



The State of Social Work 2012

**WHAT SOCIAL WORKERS THINK ABOUT THE
STATE OF THEIR PROFESSION IN 2012**

May 2012



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88% believe lives could be put at risk by cuts to services

77% say jobs have been cut over the past year, or vacant positions left unfilled

percentage of social workers who say their caseloads are unmanageable **77%**

social workers considering leaving the profession because of cuts **34%**

“It makes me so sad that this job seems only to be possible if you sacrifice your own health and wellbeing”

Mental health social worker

“The team I work in currently is working at dangerous caseload levels in terms of child protection work”

Child protection social worker

Foreword

A “terrifying” indictment of the state of a vital profession

Many of the challenges facing social work have been emphasised before, yet with the various political initiatives underway across all four parts of the UK, we might anticipate some degree of progress. High caseloads, excessive administration demands, inadequate supervision, high vacancy rates, low morale ... we know the list well.

Politicians, the public, and even elements of a historically critical media recognise the need for change, for social workers to be better supported in their work. As such, it is easy to assume that the situation is on the turn, that at last the issues are being recognised and solutions put in place. It is why, for instance, the Munro review last year called for a range of measures to tackle the barriers to good practice in child protection services in England. It also lies behind a swathe of initiatives elsewhere in the UK: from the launch of the Changing Lives agenda in Scotland in 2006, to the government in Wales revealing plans for the Social Services (Wales) Bill this year, and the even more recent Social Work Strategy for Northern Ireland.

Efforts to implement the Munro findings in England are one of a number of welcome processes that BASW supports, and that the Association hopes will secure tangible improvements to social work practice and training. Equally, the government in Westminster has now accepted BASW's long-held view that the

profession needs a Chief Social Worker, located within government, to press for the highest standards of practice. This too is welcome but it remains a small part of the solution to the profession's ills when one considers the extent of the challenges it faces.

With the findings of BASW's State of Social Work 2012 survey the extent of that challenge, and the danger it poses to the people who rely on social work services, can now be understood more clearly than ever. With the empiricism and the quantity of the response to this survey, no-one can say they have not been warned – this study and the experiences social workers have shared can not be interpreted in any other way than as a stark warning that lives that could be saved will be lost unless the response is swift and total. Social workers can never guarantee there won't be tragedies on their watch but I am in little doubt that the conditions in which they are working undermine their capacity to save lives.

This survey's statistics are damning and the

“Lives that could be saved will be lost unless the response is swift and total”

hundreds of associated comments respondents have offered are nothing less than terrifying. Work continues on the political solutions but we cannot afford to wait any longer for urgent remedial action. The survey tells us three notable things: social workers are facing an administrative overload and are, as a result, spending less and less time with vulnerable children and adults; caseloads are quite simply unmanageable, posing imminent and serious risks to the people who need services; and the stresses on service providers, from the very top to the bottom, are creating an endemic culture of bullying, driving morale levels through the floor. Morale is being further eroded with every pay freeze and every attack on previously available benefits, such as car allowances.

We need a response immediately, which is why we are calling on governments and local authorities and health boards across the UK to act swiftly. The survey makes clear the need for, on one level, a detailed and considered response focussed on the need for new and sustained focus on the dire state of this sector, and, on another level, immediate action to make a difference straight away.

For this, BASW is proposing three measures to take place immediately, though with regard for a different pace and approach in each UK country: 1) Let social workers get back to what they do best by reallocating administrative ; 2) End the attacks on social worker morale; 3) Act to reduce risk of unnecessary tragedies [see panel, right].

Whether we like it or not, resourcing is an ever present factor when considering how the threats to social work services, and in turn to the most

vulnerable people in our society, are to be overcome.

Social work services were never beneficiaries of investment in the way other areas of public service were during the so called 'boom years', yet now they find themselves facing cuts every bit as deep as those in other sectors. We didn't have the good times but we're still facing the bad times.

We cannot go on like this and BASW is urging political leaders in all four parts of the UK to act without hesitation.

