

Criminal Justice Committee Pre-Budget Scrutiny 2027-28

Social Work Scotland response to call for written evidence

20 October 2025

Introduction

Social Work Scotland is the professional body for social work leaders, working closely with our partners to shape policy and practice, and improve the quality and experience of social services and as a result those who receive those services. As an organisation and across our members we are committed to service improvement and ongoing development based on evidence and research on how we can best meet the needs of those we work with and particularly those who experience the greatest challenges and barriers to their wellbeing and lives.

We welcome the opportunity to offer views to the Criminal Justice Committee to inform its pre-budget scrutiny. This submission is based on a workshop carried out with members of our Justice Standing Committee which is made up of Justice Social Work Senior Managers from across Scotland.

Questions

1. What are the main daily budget and staffing pressures facing your organisation or service, and how are these affecting staff safety, health, and workload?

Social Work Scotland (SWS) members report that Justice Social Work services across Scotland are experiencing significant and sustained workforce pressures. Recruitment and retention of qualified and experienced justice social workers have become increasingly challenging, with particular difficulties reported in remote and rural areas and within specialist services such as accredited programmes and DTTO teams. While services continue to benefit from newly qualified staff entering the profession, there is growing concern that vacancies and turnover are resulting in less experienced staff assuming complex responsibilities earlier than would previously have been the case. Services also need to apply the SSSC Newly Qualified Social Worker (NQSW) scheme, which restricts caseloads in the first 12 months following qualification. This reduces opportunities for mentoring, co-working and the gradual development of specialist skills.

Alongside workforce pressure, services reported a substantial increase in the volume and, as importantly, the complexity of the people they support. In almost all areas that the Scottish Government collects data on for Justice Social Work, there has been an increase in workload since prior to the pandemic (2019/20), as the below figures show.

Prevention and early intervention (figures from 2025/26):

- 3,425 Diversion cases, 2nd highest in 10 years
- 1629 Bail Supervision cases, highest in 10 years
- 1560 SDS cases – 75% increase since pre-pandemic.

Community based reports and sentences (figures from 2024/25, most recent available):

- Almost 30,000 Justice Social Work Reports (JSWRs) last year, highest since 2016/17
- 18,300 Community Payback Orders (CPOs) – a 14% increase since prior to the pandemic and highest in 10 years

Prison Throughcare related work (figures from 2025/26)

- Number of custody based Throughcare cases is highest in last 10 years
- Number of community based Throughcare cases 2nd highest in 10 years
- 3000 pre-release reports – an increase of 30% since pre-pandemic.

In addition to this increase in volume of cases, SWS members report that practitioners are managing increasing numbers of individuals assessed as presenting high and very high levels of risk. This included rising numbers of people convicted of sexual offences and

increasingly complex public protection cases, including domestic abuse. For example, there has been a 19% increase in MAPPA cases since prior to the pandemic. SWS members highlighted that caseload measures alone do not adequately reflect workload pressures, as the intensity of intervention, risk management and multi-agency responsibilities associated with individual cases have increased significantly.

Financial pressures are further reducing service capacity. Pay awards, inflationary pressures and increasing costs associated with buildings, utilities, vehicles and equipment are absorbing a growing proportion of available budgets. This is particularly evident within Unpaid Work services, where rising costs of vehicles, premises and materials are creating additional operational challenges. In many areas, resources that might otherwise be invested in service development, prevention or innovation are instead being used to sustain core statutory functions.

Training and workforce development were also identified as areas of concern. The time required to develop competent and confident justice practitioners, combined with limited access to specialist training opportunities, creates vulnerabilities within services and places additional pressure on existing experienced staff. Senior managers in Justice estimated it can take up to 3 years to fully train a Justice Social Worker to be able to safely carry cases where a risk of serious harm exists. SWS members highlighted concerns about maintaining sufficient capacity in specialist programmes and interventions where the training pipeline is limited and workforce succession planning is increasingly difficult.

