Social Work Scotland, SASW, Unison

What needs to change to support Social Work in Scotland?

Qualitative analysis of Survey Data – April 2024

Contents

Introduction

The context within which professional social work is being practised in 2024 is perhaps the most challenging since its inception. Lack of resources in local government the NHS and the third sector have increased pressure on social work staff significantly, including higher caseloads, increased unpaid work out of hours and stress at an all-time high. Years of austerity, the impact of Covid-19, increased energy prices and a cost-of-living crisis have, at the same time, increased the number of people within our communities living in poverty and disadvantage.

It is against this backdrop that Social Work Scotland decided to gather existing evidence about social work in practice to consider *What needs to change to support Social Work in Scotland*? more effectively. They then produced, in collaboration with SASW and Unison, a series of statements across three headings, *the purpose of social work, how we work and leading and supporting social work* addressing this key question. Social workers across Scotland were then asked five questions via SurveyMonkey on the extent to which they felt the statements reflected their experience of social work in Scotland in 2024, details of response rates to the survey are provided elsewhere in this report.

The following is a qualitative analysis of the open-ended qualitative responses provided from three questions within the survey. The three questions considered within this report are:

- *Do the statements reflect what you'd want the social work profession to look like from the perspective of a practitioner?*
- *Is there anything missing from the statements that you would like to see included?*
- *Is there anything else you'd like to say about the statements?*

The analysis is reported on a question-by-question basis as agreed with SWS and as such there are overlapping and repeating themes and issues in each section demonstrating the interconnectedness of the concerns/issues raised across Scotland. A thematic qualitative analysis of the raw data was undertaken by Dr Gillian MacIntyre and Dr Ailsa Stewart, the methodological detail of which is outlined below.

Underlying many of the comments made in the survey was a concern to uphold and recognise the values of the profession. It is significant that when those values were diluted, eroded or impossible to uphold due to lack of resources or workload pressures that staff appeared frustrated, demoralised, and cynical about the future of the profession and their ability to deliver 'real social work'. This had a detrimental impact on their mental health and wellbeing contributing to burnout and the recruitment and retention issues currently experienced across Scotland. The quote below illustrates this point:

> *"The current situation, especially with the integration with health had led to a devaluing of the profession, the inability to be recognised for your, counselling and psychological training and the value that this has for the people we work with… over half my time is spent feeding systems and not working in a therapeutic way."*

It is also important to note that throughout the responses to the survey, social workers were deeply concerned about the impact of the challenges they were facing on service users and were committed to providing the best possible support to empower service users to meet the challenges they face. It should further be noted that a significant majority of respondents welcomed the vision contained within the statements.

The themes identified in the survey coalesce into a clear agenda for change to ensure the future of the social work profession in a way which clearly reflects the values, role and task as understood by social workers across Scotland.

Methods

Social Work Scotland in collaboration with SASW and Unison developed an online survey using SurveyMonkey to explore ***What needs to change to support Social Work in Scotland*?** more effectively. To do this they created a series of statements around the following areas:

- ***the purpose of social work***
- ***how we work and leading***
- ***supporting social work***

To address the key question social workers across Scotland were asked five questions on the extent to which they felt the statements reflected their experience of social work in Scotland in 2024. Some examples of the statements included are as follows:

The data from the survey was analysed using descriptive statistics that offers a profile of survey respondents from across Scotland. This was followed by a thematic analysis of the open-ended qualitative data provided by respondents. Thematic analysis followed the six-stage process as set out by Braun and Clarke (2013). This involved familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, generating themes, and identifying patterns across the data, reviewing themes, and defining and naming the themes. Data was coded and analysed separately and then corroborated by the researchers. Links between the themes were explored and analysed. The themes are presented according to the three key questions considered within the survey:

- *Do the statements reflect what you'd want the social work profession to look like from the perspective of a practitioner?*
- *Is there anything missing from the statements that you would like to see included?*
- *Is there anything else you'd like to say about the statements?*

The analysis is reported on a question-by-question basis as agreed with SWS and as such there are overlapping themes and issues in each section demonstrating the interconnectedness of the concerns/issues raised across Scotland.

Overview of survey participants and responses

Qualitative Findings

Question 1 - Do the statements reflect what you'd want the social work profession to look like from the perspective of a practitioner?

A range of themes were identified under this question. Respondents questioned the extent to which the statements were aspirational and raised some concern about the extent to which they were achievable within the current climate. Respondents were, however, very positive overall about the way in which the social work profession was portrayed within the statements.

Structure of the social work profession – challenges and opportunities.

Several potential challenges or threats to the structure of the social work profession were identified. These can be considered at the political, financial, managerial, and operational/procedural level. These factors were interconnected in a way that was felt to limit operational options with a focus on crisis intervention rather than prevention.

Concern was expressed about the impact of limited finances and budget cuts on staff and service users. The lack of money available to provide access to a broad range of supports for service users, limiting choice and reducing opportunities for empowerment was noted as concerning. In turn the lack of resources was felt to impact on the ability of social workers to undertake their role appropriately, in line with professional values such as social justice and dignity. That money saving was the priority regardless of risk to individuals and communities, despite the risk averse culture that social workers currently practice in was also noted, leaving workers feeling exposed and reluctant to take risks, leading to feeling a greater need to be protected. One respondent posed the question "*Are protecting human rights for social work out of reach due to resource/financial constraints, staff shortages and overuse of agency staff?* If true, this compromises professional values, creates increased workloads for staff and limits opportunity and choice for service users as noted. Insufficient staff and resources to meet the demands of the population served, also meant that preventative work gave way to crisis intervention being the only option available, impacting on both service users and social workers.

