others

- 5.28. CSWOs reported having line management responsibility for a range of strategic, operational, governance and partnership roles, which varied across different CSWOs. Participants' management and leadership of others was reported to take different forms. They facilitate both:

- formal or arranged spaces such as manager meetings, one-to-one meetings, daily team catch-ups, or supervision;
- and informal, spontaneous contacts with those they line manage.

- 5.29. Some highlighted the importance of CSWOs being approachable, collaborative, and available to their staff.

“ *Given the pressures on services and the jobs that we do, you need to make sure people feel they have that access to you... I would like to think my colleagues would say I was approachable and would answer the phone if they were trying to get hold of me... You need the formality of structure and the ability to contact as and when.* ”

- 5.30. The visibility of CSWOs amongst wider staff and regular contact with social workers on the ground was also described as key. Ways of maintaining this included: visiting teams; organising “all staff” meetings to provide updates and opportunities to ask questions; emailing staff as CSWO; connecting with newly qualified social workers; and contributing to aspects of service delivery, such as on-call rotas or resource allocation groups.

“ *I'm not at my desk at home. I am visible and hopefully approachable... I made a point of going to a newly qualified social work group that's been set up. Going along to meetings and if I'm invited to places. It's important because I don't think you can give the leadership the role requires when you're working from home.* ”

- 5.31. A small number emphasised the mutual benefits of line management arrangements, with those they manage also supporting them.

“ *It's like two-way professional support and supervision, with a bit of accountability -making sure I don't get caught off guard by something people would expect me to know about. A helpful two-way street.* ”

- 5.32. Finally, participants outlined challenges attached to the line management or leadership of others. These included:
- time constraints preventing CSWOs from devoting as much time as they would like to this;
 - visibility being more difficult within services where CSWOs do not have operational responsibilities;
 - a lack of understanding amongst staff about the CSWO role;
 - not being kept adequately informed or consulted about decisions by staff; and
 - staff being influenced by a lack of support for CSWO input from other leaders from non-social work backgrounds.

“ *Staff need support to understand what should be run past a CSWO... You've got a non-social work person managing social work teams, and (they) make very fast-moving decisions. It is a challenge to get in and about those decisions and slow things down. People will push back... The next tier down... none of them are social work either... That's a real challenge where you've got (non-social work) staff, managing social work teams that don't really want to hear what the CSWO has to say.*

7. Support in role

- 6.1. This chapter explores participants' views about the support they access in their CSWO role, and gaps in support.

Peer support

- 6.2. Most frequently, CSWOs identified peer support from other CSWOs as their most critical support. They value connecting with others who understand the role and its pressures. Peer support relationships offer a safe space for sharing difficulties and offloading, learning and reflection, keeping up to date with policies and practices, “having a laugh”, and constructive challenge. This was described as mitigating the sense of isolation that can accompany the CSWO role and bolstering confidence in decision-making.

“ They're the only people who really understand what I do... I make some really unpopular decisions... when I've had a discussion with other CSWOs, I feel like, 'OK, I'm not miles away from what I should be doing here'... So, although you're a lone voice in your own situation, you've got back up.

“ They understand the pressures - you get practical advice as well as challenge... It can be inspirational and challenging, and you're with people who get it... You need those networks. If you tried just dealing with it within your own authority, it'd be a lonely, lonely place.

- 6.3. Some mentioned national CSWO meetings, hosted by Social Work Scotland, as an important source of peer support, enabling connections with CSWOs beyond their local area. These meetings have helped some establish more informal peer support relationships, which are also seen as vital. Phone calls, WhatsApp, and email contact with other CSWOs in between formal meetings were described as helpful for seeking prompt advice and information.

“ CSWO meetings are formal meetings, but you create informal networks as a result. Some people, you hit it off with more than others. You trust in terms of how they operate, and that aligning with how you work. That's really important. Without that group, I'd probably go slightly insane.