Collectively, these pressures are having a direct impact on workload, wellbeing and resilience across the workforce. Staff are managing larger numbers of increasingly complex cases while simultaneously responding to new policy expectations, service developments and national practice requirements. This creates a risk of staff becoming overstretched and increases challenges in maintaining safe workloads, supporting professional development and safeguarding workforce wellbeing. The cumulative effect is a workforce under considerable pressure, striving to meet growing demand with finite resources.

2. How are funding constraints affecting the quality of services provided by the justice system, including to offenders, victims and the public, and what impact is this having on confidence in the system?

SWS members reported that funding constraints are increasingly affecting the ability of Justice Social Work services to respond effectively to growing levels of demand and complexity. While services continue to meet their statutory responsibilities, members highlighted concerns that financial pressures are limiting opportunities to invest in preventative approaches, early intervention and service development. As resources are

increasingly directed towards maintaining core functions, there is less capacity to develop innovative responses or enhance support for individuals with complex and multiple needs.

A consistent theme was the growing mismatch between demand and available resource. Justice Social Work services are supporting increasing numbers of people subject to statutory supervision who present with significant trauma, mental health difficulties, substance use issues and complex risk factors. At the same time, wider reductions in community-based, whole population services have limited the availability of support that can be accessed to address underlying needs. SWS members described increasing challenges in securing housing, mental health services and addictions support. These services are under their own pressures, which has a significant knock on effect for Justice Social Work as access to these services is critical to reducing reoffending and supporting rehabilitation

Funding pressures are also impacting the availability and sustainability of interventions that support positive outcomes. Concerns were raised about the capacity of unpaid work services, accredited programmes and specialist interventions to meet demand, particularly where staffing challenges coincide with budget constraints. Members highlighted that delays in accessing services or interventions can reduce their effectiveness and make it more difficult to deliver positive outcomes for individuals and the wider public.

There was also concern that resource limitations are affecting the broader public protection landscape. The increasing complexity and volume of high-risk cases, such as people convicted of sexual and domestic violence offences, requires significant professional time and multi-agency coordination. Where services are operating under sustained workforce and financial pressures, opportunities for proactive work and relationship-based practice can become increasingly constrained. While practitioners continue to prioritise public safety, members expressed concern about the longer-term sustainability of this approach without additional investment. This is particularly relevant in relation to the need to reduce the prison population. While SWS is supportive of efforts to reduce the prison population and consider this can support longer term improved public protection, this requires up front funding for community based services to ensure rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals who commit offences and to ensure public safety.

The cumulative effect of these pressures has implications for confidence in the justice system. SWS members highlighted the importance of ensuring that community justice services are sufficiently resourced to deliver credible alternatives to custody, robust risk management and effective rehabilitation. Where services experience delays, reduced capacity or difficulties accessing wider support provision, there is a risk that confidence among sentencers, victims and the wider public may be undermined. Sustained investment is therefore viewed as essential not only to maintain service quality, but also to support confidence that community-based justice interventions can deliver positive outcomes.

3. Where do budget arrangements currently make it difficult for different agencies (such as police, courts, prisons, or local services) to work together efficiently or share technology?

SWS members highlighted that budget arrangements across the justice system can create barriers to effective collaboration, particularly where investment decisions are made within individual organisations rather than across the wider system. While there is a strong commitment to partnership working at local level, funding structures do not always support a coordinated approach to service planning, delivery and infrastructure development.

A recurring concern was the lack of shared digital systems and technology across justice partners. Members described ongoing challenges associated with information sharing, duplication of effort and the use of multiple systems that do not communicate effectively with one another. This can create inefficiencies across agencies and require practitioners to spend additional time on administrative processes. There was a strong view that greater investment in compatible digital infrastructure would improve information sharing and support more effective multi-agency working.

The impact of funding constraints within wider public services was also identified as a significant factor. Difficulties accessing housing, mental health, substance use and other community-based services can place additional pressure on justice agencies and limit the effectiveness of rehabilitative interventions. Members highlighted that successful outcomes often depend on coordinated support across multiple sectors, yet services are frequently funded and commissioned separately, creating fragmentation and variability in provision.