Lack of finance/resources also impacted on the overall make-up of the workforce, respondents noted having to fill the gaps left by unfilled vacancies increasing caseloads and the need to work unpaid out of hours. Respondents also noted the need for greater support to be able to work proactively and in a preventative manner. This leads to a consideration of how social work is managed, several key issues were noted about existing management systems. There was a common concern that there were too many middle managers who were focussed on financial savings rather than on maintaining appropriate social work practice without sufficient fieldwork staff to undertake the work. A further concern was raised over the lack of professional, consistent supervision being made available to staff where they

could reflect safely on their practice. This was thought to reduce well-being and confidence. Increased and increasing caseloads were noted as being a source of concern, frustration, and risk for social workers. Operationally, increased bureaucracy and paperwork also impact workloads without any clear outcomes for service users.

Further concerns were raised about the management of the profession within local authorities and Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs). Principally this focused on where social work managers had non-social work backgrounds, particularly where managers had health backgrounds. These concerns focused on an ability to understand the values and principles underpinning the social work role and the social model approach to assessment and care management alongside an ability to reflect rather than react. This chimes with a concern about a lack of understanding of social work as an agency – lack of clarity over what it does and this was viewed as being further eroded due to a dilution of overall identity in a system dominated by health.

> *"Our executives are tied with a very short leash of accountability to the elected members who have presided over almost two decades of annual austerity on public services creating a parasitic culture of managerialism and a downward push of oppressive management onto the workforce and in turn a divisive culture of persecuting the most disadvantaged members of our communities in the arena of public protection."*

> *"If leaders do not understand the work we do, we cannot be supported appropriately, and our practice will always be affected. Managers need to lead by example and be able to promote our profession."*

Respondents noted a range of issues related to their terms and conditions of employment that would need to be addressed to ensure the statements were realistic. This included equality of pay and conditions across local authorities and professions to reduce attrition rates. It was argued that overtime payments should be made available to reduce resentment and frustration over out of hours work. Indeed, it was felt that moving away from Monday to Friday 9-5 to shift work and weekends would reduce crisis, promote preventative work, and better support service users, however, this may be a costly and perhaps unpopular option. This led to consideration of issues of recruitment and retention of staff, and it was suggested that a clearer professional development structure would encourage staff retention, better communication between managers and staff would also assist in retaining staff, also reducing feelings of isolation. These issues are explored in more detail later in the report.

The political nature of the social work role and task was noted in several different ways. The extent to which social workers could support service users to challenge power and to themselves challenging their employers' policies if they don't meet the needs of service users was noted as difficult within current local authority structures. Whether or not a political element was a central part of the social work role and task was disputed by respondents with concerns raised about the extent to which a left-wing political ideology was 'essential' to be a good social worker.

> *"If our profession is unable to politicise our responses to austerity, we should look to empowering the community to do so however with such a scale of under resourcing this is*

> *not possible against the pressures of unallocated work and an increasing risk averse culture. Practitioners would undoubtedly dedicate unpaid hours to achieve this vision but not in the current culture."*

The short answer to question 1 above is that overall, the majority of respondents want these statements to reflect the social work profession that they work in, however, the current context within which social work takes place means this is unlikely to happen without significant investment both in terms of infrastructure and resources.

> *"If SW are the only available resource and they lack confidence, protection, and relevant support, how can they undertake the task appropriately. Other resources must be available."*

Parameters of social work role and task: reality and vision

There were some questions from respondents about the detail of the role ascribed to social workers in the statements, for example, whether social workers should be health and/or legal experts, given the focus of the traditional role on the individual's social circumstances. Several respondents were concerned about the text within both 1.2 and 1.10 (see Appendix A). There were also discussions about whether social workers were expected to undertake a community development role previously undertaken by separately trained staff. This reflects a broader issue about understanding the parameters of the social work role and task and whether staff can and/or should be all things to all people and how to protect their role and identity without appropriate consistent support. This lack of understanding of the role of social workers and the agency they represent featured significantly in the data alongside the impact of this on workers and service users. This can be considered at three main levels, impact of management structures, impact of collaborative working and impact of austerity measures.

> *"More reflection is required in relation to the burnout, high caseload and under supportive environments that social workers work within. This is the biggest risk to the profession at present and I feel it is underrepresented within this statement."*

Collaborative working and in particular involvement in Multi-Disciplinary Teams, was felt to dilute the role of the social worker where they often felt undervalued, misunderstood, and sometimes ignored. This reflects previous concerns about a lack of understanding over what social workers can and should do. Values, tasks, and roles associated with the traditional social work role, e.g. relationship building, therapeutic interventions, were often felt to be marginalised or impossible to achieve/implement due to austerity and cost cutting reducing staff and increasing workloads. This has led to a focus on bureaucratic processes rather than therapeutic relationships or preventative work. As has previously been discussed the management structures in social work are thought to be overly dominated by health staff and respondents noted that this further diluted their role, especially where there was a lack of understanding about the parameters of the role. This suggests that good social work management with a clear vision of the role and task is central to ensuring the statements are realised in practice.

Bringing together these three levels it is apparent how they interconnect. A drive for integration in a climate of austerity appears to have to led to a dilution and erosion of the social work role and task overall, partly due to health being given a dominant voice and role in the existing hierarchy and social workers having to be the resource their service users need or having no access to appropriate services. What the above suggests is a need to clearly articulate the specifics, limitations, and parameters of the role and to a much wider audience before the aspirations in the statements are likely to be met. Consideration of the most effective way to communicate this information will be critical to any roadmap to take the statements from vision to reality. One respondent noted:

> *"…[the social work] role is a balancing act between, statutory tasks, being the resource to support the service user as nothing else available and being autonomous workers…Importance of early intervention, professional autonomy, and ability to place value on skilled intervention over process/task cannot be overstated."*

Inclusion of trauma-informed practice as part of the social work role was noted as important to include in the statements alongside an acknowledgement that whilst the therapeutic and preventative aspects of the role are critical to 'real social work' they are impossible to achieve within the current climate of savings and crisis focused practice. This raises a related issue about whether the therapeutic relationship in social work should or can be central to the role.