Fran Fuller, BASW Chair

Three measures to make a difference today

- **Let social workers get back to what they do best:** Immediate measures to reallocate local authority administrative staff from less critical roles into children and adult service teams to ensure social workers are relieved of the admin tasks they tell us are preventing them from doing their work.
- **End the attacks on social worker morale:** An immediate end to any further cuts to social work allowances or the introduction of any new charges, and an independent review of the impact on social work services of cuts to conditions of service and the continued pay freeze.
- **Act to reduce risk of unnecessary tragedies:** In England, Ofsted and the CQC, and in Wales the CSSIW, must be asked to prioritise in all inspections an assessment of the risks of high caseloads and overstretched social work teams, including a focus on bullying.

Executive summary

BASW undertook its State of Social Work survey between 14-30 March 2012, in partnership with its trade union arm, the Social Workers Union. Promoted via the Association's e-bulletins to members, the survey elicited exactly 1,100 responses before it closed.

The findings indicate grave challenges facing the social work profession in all four UK countries. There are variations between countries, but they are matters of degree rather than anything more substantial. Social workers throughout the UK are dealing with similar difficulties.

Cuts to services remain as big a challenge in 2012 as they did in a similar poll BASW undertook in 2011. Among the respondents, 85% have experienced notable cuts to services in the last 12 months and 78% have noticed jobs cuts or unfilled vacancies. Eligibility criteria has tightened, the use of unqualified staff is on the rise and caseloads are unmanageable for 77% of social workers.

The ultimate impact of overstretched services is reflected by the 88% who believe lives could be put at risk by cuts to services.

Economic considerations are part of an enormous range of pressures, the State of Social Work 2012 survey reveals. Nearly half of social workers operate in the sort of working environment that makes safe practice impossible, with 46% stating that they are afraid to speak out about specific concerns for fear of repercussions. It is little wonder that more a third of respondents are considering leaving the profession.

The survey also reveals something of the personal

challenges confronting social workers, in no small measure because of the same economic circumstances that are impacting on service users. Debts are on the rise, holidays and savings are being ruled out, a third of social workers say their debts are up, and a third of that sample are 'very concerned' about their borrowing levels.

Few people leave all their personal concerns behind them when they turn up to work and social workers are no different. Home life struggles

“Nearly half of social workers operate in a working environment that makes safe practice impossible”

inevitably impact on the ability of these professionals to ably support others with their needs. Pay freezes, pay cuts, slashed car allowances and newly introduced charges – car parking fees, for instance – may make a tiny contribution to the UK deficit but they make a huge difference to the lives of social workers and those they seek to assist.

More detail on all these findings can be found on the following pages, including quotes taken from the thousands of comments made by respondents.

Key survey statistics

88%

believe lives could be put at risk by cuts to services

85%

experienced notable cuts to services in the last 12 months

83%

concerned about erosion of terms, conditions and pensions

80%

find it harder to practice effectively

80%

felt impact on their work from cuts to other public services

78%

noticed jobs cuts or unfilled vacancies

77%

seen cuts to back office or preventative services

77%

concerned about unmanageable caseloads

Key survey statistics

69%

have seen tightening of eligibility criteria

68%

have seen staff shortages increase in the last 12 months

67%

are concerned about cuts in salaries

65%

are concerned about use of unqualified staff

65%

have seen examples of unqualified workers taking on qualified functions

53%

fear lack of support could have tragic consequences for service users

46%

are afraid to speak out for fear of repercussions

34%

are considering leaving the profession due to impact of cuts on ability to practice effectively

Another tragedy waiting to happen

- // I can hardly carry out any visits now, due to extent of admin duties.**
- // Support services such as Barnado's have been axed, and there are now very few preventative services that can be offered to families.**
- // I am afraid that one day soon the sticking plaster will break due to overstretching.**
- // It is another serious case review waiting to happen.**
- // Caseloads are far too high and very little actual social work is being done. It's a matter of crisis management on a daily basis.**
- // Timescales are more of a focus than doing work with families to promote change.**
- // The team I work in currently is working at dangerous caseload levels in terms of child protection work.**
- // We have ridiculous caseloads and social workers are working evenings and weekends to manage.**
- // Due to unmanageable caseloads, evidence isn't always gathered.**
- // Large caseloads means less time to spend with families and less time to listen to children. They need to build up a relationship with a social worker in order for them to feel safe enough to talk freely.**
- // Unmanageable caseload is creating huge backlog of uncompleted work and this puts me at a very high risk.**
- // Targets and demands from management also means that social workers are spending less time with service users, and less time monitoring children at risk in particular.**