4. What single change or resource shift should the Scottish Government prioritise in the next budget to relieve pressure on frontline services or improve the effective functioning of the justice system?

The strongest and most consistent message from SWS members was that incremental change or 'tinkering' with the system and how it is funded was not adequate in the face of the systemic challenges facing the justice system and that transformational change was needed. This requires significant increased funding to shift the balance from prison to the community and to ensure a sustainable justice system in the longer term.

It is noted that in England, there is a £700m increase in probation funding and if this were replicated, on a per capita basis, in Scotland, around £66m would be available to transform community justice services. Increased and recurring funding of this magnitude for frontline community-based services would provide the greatest opportunity to relieve current pressures across the justice system while supporting better outcomes for individuals, victims and communities.

Justice Social Work plays a critical role in delivering effective alternatives to custody, managing risk in the community and supporting rehabilitation. However, services are being required to respond to increasing levels of demand, complexity and public protection responsibilities within constrained financial environments. Additional investment would help address workforce pressures, strengthen recruitment and retention, support specialist training and ensure that services have the capacity required to meet current and future demands.

As discussed above, this is particularly important when considering reducing the prison population and managing more people in the community, which can only be done effectively and safely if there is a corresponding shift in resources. While in the short term this would involve significant up front resourcing, in the longer term there will be considerable savings to the public purse given it is considerably less expensive to manage someone in the community – even at a very high intensity level – than it is to imprison them.

Beyond Justice Social Work itself, investment should support a preventative and whole-system approach. Members highlighted that many of the challenges experienced within the justice system are linked to unmet needs relating to housing, mental health, substance use, poverty and trauma. Increased investment in community-based support services, alongside Justice Social Work provision, would strengthen opportunities for early intervention, improve access to support and reduce demand on more costly and intensive parts of the system over time.

Members also highlighted the importance of funding certainty. Short-term funding arrangements on a single year basis can make workforce planning, service development and long-term partnership working more difficult. Multi-year investment would allow services to plan strategically, build capacity and sustain effective interventions rather than focusing on managing year-to-year financial pressures.

Overall, members considered that prioritising significant investment in community justice related services would deliver benefits across the wider justice system, particularly the prison system. By strengthening the capacity of Justice Social Work and its partners to provide effective supervision, risk management and rehabilitative support in the community, the Scottish Government could reduce pressure elsewhere in the system while improving outcomes for people involved in the justice system and enhancing public safety.

5. Are there any changes to existing ways of working, governance arrangements or cross-agency collaboration that could improve outcomes or reduce pressure without requiring significant additional funding?

A key area for improvement is strengthening whole-system planning and collaboration across justice and wider public services. Members highlighted that many of the challenges faced by Justice Social Work services are linked to difficulties accessing support from housing, mental health, addictions and other community services. Greater alignment of planning and decision-making across agencies could help ensure that individuals receive more coordinated support, reduce duplication and improve the effectiveness of interventions.

There was also support for improving information sharing and reducing unnecessary administrative burdens across the justice system. Members noted that practitioners frequently work across multiple systems and processes, requiring the same information to be recorded or shared in different ways. Streamlining processes, improving compatibility between existing systems and adopting more consistent approaches to information sharing could increase efficiency and allow practitioners to spend more time undertaking direct work with individuals and communities.

SWS members highlighted the value of strengthening collaboration between justice partners to support a whole-system approach to risk management and rehabilitation. Opportunities were identified to improve joint working between community justice services, prisons, police, courts and third sector organisations, particularly in relation to transitions between services and the management of complex cases. Earlier engagement, shared planning and a greater focus on continuity of support were viewed as important factors in improving outcomes and reducing avoidable pressures elsewhere in the system.

Finally, members emphasised the importance of ensuring that the expertise of Justice Social Work is fully utilised within policy development and system redesign. Involving practitioners and service leaders early in the development of new initiatives would help ensure that changes are deliverable, aligned with operational realities and capable of achieving intended outcomes without creating unintended pressures elsewhere in the system.

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