

2023-24 Survey of Chief Social Work Officers across Scotland

Social Work Scotland Briefing

Social Work Scotland (SWS) is the professional leadership body for public sector social work. A core part of our role is to support Scotland's 32 Chief Social Work Officers (CSWO). Every local authority in Scotland is required by law¹ to appoint a CSWO. The role is intended to provide strategic and professional leadership at a local level, to assist the local authority in the discharge of their extensive social work responsibilities.

CSWO have responsibilities for assisting local authorities and partners to understand the complexities of social work services, and the extent to which state action can affect personal lives, individual rights and liberties. With devolution and the development of the Scottish Parliament and Government, this aspect of the CSWO role has given them an important place in national structures and discussions. This is mediated through the national CSWO Committee, a strategic forum facilitated by SWS which considers national policy and social developments, social work practice, and workforce issues.

The annual CSWO survey

SWS has surveyed CSWO about their role since 2019. Building on extensive 'all profession' research we conducted in 2022², and in the context of potential structural change for social work³, we decided to change our approach to the CSWO survey for 2023-24 to go wider and deeper. We commissioned the independent research team at The Lines Between to construct a methodology which captures and benchmarks data around CSWO employment, experience of learning and development, the structures they work in, and most importantly, their overall reflections on the utility of the role. Both elements of the research (an online survey and face-to-face discussions) achieved participation from all 32 local authority CSWO (i.e. those in post at the time of the research).

¹ Section 3 of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968, as amended.

² [Setting the Bar: towards an indicative maximum caseload for Scotland's public sector social workers - Social Work Scotland](#)

³ [National Care Service \(Scotland\) Bill: - Social Work Scotland](#)

This comprehensive response rate means this report adds critical weight to the body of evidence we have been gathering on the experience of Scotland's senior social workers and managers – it's important to note that there are no other processes which capture data about the CSWO's experiences in Scotland. For us as a membership organisation, the thematic issues and experiences in this report form a cornerstone of our approach to the support we offer social work leaders, the advice we provide to the Scottish Government and other bodies, and the steps we take to strengthen awareness and understanding of the profession.

What we're taking from this report

"It is a privilege to lead your profession."

This year's research reaffirms that CSWO remain deeply committed social workers, driven by a shared desire to address social inequality and disadvantages. The opportunities to make a difference, and to make real social work's values, are what keep many in the CSWO role. A role which, as the report spotlights, is one characterised principally by pressure, complex operating environments, and competing priorities and demands.

The report also helpfully illustrates how the level of operational responsibility held by CSWO can exacerbate the challenges – especially when there are issues requiring CSWO attention across children and families, adults and justice. Considering the structural changes being proposed by Scottish Government⁴, and the endless cycle of reviews, inspection, and policy implementation, the viability of the CSWO role, in its current form, is a pressing consideration.

It is also important to see this report in the context of wider discourse around the effectiveness and ability of all social workers to operate in the way they were trained to. There is a significant and growing body of evidence^{5,6,7,8}, including most recently a report we produced with SASW and UNISON⁹, which clearly profiles what needs to change if social workers across Scotland are to do their jobs more effectively. Within that prescription, Scotland taking a more implementation science-based approach must be a priority, with Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament calibrating the breadth and pace of change to what the system can realistically deliver.

This year's CSWO report provides a narrow but valuable window onto the practical impact of our current 'rhetoric before reality' approach to change. CSWO report

⁴ See National Care Service (Scotland) Bill

⁵ <https://www.celcis.org/knowledge-bank/search-bank/childrens-services-reform-research-concluding-report>

⁶ <https://socialworkscotland.org/reports/settingthebar/>

⁷ <https://unison-scotland.org/save-from-harm/>

⁸ <https://new.basw.co.uk/articles/one-deal-social-work-campaign-launched-sasw>

⁹ <https://socialworkscotland.org/reports/what-needs-to-change-to-support-social-work-in-scotland/>

being pulled in many directions simultaneously, and often unable to give specific issues the time and attention required. Political demands in relation to workload, policy, and implementation, alongside budgetary demands are pulling CSWO away from the operational relationships and team development which would make the most difference in respect of improving the quality of social work practice and services.

We know that social work has an ageing workforce, with widespread recruitment and retention issues. Leadership roles are not immune from these, and data gathered by SWS through the CSWO survey and other channels shows that turnover in the CSWO role is significant and increasing. Over a third of CSWO have only been in the role for less than two years. Feedback from many CSWO suggests the pressures of the role are unsustainable over a long period of time, with the prospect of retiring soon being a key factor in keeping them in the role (i.e. they have an end-date in view, which sustains them today). What this means for CSWO who are far from retirement is uncertain.

Another big challenge to recruiting to the CSWO role, identified in this year's report, is its dual nature, with demands locally and nationally. The operational and strategic challenges in local areas are well documented, but this year's report profiles the often-unexpected impact of the national platform emerging as an area that CSWO need support with. The national aspect of the CSWO role is rarely part of the recruitment or induction process for a CSWO.

Familiar frustrations, echoing previous iterations of the report, are articulated by CSWO. Their desire to strengthen the social work voice, the tensions inherent in overly complex structures and byzantine reporting requirements. The barriers (mostly time) to more meaningful engagement with social workers and operational partners. These are themes we see mirrored in *Setting the Bar* and *Taking the Wheel*. At one level it is heartening to see all levels of the profession united in their analysis of the problems, and their recommendations for change. But on another level it is frustrating that, with such commonality of experience and clarity of articulation, we are still struggling to make the changes needed.

This year's CSWO report contributes another strand to an evolving picture on the state of social work in Scotland. Over the past five years we (SWS) and our partners in Scottish Government, the Scottish Social Services Council, and local government have significantly improved the breadth of information available about the workforce. The issues are now in clear focus: a workforce struggling to hold onto new and experienced practitioners; the exhaustion of working through a pandemic, with no respite, but rather new challenges driven by global conflict and migration; and a public service reform agenda with which most social workers agree in principle, but which cannot be delivered within current levels of service and workforce capacity. All

these issues and experiences are captured in this year's CSWO report, and reflected in different ways across Scotland's islands, rural and urban areas.

In amongst the reflections are challenges for SWS too, in how we can support the public sector's social work leadership. We will reflect on these points and evolve our approach appropriately. But looking more widely, we will also use this report to influence developments in social work, such as the proposed National Social Work Agency, and the Care Inspectorate's current review of Social Work governance. The establishment of the CSWO role was an explicit acknowledgement about the critical value and unique responsibilities of social work; we will endeavour over coming months to foster the enabling context CSWO and social workers need to fulfil their roles effectively.