The political nature of the social work profession was also discussed by several respondents. Does the role require specific political beliefs? If so, does this generate the potential for discrimination of staff and service users who do not adhere to those beliefs. This is a significant question for a profession based on challenging the circumstances within which their service users live, which will often require political change or action. As agents of social change and/or control can we remove the political aspect of social work? Finally, there was some concern expressed about the use of the term social care rather than social work and whether that added to confusion about the role and task.

Importance of shared vision and values to SW identity.

As noted above a significant theme in the data is that the values and identity of the profession are often eroded due to bureaucratic demands and a lack of understanding of the role in a hierarchy dominated by health staff. In addition, other staff undertaking traditional social work roles such as support staff as care managers undermines the value and expertise of the profession. Using social work assistants to undertake professional roles was also thought to undermine the value of the social work role and identity. There was, further, a suggestion that collaboration and integration had led to social work staff trying to 'fit in' with other professions thereby diluting the value base of the profession. The integration agenda within the framework of HSCPs had led to social work being subsumed with a health dominated paradigm and considered a 'junior partner' in the work. More broadly it was noted that the public need to understand the values of the profession more clearly, and what it aims to achieve. Relationship based practice and the time to develop relationships can be considered to encapsulate the values of the profession such as social justice, dignity, and the importance of human relationships. However, a lack of time to develop relationships was a concern noted by several respondents. Widespread shared understanding and knowledge of values and skills within the profession should help to achieve the culture proposed in the statements. There is

therefore a considerable task to be undertaken at several levels in communicating the values and skills of the profession across Government, the NHS and the Public amongst others. Explicitly defining the values in the statements may therefore be useful.

Validity/usefulness of statements

Overall, the statements were felt to provide a good reminder of what social work *should be*, a return to radical social work, with a focus on the uniqueness and expertise of the role, rather than what is has become, e.g. *"churning out assessments"*. The key concern expressed was that the vision expressed in the statements does not meet the reality of the current climate; poorly resourced staff with limited or poor supervision and support within an ever-reducing budget alongside challenges in retaining staff. One respondent noted… *"feels like they come from an 'ivory tower' or 'university textbook'."* Therefore, the statements do not ring true, although they were much desired. However, the fact that they do not focus on the existing constraints but take an aspirational approach was also recognised as valuable. Concern was also expressed that these aspirations had been expressed extensively over time without being realised, raising the question what will make the difference this time? It is important to note that there is not a consensus view on the value and utility of the statements. On the one hand there were felt to lack meaning and clarity and were thought to be framed in inaccessible language. Yet at the same time they were considered valuable, visionary, concise and encapsulating how people want to work as social workers. The reflection of a rights-based social justice approach was acknowledged as important, although issues around definitions were noted and are discussed later. The identity of the social work profession was not felt to be clearly expressed and some respondents felt that it got lost when reading across the statements. This may be aided by providing definitions at the outset of the document as will be discussed.

As with previous themes the context within which the statements would have to be realised is considered critical:

> *"a preface that acknowledges the context of austerity post-Brexit, Westminster driven neo-liberal failing state would be useful… "Doesn't acknowledge the complexity of managing family dynamics in a challenging political and social landscape."*

There were mixed views on the political views reflected in some of the statements with some commenting that "[the statements] *treats social work as a noun rather than a verb – too left-wing"*. Conversely the statements were praised for this fact and a return to the political origins of social work. Gaps in focus were noted as making the partnership with families and communities more explicit, more required detail on the protective and risk management aspects of the role, acknowledging the need for strong social work management and the fact that post-pandemic telephone/remote social work is a reality and should be included. Some statements were considered overly generic, and it was suggested that they did not acknowledge the limitations of the role as noted above (see for example statement 1.2). It was argued that the focus of social work should be on well-being rather than health which was generally considered the role of the NHS. The inherent tension of care v control was also thought to be not well recognised, sometimes having to *do to* people against their wishes rather than *doing with* people, going back to the idea of social control. It was suggested that the focus of the statements should be on working with those impacted by *"social inequality, poverty, and injustice to*

meet their own identified needs" in a way that is useful to them, however, this cannot be divorced from the structural framework within which practice is undertaken. It was suggested that the statements could be seen as very children and families centric instead of acknowledging the breadth of social work. Considering the statements within the context of an integrated framework was noted as being critical, despite earlier concerns about integration. On a final note, there was some discomfort expressed about the use of the term love in a professional document, however, others valued its inclusion but noted that public protection was more important.

Key to implementation of the statements will be a broad roadmap that sets out "how" the required changes can be made to inform both social work practice and the context in which it takes place. As the statements broadly consider social work in isolation there was some discussion of the extent to which this suggested social work was an elite profession.

> *"If social work is about being elitist and making claims about what "only social workers" can do, then I am not proud of being a social worker, and that is after 40 years as a practicing social worker."*

Question 2 - Is there anything missing from the statements that you would like to see included?

The report now turns to survey responses that considered gaps in the statements that they would like to see included in the vision for the profession. Several key themes have been identified as discussed below.

