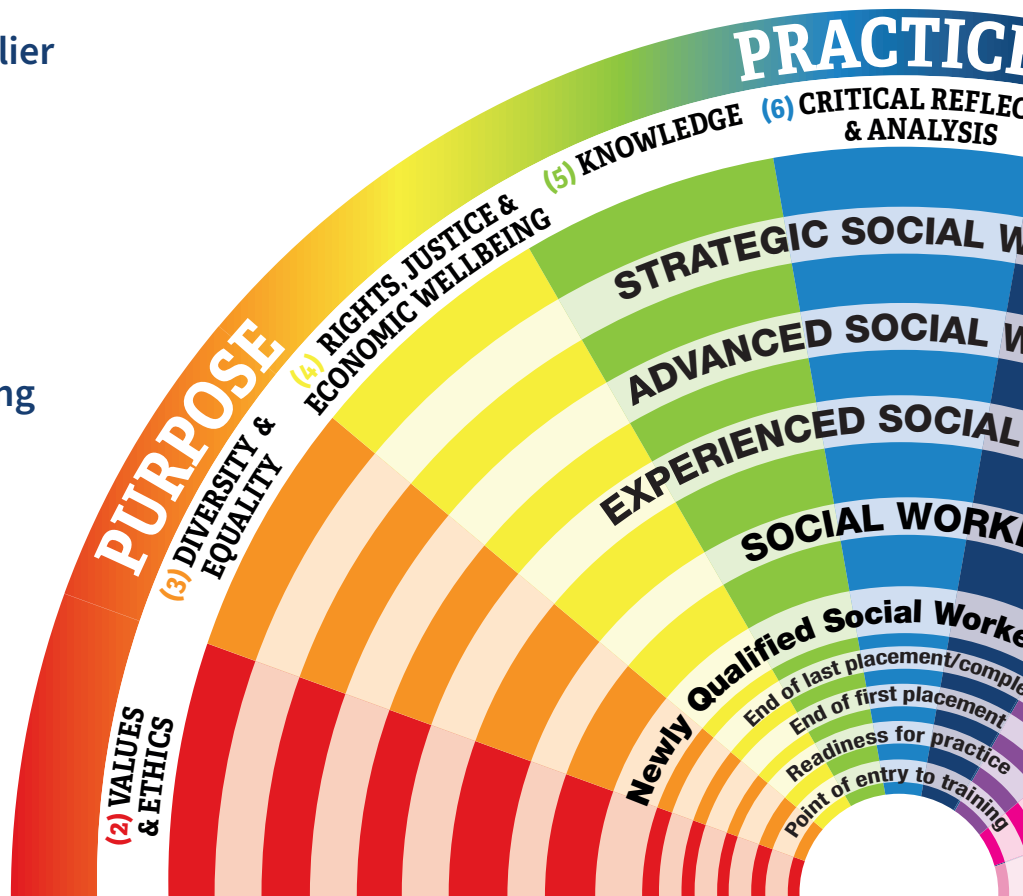


IS THE PCF FIT FOR PURPOSE?

An Evaluation of the PCF

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Executive Summary

Background

The Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) is “an overarching framework of social work education and professional development in England”, and is thus the predominant framework used to underpin nearly all social work education and development in England. However, while the PCF was originally released over a decade ago and refreshed about five years ago, there has been no social worker-informed evaluation of the PCF’s function or viability.

This project therefore considers what the PCF looks like compared to frameworks in other professions, and asks social workers from across the social work employment lifespan their perceptions on whether the PCF is still fit for purpose, and if so whether it needs to be changed or improved in any way.

Aims

The overall aim of this project was to work with colleagues involved across the social work employment lifespan to evaluate the PCF’s utility and functionality. To do this, we wanted to answer the following:

1. How does the PCF compare to other frameworks developed for different professions?
2. What do social workers, from across the social work ‘employment lifespan’, think of the PCF and its utility?
3. Is the PCF still fit for practice?

Methods

In undertaking this review and evaluation of the PCF, we utilised three methodological steps to gain an understanding of what the PCF is, how this compares to other professions, what social workers feel about the PCF in its current form, and whether it is still fit for purpose.