“ I do occasionally reach out to people for a bit of advice or to... offload. Often people will message at the CSWO's meeting to say, "Oh God, that's an issue with me as well." And we might pick it up after the call. So, it's a really good way to find out who might be in similar positions.

- 6.4. Others highlighted the value of regional CSWO meetings. Some suggested these were more relevant to their local area than the national meetings or enabled stronger peer support relationships to be forged.

“ I use the regional one... far more than I used the national one... A few of us have developed quite close relationships. That's probably where we mutually support one another and know where each other is coming from

Support from within their local area

- 6.5. Participants described seeking advice and guidance from, establishing positive working relationships with, or building a support network of non-CSWO peers and leaders at a local level. Some saw this as critical support to facilitate their operational and strategic understanding, embed with teams, “feel safe (and) trusted”, or enable their influence locally. Supportive relationships with members of the corporate leadership team,

directors, chief officers, heads of service, elected members, and multi-agency partner leaders were mentioned.

“ *The relationships I've built with other directors are key in terms of understanding... the massive suite of services we've got to offer citizens... How if we do something different in education, it might have unintended negative consequences in social work and vice versa. Similar with Communities Directorate, how can we in social work have our voices heard at the start of place planning?... It's (also) been helpful in joining the senior leadership team and having a respected voice. Other people have been around for longer - so advice, guidance from them- that's helpful.* ”

- 6.6. Some participants value the support, information and “technical, specialist advice” they receive from those they lead or manage. The benefits of sharing and delegating responsibilities in terms of workload management, sustainability and succession planning were also raised. A couple of participants identified Deputy CSWO posts as key or advocated for formalising this important source of support.

“ *(The role) is probably too great to cover adult, justice, and children and family social work - plus all the additional responsibilities that come with that. Should there always be deputies officially? We've unofficially created that depute role, but it's not really recognised.* ”

- 6.7. Support through one-to-ones, formal supervision, or from their managers or chief executives was also described by some CSWOs. The participant below spoke of the benefits of a culture of kindness and caring within their local authority.

“ *Our staff are our biggest asset. Despite my senior place in the organisation, I feel like I matter.... the chief exec is incredibly kind and caring. I feel well looked after, and I have no doubt that if I was ever to say I'm struggling or I'm not coping, there would be an absolute support network there for me.* ”

Social Work Scotland

- 6.8. Some identified Social Work Scotland's CSWO meetings, subgroups, and papers as a vital source of knowledge. Social Work Scotland was described as “holding everything together” and enabling CSWOs to remain up to date with national legislation within a very busy policy landscape. This was discussed as helping increase participants' confidence and credibility.

“ *The camaraderie of that CSWO network and the SWS board has been instrumental. If I hadn't stepped into that space, my experience of being CSWO might have been... much more isolated. I felt much more connected to the national picture. That's given me relevance and credibility locally. It builds your sense of being in control when you've got information more directly.* ”

“ *The SWS network is critical to being a CSWO. If it wasn't for that, I would not have a clue what was happening nationally because I would not have time to keep up with it... It's such a pace, and it's such a volume.* ”

- 6.9. Participants also appreciated being able to contact SWS staff directly for support and guidance on issues, including recruitment advice, arranging mentoring, and understanding new policies and strategies.

“ *Through the whole pandemic, (SWS staff member) and the wider board kept me on an even keel for most of that time. (Staff member) is my own little support network – (they) deserve a medal for that.* ”

- 6.10. However, a few participants wanted an increased focus on national agendas during CSWO meetings or for Social Work Scotland to exert more of an influence nationally. One suggested improved use of data to aid this.

“ I don't think we always use science and data appropriately... And that's about influencing policy on a national basis... They need to take more of a lead with CSWOs in directing the agenda... There are the national priorities they can start to set... I think they've got a lot more influence and power than they're currently exerting.