Returning to basics – the fundamentals of the social work role

A significant number of responses emphasised a need to return to the fundamentals of social work practice with a particular focus on person-centred, relationship-based practice. However, it was suggested that there needs to be clarity and a shared vision over what the therapeutic relationship means or looks like. There was an acknowledgement that the social work role varied across communities but that there should be a central focus on compassion, empathy, integrity, and trauma informed practice. It was noted that this should extend to social workers – *"empathy is for the workforce and not just the people that social work serves"*. In addition, it was emphasised that an important part of the role was to support people to access services and a range of practical and financial support to enhance their quality of life. Some responses mentioned work with specific groups such as families and mental health. However, the primary focus was on supporting independence and self-determination. Community work was also seen as vital but there were questions around how this could be achieved within the current financial climate and whether this should be the role of community social workers or outsourced to the third sector. Fundamentally, it was acknowledged that more resources were needed for this type of work, that *"isn't simply focussed on crisis management"*. It was argued that there was a need to:

> *"reclaim back some of the key social work skills that have been outsourced such as advocacy and basic level counselling…the admin burden could be rolled back to allow time to do some of this important work."*

A second core element of the social work role discussed was around the advocacy or activism function of the profession which sees social work as an agent for change. One example of this was around a commitment to tackling poverty and maximising income. There were concerns that, at times, this can get lost amongst the other demands and core components of the role. However, some respondents argued that while a focus on social justice was important, this could not be at the expense of core social work skills such as listening, assessment and risk management.

Some responses under this theme focused on the importance of managing risk and risk assessment and there was a suggestion that social workers statutory duties were what made the profession unique. Some respondents suggested that the core social work duty is to use the legislation at their disposal to protect children and adults at risk of harm. It was argued that any consideration of risk required to be nuanced and key tensions and dilemmas needed to be acknowledged around risk to self v risk to others. One respondent also highlighted that it was important to acknowledge one's own limitations and defer to the expertise of others when it comes to risk, although this does not appear to be a majority view. Indeed, for other respondents there was a resistance to an overly dominant

focus on risk with a view that risk aversion might be impacting on people's right to live the life they choose. Conversely, there was some concern that social work had the potential to become a statutory only role.

Respondents raised concerns around the direction of travel of social work advocating for a return to focussing on people and a range of appropriate interventions rather than on assessment and records and other bureaucratic paperwork:

> *"As social workers with ambition and skills to help we are often turned instead into bad typists and bad accountants for much of the day instead of tackling the people-facing parts we are trained for."*

This meant that there was not enough time for face-to-face work. Alongside this there were concerns around the gate-keeping role now being played by social work:

> ` *"This [gate-keeping role] needs to be acknowledged because there will never be enough resources...therefore they need to be targeted where there is greatest need and most impact."*

From these responses, it is possible to glean some insight into the social work role and the key attributes of the social worker. This was viewed as an autonomous role carried out by someone with a disposition towards care and an unconditional positive regard. Social workers need to have empathy that respects and valued humanities and difference and the complex circumstances that people find themselves in. They need to operate with a degree of flexibility to meet the needs of different service user groups.

Burden of professional role

The social work role was often conceptualised as a burdensome one which had the potential to impact negatively on mental health and wellbeing, stress levels and burnout. This has longer term implications for retention rates and workforce planning and is supported by broader literature in the field. Overall, participants in the survey felt that this must be acknowledged in the statements that are produced. There are several factors that were thought to contribute to the burden experienced. The first group of concerns relate to the nature of the role and how it has changed. Concerns were raised about increasing caseloads and it was felt that these needed to be protected with consideration of a more sophisticated workload allocation model that focuses on time rather than on number of cases. There were suggestions that caseloads should be capped, and that additional time should be made available to write up case notes. This was thought to be particularly important for newly qualified workers, who it was felt were not offered enough protection.

A perceived lack of resources meant that social workers felt that they were increasingly expected to undertake additional work alongside their substantive role. One participant expressed this as "being everything to everyone":

> *"I think it is important that we cannot be all to everyone in terms of how we can be link workers, practice teachers, mental health officers, senior practitioners and still deal with all our daily*

work - all linked to resources. There is very little, or no incentive or time allowance given for social workers to develop their own skills."

Indeed, it was argued that social workers are not a panacea and cannot solve all problems just by being there. This further suggests a lack of clear identity for the profession and a lack of understanding from other professionals and the public. Closely associated with this was concerns about working conditions. This included a range of different issues including, perhaps worryingly the need to tackle bullying in the workplace.

A further group of concerns relate to negative public perceptions of social work. There was a view that work is needed to raise awareness of what social workers do:

> *"...need to change the public perspective and presumptions about social work. We should be able to promote and educate society about what social workers actually do, our value base, and the challenges we face. TV shows about emergency services are accessible and relatable, and I think that using this format to give the public insight into social work would be helpful."*

Some participants felt that it was important that the burden that social workers carry with "no let-up" was acknowledged. This might involve focusing on the mental health and wellbeing of social workers as well as a consideration of vicarious trauma. It was also argued that the lack of resources at social workers disposal alongside the stress and pressure that social workers are under plays a significant role in creating barriers to positive practice. This will have an impact on social workers and the people they serve contributing to further stress and burnout. The following quote illustrates well the impact of stress on social workers who responded to the survey. It gives a sense of social workers at breaking point:

> *"...social workers need reduced caseloads, more resources and more pay given the stress and the emotional toll it takes on you. The stress on workers is unsustainable. We should not be expected to tolerate abuse from clients or family members. There should be a maximum number of cases we get allocated including adult protection cases. The sheer volume makes me reconsider the profession and I'm only in my 30's and not even been a social worker ten years. It's a rewarding job in a lot of ways and I still have some job satisfaction and thankfully my team and colleagues are supportive. If they were not, I couldn't do it. Additional holidays required given high pressure of job but that will not happen. By the time you start to relax you have to go back. I don't think I will do this until I retire given the pressures and the pay does not really match the reality of the pressure. "*