The first step was a rapid review of the academic and non-academic literature which has been published about the PCF, its purpose, and its development, as well as to look at how other professions – in particular teaching, occupational therapy, and youth work – approach capabilities and other practice frameworks. Next, we worked with a stakeholder group of social workers, service users, and social work leaders in the development and dissemination of a survey. The aim of the survey was to understand the perspective of colleagues from across the social work employment lifespan on how the PCF is used, whether it is fit for function, and how/whether it can/should be improved. Finally we ran a series of individual interviews with social workers and other stakeholders to gain a depth of understanding of their own perspectives and thoughts on the PCF.

Findings and Recommendations

The vast majority of respondents said that the PCF is still fit for practice, and is an excellent overarching framework which is and should continue to be used to support and influence social work education, development, and practice. However, this does not mean that there should not be any change and improvement to the PCF. In addition to a greater provision for social workers outside of their Assessed Year in Practice, we present seven recommendations for change. These are not presented in order of importance, and each should be worked on:

1. *Signposting Frameworks*: The PCF should be the one overarching framework for social work education, training, and practice. While there is utility in the many other frameworks which reflect the social work role (e.g. PEPS, KSS etc), this also leads to confusion. Therefore the PCF and other frameworks should clearly signpost into each other where appropriate.
2. *Social Justice at its Heart*: Social justice is at the heart of the social work role. While Justice and Rights are already one domain within the PCF, we recommend that social justice should clearly be reflected in every one of the domains.
3. *Integration of the Super Domains*: Practitioners and those within social work education are unclear how the super domains work or what they are for. The super domains need to be more clearly described and discussed, and should be re-imagined (perhaps including, as above, social justice).
4. *An Improved Career Framework*: While it is clear how the PCF is useful for those earlier in their career, for those who are more experienced and in more complex roles it is less so. Therefore, the career framework needs to be re-thought, particularly for those in the higher reaches of the profession.
5. *An Emphasis on Reflection*: Reflective supervision is key to social work practice, but respondents suggest it is not discussed clearly enough in Domain 6. Reflective supervision (what it is, and how to do it) therefore needs to be more thoroughly discussed within Domain 6.
6. *Professional Leadership*: While leadership is easy to demonstrate for those who have leadership roles, those in the earlier stages of their career find it an almost impossible domain to demonstrate. We recommend that either the title or description of this domain needs to more clearly outline what professional leadership is expected – particularly of those earlier within their career.
7. *Illustrative Examples*: As above, the PCF is a good overarching framework for social work education, development, and practice. However, we suggest that more (tangible) examples of each domain (and, where appropriate, super domain) are presented within the PCF literature.

Background

This project was commissioned to Prof Jermaine Ravalier of Buckinghamshire New University, working with colleagues at Bath Spa University, the University of Essex, and the University of the West of England. The aim of the project was to find out what social workers – and those who work in the social work profession – think of the PCF. Ultimately, we aimed to discover whether social workers from across the employment lifespan, from social work students to those who teach them, to advanced and senior social workers and more, think the PCF is still fit for practice in its current (or any) form.

What is the PCF?

The Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) is ‘an overarching framework of social work education and professional development in England’ (BASW, n.d.). The PCF is therefore used across the social work employment lifespan in order to support the training of the vast majority of social workers in England, and can be used to support social worker recruitment, development, training, career, and professional development (CPD). The PCF was first launched in 2012, with an update in 2018 (BASW, 2018), in which the nine domain descriptors were updated and three super domains introduced. BASW Professional Capabilities and Development (PC&D) additionally works to develop social work practice, releasing a statement in 2023, discussing areas for improvement.

The PCF consists of nine domains and three super domains, and breaks down what is expected of social workers at different stages of their careers. By having an overarching framework for practice the PCF should therefore support both the practice of social work in England, as well as a unified professional identity. The PCF should also underpin social work career and professional development, and therefore support learning across the social work employment lifespan.

The three PCF super domains are each argued to sit ‘over’ three of the underpinning nine domains, with some reflecting all domains and others being more specific. The three super domains, which were introduced in 2018, are:

Purpose: Why social workers do what they do, their values and ethics, and how they do their work.

Practice: What social workers do. The specific skills, knowledge, interventions and critical analysis that social workers apply through their work.

Impact: How social workers make a difference through their work.