Mentoring and coaching

- 6.11. Mentoring and coaching relationships were also seen as helpful for the development of leadership skills or understanding and navigating the systems within which CSWOs operate and the challenges they face. A few explained they were encouraged to access these by their local authority or Chief Executive, while others sought these out themselves. One appreciated that their local authority was invested in developing the role of chief officers.

“ There were political challenges, so I felt I'd get some mentoring. Objective external mentoring was a real support and probably gave me a lot of the skills and techniques that have led me to where I am now. It was someone who was previously a CSWO, who knew exactly what the challenges were.

“ I used to meet with (mentor) and just talk about it because it's quite a lonely position - when you become the most senior of something, who do you ask?

Other supports

- 6.12. Some participants felt strong administrative and business support was critical to “manage time, manage demands, and keep everything ticking over.” Those without this identified it as a significant support gap. A couple highlighted the need for dedicated and specialist business and administration support, given the breadth of the CSWO role and the complexity of tasks they are involved in..

“ I've got a super PA - organisationally, I'd be dead without (them).

“ The internal business support is poor... if there's data needed - there's very few people I can lean on to do it.

Areas for improvement

- 6.13. While some felt they had enough support in their role as CSWO, most identified gaps in this or suggested improvements.
- 6.14. Most commonly, participants raised challenges accessing peer support and information from other CSWOs. These include: changing personnel; competing demands and hectic schedules preventing attendance at CSWO meetings; limitations in the ability to be open and raise issues in this forum; and reduced informal networking opportunities linked to online meeting formats.

“ You're just not getting to (CSWO meetings), and if you don't go you actually lose a lot of the information... I have had a discussion with my director about the relentless hours I'm working and how I can carve out time for me... whilst keeping all the plates spinning and not dropping any.

“ *There's always a fair amount of people on these calls, and the agenda is quite busy too... most of the time is spent on SWS keeping us up to date, which is helpful. But probably less (helpful in terms of peer support) because it does tend to be more focused on the agenda and business.* ”

- 6.15. There were calls to enhance peer support and learning networks for CSWOs, which was seen as particularly important for CSWOs new to the role. One welcomed the recent re-establishment of some in-person CSWO meetings. A couple suggested that Social Work Scotland structure meetings to help formalise links between CSWOs or facilitate access to the most relevant learning.

“ *It's making sure we've got formalised groups, so we've got support. The CSWO group meet regularly, but it's mostly on Teams, and you don't get the networking. We could formalise some of that (by) breaking into small subgroups, not necessarily always by geography - because we want to open up that cross-fertilisation.* ”

“ *An organised forum that you could dip in and out to. (For example) 'this week we're discussing SDS'... so you can pick and choose.* ”

- 6.16. Some participants expressed concern about a lack of support with heavy workloads and limited capacity within their role. One explained, for example, that many CSWOs make up hours in their own time to access Social Work Scotland meetings. Time constraints were also highlighted as preventing access to other forms of support, such as joining SWS sub-committees, engaging in learning and development opportunities, developing supportive links with the Scottish Government, or accessing coaching and mentoring. Participants highlighted the risks of this for their own wellbeing.

“ *The lacking bit is my own time... I would have had a professional advisor, a coach... around my own development, but also my own sanity... Let's be clear, it's well-being I'm talking about.* ”

- 6.17. Some raised the need for deputies or more formalised support structures to decrease CSWOs' workload and improve sustainability. However, resource limitations were identified as a barrier to this.

“ *I've asked my organisation for a deputy. In this financial climate, for good reason, they've said it's not possible. That leaves me absorbing all of the stress... the risk. There's no one else to help or for me to hand things to. That's an area I'm not supported in – having the capacity to do my job.* ”

“ *Someone with more dedicated policy planning (time would be helpful). People to write some reports for me... and who you don't feel you are dumping things on top of their already full portfolio... At the moment... I'm overly reliant on managers who are also overworked.* ”

“ *(I tried to start) expanding the capacity for who could take on CSWO responsibilities... (but there is a) narrow potential pool... Not quite succession planning, but to bring a bit more resilience.* ”

- 6.18. Awareness raising of what the CSWO role entails and more formal governance structures surrounding this were called for to promote greater clarity and provide scaffolding for CSWOs and others. Participants felt inductions, welcome packs, explanatory documents, and more regular liaison meetings with Social Work Scotland would be helpful.