Importance of strong leadership

Survey respondents also made several comments about leadership and there were a range of statements on what appropriate or strong leadership looks like. Several characteristics or attributes were identified. It was argued that leaders require a clear understanding of social work and the social work role and ideally should be social work qualified rather than a civil servant. This involved being visible and accountable to services users for decisions that are made. Those from a social work background were thought to better understand the problems that social workers were facing:

> *"We work in substance use, one of the most stigmatised groups that experiences considerable health inequality. The person has no health nor SW training. A government project manager."*

A core element of strong leadership was the provision of regular supervision and space to problem solve. However, some participants argued that it was not clear what good supervision looks like and therefore further clarity is needed. Core elements of good supervision involve tangible support rather than simply paying lip service to the idea. Indeed, some participants argued that there was a need for restorative leadership and supervision to support learning when things did not go according to plan. It should involve ensuring that staff are not overwhelmed by large amounts of paperwork and should be trauma informed for those who have experienced trauma. It was argued that social workers need to be supported both relationally and therapeutically when dealing with particularly challenging situations and it was suggested that there needs to be a space for recovery for those who have experienced vicarious trauma. This is well illustrated by the following quote:

> *"Other occupations in society where workers are exposed to toxic substances in their environments are legally required to offer protections, training to workers on physical health grounds and with the emerging understandings about exposure to toxic stress and vicarious trauma, Social Work Profession should argue that psychological protection and support should be afforded the same status. Here training and clinical support, including Clinical Supervision may help and the profession should explore opportunities for earlier retirement in the same way other emergency services can opt for this."*

In addition, it was argued that leaders and decision-makers should be visible and accountable to service users for the decisions they make.

Further discussion considered poor leadership. Participants felt it was important to highlight that poor leadership contributed to high staff turnover and greater stress for all staff. Poor leaders were thought to focus on their own careers rather than challenging the perceived existential threats to social work values. There was a sense that some managers viewed the progression and development of others as a threat rather than seeing career development of staff as a key part of their job role.

It was felt that senior managers were too far removed from frontline practice with a focus on achieving targets. Indeed, it was suggested that some managers focused on targets and deadlines with almost "zero praise" for staff. It was suggested that managers should adopt a strengths-based approach in their interactions with social workers focussing on what they do well as well as what needs to be developed:

> *"show the same spirit in management as social workers show in working with people...line managers/team leaders showing kindness and taking a strengths-based approach with workers."*

It was felt that managers should be more accessible and available so that they fully understood the best way to support staff. Increasingly, *"more and more management"* was felt to be happening on MS Teams which exacerbated the view of managers being far removed from frontline practice. There

was a perception that senior leaders within Local Authorities did not value social workers in the same way as they valued other public service workers and therefore it was argued that they needed to be afforded the same levels of respect as other workers. Indeed, one respondent suggested that of the 13 managers they had had only four had cared about them as a person rather than as a "bum on a seat".

Overall, it was felt that there needs to be a culture change within social work management and there was a perception that there were too many attempts to micromanage. It was highlighted that when things go wrong there needs to be an adequate and robust complaints and investigation process potentially involving outside agencies.

Role of the Scottish Government

Some respondents discussed the role of the Scottish Government and other bodies in promoting and enhancing the social work profession. It was argued that the Scottish Government needs to have a clear and joined up vision for social work. Yet, there was a view that the current government attempted to manage social work by introducing prescriptive targets linked to funding and that as a result social work was being influenced by a *"creeping political agenda"*. It was argued that before any further changes to the structure and remit of the social work profession were made that greater consultation was essential. There was also a need for greater collaboration with managers who it was felt followed the Scottish Government's rules yet lacked autonomy at times.

There were general concerns and worries about government funding and the extent to which social work was being limited by resource constraints. There was a perception that any attempt to support or enhance the social work profession depends very much on the willingness of political leaders to adequately fund social care. This funding was deemed essential in several ways – particularly around the promotion of preventative work and the development of an adequately funded learning and development culture.

> *"Those in political power have a duty to ensure that social work and public services are adequately funded to allow preventative work as opposed to crisis intervention. There should also be a duty to promote a learning culture, not a blame culture where the media sensationalises situations and individual practitioners get blamed when things go wrong."*

Some survey respondents felt that many of the barriers being discussed required to be "fixed" at Scottish Government level and that many of these were fundamentally a result of legislation or a lack of funding.

Service User Involvement

Some respondents raised questions about user and carer involvement querying how they can be more meaningfully involved in several aspects of social work including policy development, co-design and delivery of services and education. It was argued that it is important to acknowledge and tackle the power imbalances associated with this to ensure that these do not impact on relationships. It was

argued that social workers should seek to promote choice – even amongst the most marginalised service user groups:

> "Social Workers are crucial in providing choice even when societal inequality, seeks to limit the choices available to the disadvantaged".

> "You know, just something to highlight that Social Workers are critical in maintaining social equality and also implementing government policy in all sorts of fields."

The impact of joint working and integration

A key theme that was explored consistently was joint working and the integration of health and social care. As a starting point it was argued that health and social care integration has many benefits however there was a concern that social work was in danger of being subsumed by health, with a sense that the health agenda has crept into social work and dictated the terms of engagement eroding the value of social work. There was a general perception that social work was unequal in terms of resources and pay structures and that social work appeared to be devalued when it came to terms and conditions and pay awards. In addition, there was a view that some partnership arrangements undermined the specialist knowledge and understanding that social workers bring to cases. In this respect it was argued that social work requires strong leaderships along the same lines as teachers who negotiated separately for a national pay award rather than being part of a Local Authority pay settlement.

Several barriers to joint working were identified such as the different values and agendas of the various agencies and there was a concern that different professionals are not always working together to achieve the same thing. Related to this, there was a sense amongst some respondents that other professionals did not give social work the respect they deserved:

> "time and time again it is seen as bottom of the pack in terms of pay and conditions, respect, further training etc."