Sitting underneath these three super-domains are the more specific domains which form the majority of the framework for action and behaviour. The original description of these nine domains were refreshed in 2018, at the same time as the development of the super domains. The nine domains are (all taken from BASW, n.d.):

- **Professionalism:** Identify and behave as a professional social worker who is committed to professional development.
- **Values and Ethics:** Apply social work ethical principles and values to guide practice.
- **Diversity and Equality:** Recognise diversity and apply anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles in practice.
- **Rights, Justice, and Economic Wellbeing:** Advance human rights and promote social justice and economic wellbeing.
- **Knowledge:** Develop and apply relevant knowledge from social work practice and research, social sciences, law, other professional and relevant fields and from the experience of people who use services.

- **Critical Reflection and Analysis:** Apply critical reflection and analysis to inform and provide a rationale for professional decision making.
- **Skills and Interventions:** Use judgement, knowledge and authority to intervene with individuals, families, and communities to promote independence, provide support, prevent harm and enable progress.
- **Contexts and Organisations:** Engage with, inform, and adapt to changing organisational contexts, and the social and policy environments that shape practice. Operate effectively within and contribute to the development of organisations and services, including multi-agency and inter-professional settings.
- **Professional Leadership:** Promote the profession and good social work practice. Take responsibility for the professional learning and development of others. Develop personal influence and be part of the collective leadership and impact of the profession.”

The PCF therefore outlines the nine areas of practice that social workers should be reflecting upon in their work. Additionally, however, the PCF also outlines the differences in expectation placed upon social worker practice at different times within their training. In particular, it outlines the complexities and suggested level of practices from early within their student journey through to being an advanced and/or strategic social worker. The PCF is therefore used as the basis for a significant amount of social worker training and development. Indeed, many university courses are based on the PCF’s domains, and many social workers base their own career and professional development evidence around the PCF’s nine domains, depending on where they are within their social work journey.

Aims and Objectives of this Evaluation

Since the development of the PCF some 15 or so years ago, there has been no systematic evaluation of its use, function, and utility. As such, this project aimed to evaluate the use and practicality of the PCF by speaking to and listening to the voice of social workers from across England who are at various stages of their social work career, as well as those who work in the social work sphere such as educators. As such, we aimed to gain an understanding of the PCF from the perspective of social workers from across the social work career lifespan.

The main aim of this report therefore is to provide an independent evaluation of the PCF. To do this, we sought to address the following objectives:

1. How does the PCF compare to other frameworks developed for different occupations?
2. What do social workers, from across the social work employment ‘lifespan’ think of the PCF and its utility?
3. Is the PCF still fit for practice?

Methods

The project consisted of three overall methodological steps. These steps were developed in conjunction with a working group of stakeholders who have either used the PCF in their role as a social worker or social work educator, are current social work students who utilise the PCF in their studies, or are experts by experience. The stakeholder group was made up of 15 individuals, who input both through a series of meetings and asynchronously via email. Ethical approval was gained from the Bath Spa University School of Sciences research ethics committee.

Figure 1: Timeline of the three project steps



The Rapid Review

The aim of the rapid review was to understand what is done within social work as a whole profession across the UK to support practice and development, and how this compares with other frontline public sector workers. Education and Occupational Therapy were chosen as comparators because social workers are likely to work closely with these professionals in multi-disciplinary teams, while also being manageable in terms of size (compared to, for example, nursing, which would have relied on huge searches due to the number and breadth of frameworks that are available for differing roles etc). We additionally included Youth Work as a comparator because it has clear frameworks within it, but is a non-statutory role.

In conducting the rapid review of the frameworks used across each of social work, education, occupational therapy, and Youth Work, we used a standardised process known as a rapid literature review. We followed a predefined protocol (Wegrzynek and Ravalier, 2023) and adopted a Boolean search strategy to search the first 10 pages of Google Scholar database from 2010 until May 2023 for academic and non-academic sources relevant to the research aims. We also employed the key search terms to find any relevant grey literature (e.g. policy documents) via Google. We assessed the identified literature for relevance to said criteria at title, abstract, and full text, followed by a quality assessment adopting the UCL's (2021) resource evaluation tool.