“Unmanageable and unsafe”

- // I should have a protected caseload of 15. I have 30 cases, I am concerned about unsafe practice because I am unable to manage my cases effectively. After eight months of being in post I am feeling overwhelmed and very stressed.**
- // Workloads are increasing but staff are not being replaced when they leave, making work unmanageable and unsafe.**
- // Caseloads have definitely increased with the introduction of personal budgets and personalisation. It was introduced to give clients/carers and their families more choice, but it hasn't, as it is always about money and how much money is in the budget to purchase care.**
- // Clients are suffering because of lack of community resources and not enough money to go round for everyone.**
- // More and more I see colleagues who are not trained as social workers, struggle to manage really complex cases.**
- // The risk is high in mental health teams and I think it's a miracle that so far there have been no major 'slip ups'. I am 52 and cannot imagine I can physically or mentally keep this level of work and stress up.**
- // Staff not replaced, we are running a service on three full time staff and three part time – it used to be six full time staff. Our caseload has doubled and I fear things will be worse.**
- // I recently left my job within a child protection team because even working 12 hour days and taking work home at weekends, I was unable to keep on top of my caseload, and could no longer operate in such risky, dangerous conditions. Many social workers feel they are sitting ducks, just waiting for something to go wrong.**

“It is dire, very toxic, I can’t wait to retire”

- // The stress and burn out of overloaded social workers.**
- // It makes me so sad that this job seems only to be possible if you sacrifice your own health and wellbeing.**
- // It is dire out here, very toxic. I cannot wait to retire, I only wish I did not have to wait until I am 66.**
- // I have, after over 20 year’s service, taken the decision to leave social work. I am sick of working long hours to manage the unmanageable.**
- // We social workers get criticised left, right and centre by managers, other professionals and service users and get worn out by the emotional strain this puts on us.**
- // The ‘lean’ approach to work from management – completing the task with the minimal amount of work and forgetting quality, is combined with Government pressure to increase performance. But in adoption work, cutting corners ruins both childrens and adults lives forever.**
- // Due to workload pressures we end up not having the time or resources to build upon any of the knowledge or skills we have. I feel like I just end up doing everything badly.**
- // Pay and car allowance cuts lead to demotivation and low staff morale.**
- // I have seen huge changes in my short career and am tempted to leave the profession as I don’t see the situation improving.**
- // No pay increase for three years now, plus loss of car user allowance and plans not to pay us for first three days of any sickness absence.**
- // Pay freezes and hidden cuts to salaries, such as removal of allowance, car park charges for essential car users, mileage rate freezes.**

Cleaning, typing and filing – not social working

- // Social workers have become expensive typists!
- // Increased administrative tasks following a 50% reduction in administrative support across the social services department.
- // My role is about 80% admin, along with an IT system that is unfit for purpose and assessments that have been designed by unqualified staff, who don't have an idea of its impact on practice.
- // We are expected to do the tasks previously carried out by support staff.
- // Filing, mailing letters, purchasing stamps at the post office, ordering office supplies, answering the general office phone and dealing with callers without appointments, on behalf of other staff, takes time which was previously addressed by an administrative worker.
- // I spend a considerable time doing admin tasks – not the best use of my skills.
- // We lost a business support role, and have to take turns staffing reception and answering phones during busy periods.
Social work time taken booking meetings, faxing and, especially, taking telephone messages! Working like a PA.
- // Admin, admin, admin – we get more admin tasks than ever! It takes longer to do admin tasks than the actual assessment.
- // In our office we now have no cleaning staff, and have to Hoover and clean the loos!