“ A more formal governance structure that all CSWOs followed (would be helpful) ... I've just had to work it out as I've gone along. It would be helpful for local authorities to have a document outlining 'Here's what you should expect from your CSWO, and here's your responsibility in relation to that'. There is some material sitting around on the Scot Gov website on the guidance for CSWO but sometimes people aren't clear what the role is for.

“ I got no induction whatsoever... It literally was firefighting straight away” ... More regular liaison meetings with some key people in SWS would be helpful for CSWOs out with those big group meetings. Maybe quarterly, six-monthly, to really surface some of the issues around the role and shape what some of the future structural arrangements need to look like.

6.19. More formalised mentoring or coaching opportunities were also requested. This was felt to be particularly important for new CSWOs or those without previous experience working within the political arena.

“ There's a bit of a lack of formal opportunities for mentoring arrangements for CSWOs. Someone will say, 'Oh, I've appointed so and so. Would you mind if you were their phone a friend for the first six months?'. But being a mentor and being people's informal mentor- it's completely different.

“ For new people coming into the role, it would be useful if there was a formal structure... It is a big ask and a big role, so people need support to step into that... (Without experience, it's hard to understand) the relationships (you need) to make in the political arena. Probably new CSWOs would need that mentoring to understand the role.

6.20. A small number hoped that the development of a National Social Work Agency would bring increased opportunity for formalised mentoring arrangements, enhanced learning and development pathways, and better coordination of support resources.

“ There is a cluttered landscape of inspection and improvement... There should be a single source, and it should be clear to people where they can look for what... The National Social Work Agency should take ownership, which might be about acting as a landing page and signposting.

“ I talked earlier about our L&D strategy and creating pathways and a sense of future for our workforce. Who's doing that for CSWOs? ...a National Social Work Agency, I would absolutely hope would be doing that.

8. CSWO development

- 7.1. This chapter explores CSWOs' views about their development needs in the role of CSWO – how these are identified and met, their experience of the CSWO Award, and their reflections on development needs in the profession in the future.

Identifying development needs

- 7.2. Development needs are identified by CSWOs or through discussion where people have a supportive line manager. One described a highly supportive line manager who helped them explore their development needs, including through 360-degree feedback. Others reflected on formative experiences in previous roles where line managers had encouraged them to work outside of their comfort zones.

“ I've probably been quite fortunate, but throughout my career I've had really good leaders that I've worked with. So that's a positive and that has developed my skills and my knowledge and my role.

- 7.3. Some participants named their development needs. Echoing the fact that many CSWOs have more experience in children's services and the need for CSWOs to be part of multi-disciplinary committees, gaps in knowledge and experience in adult services (such as mental health, older people's and justice services) and the challenges of integration were highlighted.

“ I think my biggest development needs right now are more fully understanding the wider partnerships. So, for example, the community planning partnership is an important one because that's where we've got not just the usual suspects in terms of the council, police and health coming together, but others too... It's about taking myself above that professional leadership and management role and broadening my horizons around what are the biggest strategic drivers for the whole of the region...

- 7.4. It was more common for CSWOs to describe personal development as less of a priority because of the weight of responsibility and workload of their CSWO post.

“ I suppose the short answer would be no... The risk is, and at the times where you're having your worst weeks, you lose it. You know, you're just in that reactive 'dealing with what needs dealt with' that actually where do you get that professional development and leadership time?

- 7.5. While some described difficulties finding the time for formal learning opportunities, others noted that they gained significant personal development from learning 'on the job'.