Other barriers related to the sharing (or non -sharing) of information with some concerns that information was shared inappropriately because *"service users do not want to keep telling their story".* One respondent emphasised the need for due diligence around data protection legislation.

Several respondents appeared to emphasise the need for exclusivity to enhance and protect the social work role and task. Concerns were raised, for example, around the potential inclusion of Occupational Therapy colleagues in national developments. There was a strong view that the National Social Work Agency should not include other professionals to guard against the potential dilution of social work skills and values:

> "SW has a definite set of skills and values, thus should have its own identity. OT is allied to health profession and most people would have a clear understanding of OT role and remit, please do not dilute SW by the inclusion of professions which will not be able to undertake tasks specific to SW (as assigned to CSWO). I was a SW in a care management team many years ago

and my practice was fundamentally different from the OT and nurses employed as care managers. If we include other professions into the NSWA at this juncture, we have already 'sold out' on our uniqueness."

Alongside this there was a concern that social work had the potential to become a "scapegoat" when things went wrong. There was a fear that social work might *"carry the blame"* for multi-agency decision making. Indeed, according to one respondent – *"social workers are part of a team that carries risk – they are not the sole decision-maker".* Alongside and related to this was a plea that social work should not be held accountable for other services being under-resourced.

It is important to take note of an important counterpoint within this discussion however with one respondent arguing that social workers *do* in fact share values with other professions such as community education, community nursing and community OTs. Indeed, there was a suggestion that all allied health professionals, including social work, aim to ensure people are healthy. There was an argument that they share much in common, particularly in relation to working ethically and practising in a non-discriminatory manner to support individuals and communities. The following quote sums this up well and is a helpful way to finish this section:

"It is the duty of social workers to work in partnership with others and not be precious about what social workers can and cannot do."

Protection of social work role and identity

Related to the theme of joint working is an important theme around the protection of the social work role and identity and a need for greater clarity over the role. This was also discussed in detail earlier in the report. There was a sense that how the role is described and how it is then operationalised in practice are two very different things. The starting point appears to be the need to clearly define and protect the statutory duties that underpin the social work role. There was an argument that the statutory nature of the social work role is distinct and requires greater levels of supervision and support and access to professional development opportunities. In recognition of this, the role should be carried out by qualified social workers and aspects of the role should not be passed over to support assistants as this can potentially undermine and devalue the skills, knowledge and expertise required to undertake the role. It was argued that consideration should be given to the introduction of differential pay scales where it is acknowledged that children and families' social workers have higher demands placed on them with generally higher caseloads and more pressure and a resultant high staff turnover. It should be noted however that there were mixed views on this and elsewhere there were clear arguments for everyone to be paid the same.

As discussed previously there was some concern that members of the public and even other professionals did not fully understand the social work role, assuming that they are support workers. According to one respondent, the term social worker appears to be getting eroded:

"In my authority there is Health and Social Care alongside Education and Families. This lack of knowledge and erosion of the term means that social work is struggling to maintain a professional identity."

Related to this, respondents discussed the negative stereotypes that continued to exist around social work and social workers. There was a perception that these negative attitudes were held by the public and exacerbated by negative media coverage. It was argued that there is a need to change the narrative about social workers, particularly those from children and families in the media as this was felt to have a negative impact on the mental health of social workers:

> "On the whole, workers are vilified, and it is detrimental to our mental health to spend time outside of work reading headlines and articles that shun our profession. I completely understand the need for serious case reviews and audits but there still appears to be a big blame culture in social work which leads to defensive practice and not achieving the outcomes we want for the people we work with."

Taken together, a lack of clarity over the role together with negative assumptions by the public, the media and, to some extent, other professionals represent an existential threat to the unique role of social work. This was felt to be particularly important in the context of the National Care Service where the amalgamation with health with its *"…crippling hierarchy of banding and status"* was seen to potentially limit professional autonomy and voice. These perceived challenges suggest, it was argued, that social work needs a stronger body and union to represent it:

> "Social work needs a strong body to represent it and advocate to protect the rights of the profession. It is the only statutory profession with a weak body representing us. Health, police, education etc all have much stronger bodies backing and championing them."

Resources: constraints and considerations

Survey respondents provided several responses that have been grouped together under the theme of resources. There was concern that Scotland is now experiencing the "neoliberal community-asset stripping that has been taking place in England and Wales since 2010" and it was argued that "BASW and Social Work are powerless in the face of this".

It was argued that there has been a shift to a *"cost over care"* model where service user needs were no longer prioritised over funding cuts making it more difficult to adopt a user centred approach. Several examples of this were given including the creation of teams to review care packages with a view to reducing costs and a spending cap on care packages for people aged over 65 with dementia:

> "If people are over a certain age (65) with a dementia they can only get a budget of around £800 per week and if it is more, they should then be put into an older people's care home. Why should an older person who has been paying tax and NI their whole life be treated less favourably than a child or an adult with a £2500 a week care budget? This is in direct conflict with our values...it needs to be addressed."