Bullying, intimidation and lack of support

- //** Saying it's too much earns you a 'reputation'.
- //** If you do raise concerns about caseload, you are made to feel incompetent.
- //** Bullying is rife and social workers have been disciplined for the most ridiculous things.
- //** I work in a working environment where management are oppressive and bullying.
- //** I've raised all my concerns and now I've been asked to attend an investigation interview. I feel like I'm being punished for speaking up
- //** My manager feigns total non-recognition when I have raised concerns about my caseloads.
- //** Social work practice is becoming harder due to policies from management which may protect against 'claims' but diminish good practice, i.e. don't worry about the client as long as the file is up-to-date and everything signed.
- //** There is now an air of intimidation in social work that I've never experienced previously.
- //** At the local authority I work in, the bullying culture has led to high numbers of agency staff and high staff turnover, yet the bullies remain in post.
- //** Bullying; blaming social workers, not the system they are in
- //** My manager is increasingly under immense pressures.
- //** I have never had reflective supervision since qualifying nearly five years ago, it just doesn't seem to happen in adult services.

What social workers say they need ...

- // We need fit for purpose fluid intelligent IT systems and skilled administrators who are an equal part of the team, valued for their skills and expertise would really reduce the burden of paperwork and support social workers to do social work.**
- // Extra staff would lower caseloads.**
- // Less bullying and blame.**
- // Employing more social workers will alleviate impossible caseloads and free managers to undertake supervision, as so much of their time is taken up managing the stress and burn out of overloaded social workers. This will allow managers to challenge bullying senior managers and directors.**
- // Social workers require longer protected internship practice experience during qualification, accompanied by on-going training.**
- // Good leadership/management and ownership of issues would address most of the things listed above.**
- // A real tackling of covert bullying by senior managers, which would by default mean lighter caseloads too.**
- // Lack of coercive bullying in the work place.**
- // More supportive management.**
- // Better strategic management.**
- // Better organised use of admin and non-qualified staff.**
- // Management lack transparency, integrity and follow-through.**
- // Fewer changes and better planning for changes.**

What social workers say they need ...

- // Fewer directives from management that are changing practice for the worse.
- // Unpaid overtime. Paid overtime would make management think about the work we are expected to do. Put us on a par with other professionals.
- // The solution is more staff, or at least get paid for extra hours. I know of colleagues in police who, if out on job with a social worker, can claim overtime.
- // There needs to be a system where experienced social workers can continue to practice and not get moved on to management as the only option to career development.
- // Whilst lower caseloads would be helpful, regular positive supervision and the feeling that experienced staff are valued would make an enormous difference.
- // Regular supervision is vital; mine gets cancelled regularly due to other pressing concerns.
- // Local authorities should not be allowed to interpret legislation. Social work needs a BMA equivalent to tell the local authorities what members will and will not do and sets ethics externally, as it is too hard for workers to fight the shoddy practices of their employers without losing their jobs. Maximum caseloads should be legally set so there is recourse to overwork.
- // Better pay, in recognition of the difficulties of the job that we do.
- // Address the blame culture and erosion of social work role.

What is BASW doing next?

BASW is calling for urgent action to address the pressures, failings and dangers that social workers have highlighted in this survey, including for immediate action on three policies, with slight variations according to each UK country: Let social workers get back to what they do by best reallocating administrative staff; end the attacks on social worker morale with a ban on any further pay or allowance cuts; and act to reduce risk of unnecessary tragedies by placing a new onus on the CQC and Ofsted in England and the CSSIW in Wales.

BASW has written to the Westminster government and the Welsh Assembly Government to bring the findings to their attention and request urgent action to ensure that dangerously overstretched social workers are given the support they, and the vulnerable people that rely upon their support, desperately need.

BASW is inviting the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Work to conduct an immediate inquiry into the state of social work and the inherent risks to vulnerable children and adults.

BASW is sharing the findings of this survey with our members, whose generous participation enabled the collation of information about the state of social work in the UK in 2012.

BASW will be asking our members to share the findings with their colleagues, to highlight the fact they are not alone in the conditions in which they are working, and urge them to join BASW to further strengthen our voice in attempting to secure a properly resourced, recognised and appreciated profession.