The Survey

The next step of the project was to undertake a survey to understand the views of those who use the PCF: whether they use the PCF, if the domains could be improved, and whether the PCF is still fit for function. The survey consisted of 18 questions about the PCF and a further five about the demographics of respondents (see Table 1 below). The first 15 questions were open-ended, allowing free text responses. These question sets therefore asked whether the PCF is used in their current role, and how (and whether) each of the nine domains are used in their role. We then asked about whether the PCF supports the maintenance of a social work professional identity, whether the three super domains reflect the social work role, and how the PCF could be improved.

The final two questions were ‘yes/no’ responses, asking whether the PCF could be built upon to better support social worker development, and whether the PCF is still fit for function. Respondents were recruited by social media and word of mouth. As noted above, the questions asked were developed alongside the stakeholder advisory group, although with the research team ensuring ongoing integrity of the research.

Table 1: Survey participant demographics. Ethnicity, job role, and training route into social work

Ethnicity	White British			White Other		Black British or African		
	73.7%			9.6%		6.8%		
Job role	Student	NQSW	Social worker	Senior social worker	Advanced social worker	Strategic social worker	Practice educator	Lecturer
		9.3%	4.5%	15.0%	10.1%	10.5%	8.9%	13.4%
Training Route	UG degree	Apprenticeship	Master's degree	Diploma	CQSW	Frontline	Step Up	Think Ahead
	33.8%	5.2%	30.3%	17.7%	8.7%	1.7%	2.2%	0.4%

*Not all responded to every question, so percentages may not add up to 100%

As noted above, we were keen to hear from a range of those involved in social work from across the social work employment lifespan, from those still training to those who are more experienced, as well as academics and those supporting social work students. This we managed to do – Table 1 above shows a good range of survey responses from across a number of job roles, as well as social workers who went through a range of different training routes.

Altogether 278 responses were gathered, and the mean age of respondents was 48.35 years.

The open-ended data were analysed using conventional content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). This essentially counts the number of times particular themes or topics are mentioned across the data, with more importance placed upon those themes/topics which were mentioned most frequently. The findings chapter (The Evaluative Survey) describes the findings of this survey.

The Individual Interviews

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to delve deeper into the findings of the online survey and rapid review. Participants were recruited to the interviews via one question within the survey, which asked respondents to leave their email address if they would like to take part in an interview. As this data was not in any way tied to the data collected through the surveys, respondents were therefore asked for participation at random. In order to ensure ongoing anonymity, no demographic data was collected here.

The interview schedule (i.e. questions asked of participants) reflected the findings of the survey, although the semi-structured nature allowed divergence from the schedule where it was needed. Once the research team developed the questions to be asked, they were then reviewed and piloted with the stakeholder group. This led to the addition of one further question, asking specifically about the inclusion of poverty and its inclusion within the PCF. The interviews therefore began by asking about the role of the PCF in shaping social work professional identity, how the PCF is used in training and practice, whether the PCF should be joined with other frameworks available for social workers and employers’ use, whether the PCF can be expanded upon or altered to reflect social worker development, and finally whether the PCF is still fit for practice or whether it should be improved in some way.

Data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2008). Thematic analysis allows researchers to generate themes across data, and allows researchers to build a picture of what has been said within the interviews. Sixteen interviews were conducted altogether: nine after the first set of requests for participation were sent out to sixteen participants, and a further seven interviews from the subsequent 12 invitations.

Frameworks in Social Work

There are a number of core frameworks which are in use within social work in England which support social workers throughout their occupational life cycle, from training through to senior management, and many more which have become obsolete. The review below will outline many of these frameworks.

Note: We are aware that the Department for Education are developing an early career framework for social work, but at the time of undertaking this review we couldn't find any information about it.

The Professional Capabilities Framework (British Association of Social Work, 2023). The predominant framework for social workers and social work practice is the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF). The PCF was originally developed and implemented in September 2013 following the death of Baby Peter Connelly and recommendation by the Social Work Reform Board (Higgins, 2016). It outlines the nine 'levels' of social work practice from point of entry and training as a social worker through to becoming an advanced and strategic social worker, allowing social workers to identify their current role and consider how to develop across their careers. It also outlines capabilities required for working in different social work fields, such as older people, those with learning disabilities, and through to children and families amongst many others. The PCF also contains three super domains which cut across the nine smaller areas: purpose, practice, and impact.

Knowledge and skills statement (KSS; Department of Health). This framework sets out the knowledge expected of adult's social workers, and what they should be able to do by the end of their ASYE (Assessed Year in Employment) year. The KSS works alongside the PCF to reinforce the support available to employers set out in the Standards for Employers (see below). The KSS therefore are the first step in the social worker's career. There are 8 separate functions outlined in the KSS.