“ I think I'm accessing development every day - my understanding of the asylum system is vastly improved from where it was a year ago but it's done on the basis of what I need to know about it. You know my legal understanding of certain ups and downs around guardianship is vastly improved. I think there's development every day and it's a far better development than it would ever get going in any course and cherry pick the odd conferences... I've got no concerns about that, but it's in an organic way with what's in front of me.

Experiences of the CSWO Award

- 7.6. There were varied experiences reported of the timing of studying for the Postgraduate Diploma for Chief Social Work Officers (CSWO award) and the work involved in it. Some had completed it before achieving a CSWO post, others were doing it while in post, and others were in post and did not intend to study for it.

- 7.7. Those who had done it while in a deputy CSWO position believed it had prepared them in general development, improved leadership and management, even if they did not intend to seek promotion. Elements of the course have also been helpful in terms of identifying development needs.

“ I did it just as a result of just wanting to do a bit more personal development and about just getting a bit of a wider awareness of managing myself and how to better manage other people and lead... possibly with not even half an eye on being Chief Social Work Officer, maybe a quarter of an eye, knowing that at some point I'd be asked to deputise or make decisions, but certainly not a longer-term aspiration to actually undertake that role.

“ Although I hated it at the time, the mapping against the competencies for the Chief Social Officer and thinking about your adult learning pathway, what you were competent in and what were opportunities you needed to find to develop... I had done all that before the job was advertised, so I already understood lots of the skills that I had and I'd really thought about it as part of that process.

- 7.8. Being part of a supportive group with other people studying for the CSWO award was also a positive aspect of the course.

“ I think that the opportunity to be with other people who'll be in that role, to consider what the demands are, to form a bit of a peer group in terms of some ongoing support potentially is really important.

- 7.9. Some participants talked about the CSWO award course content and structure needing to be revised. One described the need for a better balance of directive and self-directive learning and more support for the self-directive aspect.

“ I think we need a balance that does some of that self-learning but perhaps would also do some development and coaching around the information about processes, procedures, law around the mental health world.

- 7.10. Some who had not taken part in the CSWO award saw the opportunity positively, but others had heard “mixed feedback”. Others who were doing the CSWO award while in a CSWO post described how they were finding it challenging to make time for the course and its associated assignments.

Most important development activity

- 7.11. The activities that CSWOs described as having been important for their development included the experience they gained through their careers working and learning across different social work disciplines and associated legislation.

“ I'm probably a better social worker now than I was always, you know, five or six years ago. Because I have a much broader sense of community, a much broader sense of complexity and a much broader sense of the issues that affect our communities. So be open to that, you know, take the time to get your experience.

- 7.12. Managers who have identified and supported development needs and encouraged staff to take up roles they might not initially have chosen have played a critical developmental role in the earlier stages of CSWOs' careers. Some describe how this has resulted in them gaining experience and insight from working in different areas of social work.

“ Without those key managers who have really said to me, you can do this, but you've got to learn this, this and this, then I wouldn't be here.

- 7.13. The importance of having a group of peers was highlighted with CSWOs describing how their competency and thinking have developed by “grappling” with common issues in discussion with other CSWOs.

“ You hear lots of ideas and different things that people are doing. For me, that really helps develop my thinking. It makes me a more competent practitioner... if I couldn't attend the Social Work Scotland meetings, I would be really isolated... I would actually be so siloed that it would be risky.

- 7.14. A few CSWOs highlighted gaining an understanding about the profession and its related theories from reading academic books, evaluation material and access to reports and applying this to their working situation. Learning being a career-long concept was described by one interviewee, and the importance of providing a positive example of this for other staff.

“ ...you still attend briefings, you still refresh your knowledge... I think that doesn't stop depending on how senior you are... We model that as a management team. We don't stop training and developing ourselves.