It was argued that there is a need for transparency over what can be realistically achieved given these constraints and that there should be a "practical guide" that sets out what to expect. There was a

sense of pessimism amongst some respondents that suggested that this situation was unlikely to change:

> *"Funding will never increase so how can we do our jobs to the best of our ability if the resources around us are not there."*

Yet there was also concern that some social workers had become almost complicit in the face of these cuts and needed to do more to challenge these conditions that were seen to be putting pressure on communities and vital services:

> *"Sometimes it feels like social workers are colluding with finite resource decisions – has social work lost its advocacy skills?"*

Several respondents argued that funding cuts and resource constraints meant it was simply no longer possible for them to deliver effective or appropriate services and that this was resulting in poorer outcomes for service users and reputational damage for the social work profession:

> *"Lack of resourcing and funding is leading to both demonstrable poorer outcomes for the people we work with and a deterioration in the professional standing of Social Workers. This is a vicious circle resulting in poorer recruitment and retention and, inevitably, a deterioration in the overall quality of the workforce."*

Respondents argued that these working conditions meant that they were no longer able to work proactively or preventatively as they spent most of their time firefighting. This resulted in workers having less time to spend with service users and much less time for their own professional development with limited opportunities for training. These challenges are further exacerbated by a lack of admin support which it was felt had been eroded over the last five years. This has had a significant impact on the social work role and has been detrimental to the wellbeing of social workers. This is powerfully highlighted in the following quote:

> *"In the past 13 years my workload has doubled and the admin support now nearly non-existent. Senior Social Workers and Team Leaders also have an increased workload meaning they have limited time to supervise and support the frontline staff. Social Work needs to have additional funding and staff to enable the workforce to function effectively. As it stands, we feel under constant pressure and stress levels are high. We need the resources and support to enable us to continue in our roles and not seek employment elsewhere."*

Taken together these resource constraints and resultant working conditions have resulted in what has been widely acknowledged as a recruitment crisis within Local Authority social work. High staff turnover raised such concerns amongst respondents that there were calls for an independent review to consider the reasons for this. Indeed, it was argued that continually being asked to *"do more with less"* was directly impacting on workers leaving the profession who were not replaced. It was argued that more work was needed to evidence the harm caused by under-resourcing. This could be considered at several levels: impact on service user experiences and outcomes; impact on social workers ability to do their job and the resultant consequences for mental health and wellbeing; impact

on staff recruitment and retention; and the reputational damage this does to the social work profession.

It was argued that more needed to be done to make staff feel valued and there was a concern that current Local Authority money saving initiatives such as hot desking did not make staff feel valued or instil a sense of belonging. Others argued that there should be an end to agency work who are paid more than full time staff. This was perceived to eat into staff budgets and was considered unsustainable in the longer term. There was also a call to pay all social workers the same salary, although it must be noted that there were some contradictory views on this as discussed above.

Overall, respondents felt that it was vital to emphasise the impact that a lack of resources might have on any future developments, with some concern expressed that this could significantly impact on the ability to make any changes of note:

> *"There needs to be more emphasis made on the lack of resources and funding to achieve all of this. It's wholly unrealistic creating a fantasy document of what could be without having financial, practical plans to implement it properly. You could argue that setting up yet another body to 'support' social work is just wasting money if it's not going to offer any practical help on the ground to us".*

Importance of ongoing learning and development

Respondents identified several training and development needs for the social work workforce. This was felt to start with social work education, to support the development of "tomorrow's social workers" and it was argued that there was a need to adequately finance this. Service user and carer involvement should be a central part of this process. Supporting social work education also included supporting social workers to become practice educators and supporting Local Authorities to provide placements to enable the development of the next generation of social workers. Related to this was an acknowledgement of the need to support newly qualified and early career social workers in their first few years of practice.

It was argued that there was a need for baseline mandatory training for each service covering children and families, adults and justice and it was argued that there needs to be equal access to training on a national basis amid concerns that delivery is patchy and subject to significant geographical variation:

> *"The issue of access to uniformly agreed training materials and access to subject matter experts/recordings which usually come at a cost from agencies etc. This needs to be looked at as part of the NSWA. Ensuring that our workforce has the same access and opportunities regardless of authority, resources, and funding available."*

As well as baseline training, several key areas for training were identified including anti-discriminatory practice and anti-racism and training to deal with the stigma faced by the social work workforce.

It was suggested that there should be protected time for training and development with a much greater focus on career development and succession planning. It was argued that training and

development opportunities are crucial for good practice and can be vital in terms of maintaining motivation when there are *"difficult professional times"*. Associated with this was a clear focus on the advancement of practice, supporting workers to become specialists within teams without necessarily taking on a management role. Yet it was recognised that becoming a highly skilled professional is a journey supported by skilled leadership and experienced peers who can mentor those with less experience. Indeed, peer support was viewed as a particularly important aspect of learning and development and opportunities for this should be identified, developed, and nurtured.

Question 3 - Is there anything else you'd like to say about the statements?

Many of the issues presented in this section have been discussed above, however, respondents clearly felt that they required to be emphasised.

Leadership in integrated systems

Perhaps the most obvious comments focused on the 'domination' of health within the integrated system of service provision. A need to challenge this 'domination' to prevent the profession being undermined and 'asset-stripped' was noted as important. Current HSP structures were considered not to value social work as a profession or as leaders undermining the professional identity overall. It was argued, therefore, that social work being the lead agency within integrated systems could be a useful starting point, particularly as they lead in key agendas such as SDS, ASP and child protection. It was noted that this could help to equalise the relationship with health and help to promote the value and identity of social work.

> *"[we] Need to stop being viewed as working for all the other agencies rather than having our own identity – we are not lesser but are full partners and leaders."*

> *"If we are **" unafraid to challenge the structures and systems behind structural inequalities and poverty**" this needs to be referenced in the leadership section. It is crucial for social works little voice (always either structurally over-shadowed by Education or Health services) to become loud and assertive in order to ensure the survival of the profession."*

The importance of the system being responsible for the support and elevation of the profession, rather than leaving this to individual workers was noted. It is evident therefore that systemic change is required. There was some concern expressed however about social work becoming overly elitist as a profession.

> *"The danger of being almost elitist and separatist about social work and claiming that only social work can hold certain key values, is that you see jobs in multi-agency organisations, like health and social care partnerships, deemed jobs that only qualified social workers can do. Behaving like this can bring social work into disrepute by discriminating against nurses etc by denying that they hold "the right values".*

Challenging existing systems and practices.

Significant concern was expressed about the size of caseloads and overall workloads carried by social workers as noted throughout this report. A need for more balanced, manageable caseloads with access to increased resources and regular, consistent, professional supervision was at the core of these concerns. Structurally, issues such as direct commissioning of services (a long-held aim within community care since 1990), increased funding and stronger links with services such as housing and the Police were considered critical. However, there was clear acknowledgement of some of the challenges that accompany structural change such as how to achieve balanced workloads whilst

managers are instructed to allocate all work regardless. Achieving equality of pay and conditions across local authorities was also considered to be important, but was acknowledged as challenging across different geographical areas, with different priorities and political agendas. The retention of staff was clearly of concern and post-employment support, focused on emotional and physical well-being and balanced, achievable workloads with good supervision was noted as critical to better retention.

The importance of the acceptability of risk was noted. Systems need to be able to accept and promote risk and that not everyone wants to live the same kind of life and that's okay. Significant structural and systems change was, therefore, thought to be required to achieve the perspective of social work outlined in the statements.

Regulation and representation

Representation at a political level that understands the SW role and identity was noted as important so that leaders understand the day-to-day challenges and don't put in place unachievable systems change that exacerbate rather than resolve problems. An argument was made about the need for the National Social Work Agency (NSWA) to fully represent the needs of the profession. For example, NSWA needs to reflect the overworked/underpaid nature of the profession and work to ensure that the average length of a SW career increases as well as developing a unified PR approach to promote positives and successes. There was a plea not to dilute the SW identity by trying to be too inclusive in the NSWA. It was argued that this should be seen as an opportunity to reclaim the profession, promoting pride in the profession and the value of staff.

Current support systems were thought to be fragmented, for example paying fees to a range of organisations for support such as SSSC, SWS, SASW. There was a plea for one fee access to all resources. This could potentially lead to collective advocacy by the profession at a national level that may lead to better resources/ sustained funding, national solutions to crisis in recruitment and retention and stronger leadership overall. Finally, the need for a National Care Service liberated from Local Authority political oscillations and point scoring was considered helpful to the future of the profession.

Discussion and conclusions

Overall, the clarity of terms used in the statements was disputed and questions were raised around the meaning of terms such as social justice and the level of confusion that could be created if these definitions were not shared by everyone. Also, the language and terminology used by social work leaders varies across Scotland and could create confusion, so definitions need to be agreed and shared as a preface. The value of a human rights perspective was welcomed but a re-emphasis on anti-discriminatory practice was thought to be required. As the current focus of social work is on care management and not intervention some respondents felt there were statements that simply did not apply to current practice. This does, however, chime with previous discussions over the lack of context setting for the statements. Opportunities to develop evidence-based practice should be standard within the profession.

It was suggested that tensions and conflicts in the role need to be more clearly articulated to capture the ethically dilemmas faced by social workers such as being an agent of the state and the inherent power in the role while at the same time aspiring to be an agent of change. A useful suggestion was for the statements to be tested more rigorously with professional social workers, e.g. *"Workshop the statements with a social worker and a senior manager from each of the 32 social work organisations. Include the Care Inspectorate, ILF Scotland and representatives from the Chief Social Work Advisors office."*

A roadmap that takes the statements from aspiration to reality was a key concern for respondents and it is argued here that this is beginning to emerge from the responses presented here. For the statements to present a real picture of social work in Scotland in 2024, significant systems and structural change is required. This should include further emphasis on continuing professional development with a focus on staff learning and training and management and leadership changes to create a more supportive working environment where there is a greater understanding of the social work role. Resources will be needed to develop models of practice that focus on prevention rather than reactive crisis-based interventions. Social workers need to be able to work in partnership with their managers rather than simply being directed, reducing the gulf between strategic and operational social work, The voice of the profession also needs to be more clearly heard at all levels with all key stakeholders including the public.

Increased resources and funding are also required to make these changes happen. Respondents have stated quite clearly that continuing to demand that workers be the change they want to see and to do more with less without effecting structural change will simply not achieve the desire outcome. Other professionals and key stakeholders will also have to contribute as partners to any change and this will require them to better understand the role and task of social work and to appreciate its value.

The statements were therefore considered to be the beginning of a long overdue journey towards change, rather than the change itself, more solutions would have to be identified within the statements for them to be useful. The challenge lies in creating and putting into action an achievable comprehensive plan to make this happen- considering differences in localities.

> *"There would need to be radical change in all areas of policy and resourcing to get to where these statements want. Leadership within local authorities doesn't have autonomy to work within the way that they want as they are accountable to the internal structures of the local authority or the health board."*

What is evident from this discussion is that the social work profession in 2024 must be viewed from a range of perspectives, political, structural, financial, and operational. As noted, for the statements to be a realistic vision of social work a clear agenda for change will require to be developed and agreed alongside any national developments such as the National Social Work Agency and the National Care Service. The integrated nature of service provision in health and social care must be acknowledged but also challenged in terms of hierarchy and value ascribed to the various professions therein. Significant structural change in terms of the management, support, supervision, and contemporary practice of staff is required. This will require significant resources and political will, alongside a

communication strategy to articulate and convey the meaning, value, role and task of social work more effectively.

Key Actions for a roadmap for change

Based on the findings reported here it is possible to begin the development of a roadmap from aspiration to reality. Any such roadmap should consider the steps that need to be taken to achieve the changes that have been called for with a particular focus on equality for social work in any integrated working arrangements, reducing the domination of health in senior management positions. Social work recruitment and retention need to be addressed as a matter of urgency with a consideration of better terms and conditions with equality across professions and local authorities, increasing and development of post qualification and employment support for social workers, reduced caseloads, better, more consistent professional supervision and the development of a clear learning and development culture.