Further reflections – Social work careers and the future of the profession

- 7.15. Observations about the current and future state of the profession included the fact that people can quite quickly become siloed within children's or adult services and, therefore, not build up a more generalised experience. Later in their careers, staff may be responsible for all of these and need the support of other senior staff if they do not have the experience.

“ It's remarkable that you can study, qualify and take one of either two or three different routes and they're very different professions particularly children services and adult services... When your career has been specifically in one of these services and then you're asked to have responsibility for all of them, that's where if you don't have the right structure beneath you - if you don't have experienced heads of service, you would struggle - I feel you would really struggle.

- 7.16. Others reflected that some skills required for CSWO posts, such as financial training were not covered in any training, or that people could achieve a senior role and then struggle to access training which would be helpful.

“ You actually end up in this middle ground of being too senior for some [training/learning opportunities] and others that are actually going to be most relevant at this stage in your career being not defined by the role.

“ What we don't have is a good programme that helps people as they move through... if you're good social worker to become a senior social worker then an area manager. Nobody talks to you or trains you about budgets. So some of those things need to be in the development process.

- 7.17. Looking to the future, a changing landscape of integration and public protection was recognised, and a strong social work voice was needed. Learning opportunities that support staff in this area need to be developed and should be part of any future national social work agency.



We have moved into a more public protection arena that actually spans both child and adult protection. But now it's also drug-related death. It's about suicide review. It's about violence against women. It's about alcohol and drugs more generally. The sort of the span of public protection has really grown and I think we'll continue to grow. And I think that there's a risk that actually the voice and the role of the Chief Social Work Officer is diminished as a result of that. And I think that's something we collectively need to ensure that we still have an active voice within that forum to influence there... There is at times still that singular siloed thinking around it, but actually we cut across all of those domains in a way which others do not.

9. Conclusions

- 8.1. This chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the study findings.
- 8.2. Reflective of the breadth of the CSWO role, regardless of the different routes and career pathways that individuals have followed on their way to holding the role, all arrive with gaps in knowledge and experience to varying extents. This can relate to specific areas of social work that lack exposure to, and the new experience of navigating complexity, influencing the political and leadership environment, and engaging with operating and governance structures.
- 8.3. Very few CSWOs felt fully equipped or had a deep understanding of the role at the outset. Their confidence and understanding was influenced by their previous breadth and seniority of social work experience, and prior exposure to the CSWO role. Those who had worked closely with a previous CSWO, or held a deputy or interim post tended to have a better understanding of the role and what they could expect from it.
- 8.4. Given the expansive role and remit of a CSWO, and the knowledge and experience required to fulfil it effectively, it is perhaps unrealistic to expect people to arrive in post fully equipped. However, there were suggestions about how to support this transition, including effective succession planning, the provision of mentoring and/or coaching for those coming into role, and inductions that are specific to the unique operating contexts of each local authority. Access to competent, experienced and trusted colleagues across different areas of social work can be valuable in negotiating and plugging any gaps that CSWO arrive with. However, even those with long experience in the position note that it is an ongoing development journey.
- 8.5. CSWOs hold a role which is extremely high pressured, with a significant level of responsibility and an unenviable workload, reflected in the average number of hours worked beyond what they are contracted to provide. Considerations about the sustainability of this for individuals, and concerns about the impact on their health and wellbeing should not be taken lightly. It is critical that the wellbeing of those holding the CSWO is supported and protected.
- 8.6. The challenges faced by those in the CSWO role are many and varied, and they are influenced throughout the year by changing demands and priorities. For most CSWOs, the challenges are compounded by the workload and responsibilities associated with the demanding operational role they hold alongside that of CSWO. While those holding only the CSWO role, of which there are only a few in Scotland, experience many of the same challenges, they are less pronounced or are easier to manage and overcome without the demands of a second role alongside this. However, several acknowledge the benefits of remaining involved in operations alongside the CSWO role.
- 8.7. The national landscape also adds to the pressures and demands on CSWOs, and feedback suggests that this could be alleviated to some extent through a more coordinated and cohesive approach across different policy areas from the Scottish Government.
- 8.8. The breadth of the role, and the level of responsibility alongside the demanding workload, leave most CSWOs feeling that what is being asked and expected of those in role as unrealistic. There are simply not enough hours in the day to give the time, attention, reflection, thought and action to all areas that need it. A critical skill for CSWOs is the ability to organise and manage their time, and to be effective in their prioritisation and delegation.

- 8.9. The importance of adequate support functions and structures, alongside effective reporting and line management were highlighted. Critical success factors included supportive relationships with peers and senior leaders across the operating environment who have an interest, understanding and appreciation of social work, and the role of CSWO and their statutory duties. Where these components are not in place, or inadequate, it adds to the challenges of CSWOs being able to fulfil their role effectively and efficiently.
- 8.10. Support from other CSWOs is also highly valued. They represent a small cohort of people that truly understand the role, its pressures and challenges and how isolating it can feel. In this respect Social Work Scotland's presence and activity to provide opportunities and space for CSWOs to come together is essential. As well as connecting with peers, Social Work Scotland are seen to provide valued opportunities for CSWOs to remain abreast of, inform, and to influence the national agenda. There were however calls for Social Work Scotland to exert greater influence on policy at a national level, and to help raise the profile and understanding of social work and the role of CSWO.
- 8.11. While a key aspect of the CSWO role is focused on professional standards and the development of the workforce, their own continuing professional development is often an area that is neglected. This is not because CSWOs do not value development or recognise their own development needs, but because they simply do not have the capacity or opportunity to explore these comprehensively or formally. The professional development they undertake is often self-directed and in response to meeting a pressing need or priority, rather than being proactive and planned.
- 8.12. While the CSWO award has a role to play in supporting the development of those with aspirations to become as well as those already in post, areas of improvement were identified. These should be considered in any review and redesign of the award, and how it can become an integral part of succession planning and better equipping people that will potentially move into the role in the future.
- 8.13. Much of this report paints a stark and bleak picture of the experiences of those in the CSWO role, which spans the challenges, pressures and workload associated with the role, and the complex operating, legislative and governance structures they must navigate. There is a backdrop of wider pressures on social work services and the social work workforce, with recruitment and retention challenges, a difficult financial environment where saving and efficiencies are expected alongside service improvement and development, coupled with increasing demand for services and more complex needs. However, those in the role are committed and dedicated, and are passionate about social work and the values and purpose that underpin the sector and profession. They recognise the importance of the role to the profession and in ensuring quality services for those accessing them. CSWOs believe they are able to affect positive change and make a difference, and there are many aspects of the role that they find rewarding.

10. Appendix 1: Methodology

Survey

Using the previous year's CSWO survey, The Lines Between and Social Work Scotland worked collaboratively to shorten and streamline the survey. The areas retained were those which Social Work Scotland want to continue to benchmark annually.

The survey was set up and administered through SNAP, an online survey platform. Responses were received from all 32 local authority areas with 30 CSWOs, one deputy CSWO and one interim CSWO responding.

Interviews and small group discussions

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to ensure discussions with CSWOs were focussed on key areas relating to CSWOs experience of their role, and to provide consistency. Again this was developed collaboratively between The Lines Between and Social Work Scotland.

All CSWOs (or interim CSWOs) were invited to participate in either a one-to-one or small group discussion. As with the survey, all local authority areas were represented and participated in either a one-to-one discussion or paired discussion. This involved 26 CSWOs and six interim CSWOs, with 30 one-to-one interviews and one paired discussion being undertaken.

Analysis and reporting

A coding and analysis framework was developed to underpin thematic analysis of the qualitative data gathered through the survey and discussions with CSWOs. Quantitative data gathered through the survey was analysed using Microsoft Excel.