Core competencies framework (Social Work England, n.d.). This outlines the job requirements of social workers at various stages of their careers, and thus allowing job matches, aligning pay, and helping to design career development opportunities. Jobs are split into three levels: executive leadership; professional and technical roles; and support and administrative roles. The core competencies then outline six technical requirements for each role.

Standards for employers of social workers in England (Local Government Association [LGA], 2020). This outlines the standards for employers for social workers. They outline what employers should do in order to develop a working environment that social work practice and social workers can flourish in, thus supporting recruitment and retention. These standards are therefore shared expectations of employers, who should in turn self-regulate with a clear monitoring system against the given standards. In particular there are 8 standards of support that employers of social workers should adhere to, and the LGA outlines clearly what employers should do to maintain strategic and operational accountability (LGA, 2020).

Standards of Proficiency: The Standards of Proficiency (SOPs) for social workers in England, presented originally by the Health and Care Professions Council, set out the standards for safe and effective practice in social work in England (HCPC, 2018). While the SOPs were live and worked alongside the PCF, they are no longer in use in social work. We have included them within this document because they are referenced frequently online. The SOPs therefore set out 15 generic standards, underlined by more specific attributes, that a student must know and be able to do by the time they complete their training, and what registered social workers must know and do (HCPC, 2017). The SOPs worked alongside the PCF to ensure standards of practice are outlined to be as effective and supportive as possible, however are no longer used.

Development of the Frameworks

Across all of these frameworks, the authors claim that they have been developed by a dedicated network of professionals, co-produced, and/or via consultation with the sector.

The PCF: Following the death of Baby P, a social work group was established to investigate the state of the social work profession in England and led to changes in social work education and practice - the Social Work Reform Board included representatives from over 30 organisations and groups, and was made up of a wide-ranging cross-section of the social work profession, including representatives of social workers, educators, service users, carers, and employers (see Social Work Reform Board, 2010, pp. 21-22), with the aim of getting as representative a sample from across a key stakeholder network as possible.

Their national reform programme comprised 15 separate recommendations and a timeline for implementation, among which the PCF was one such recommendation (Social Work Reform Board, 2010).

KSS: The KSS were developed by the chief social worker for adults, in partnership with key stakeholder organisations, groups, and individuals. It is a national framework which allows the assessment of newly qualified social workers at the end of their ASYE year, and thus allows an independent validation and quality assurance of the assessment process.

SOPs: Were developed 'through the input of our stakeholders, including a public consultation' (HCPC, 2017), and were subject to a revision consultation process in mid-2016. A public consultation using a predominantly online survey tool (as well as some emails and letters) was undertaken, asking respondents to complete a survey using 'yes', 'no', and 'don't know' answers. 125 responses were received, 104 from individuals and 21 from organisations. The outcome of the consultation can be found at HCPC (2016).

Functions of these frameworks

The PCF: is key to both social work education and practice - it is therefore an overarching framework which unifies both social work education and practice (BASW, 2023). Higgins (2016) contends that the PCF has been used to introduce capabilities, the nine domains, an integrated approach to assessment and learning, qualifying levels to end of placement, and supporting social work education at both qualifying and post-qualifying levels. The PCF is therefore used as the basis of social work education and vocation across the social work lifespan - from training right through to becoming the most senior of social workers.

SOPs: The SOPs were used to outline safe and effective practice in social work, and were standards considered necessary to protect members of the public. The HCPC, the social work regulator before Social Work England, outlined that all of the standards must be met in order to stay registered as a social worker on its register. Furthermore, if a social worker's practice is called into question, then the standards were considered in deciding what action, if any, should be taken. However, as above, this framework is no longer in use.

Findings: Frameworks in Education, Occupational Therapy, and Youth Work

The aim of this part of the project was to look at what capability frameworks other, comparable frontline professions utilise, and where available how these were developed and whether they have been evaluated. Education and Occupational Therapy were the two professions chosen here because they often work closely with social workers, but are distinct and important professions. Youth Work was included as a comparator which is not regulated, but has clear frameworks for use. As outlined above, a rapid review of the available academic and non-academic literature was undertaken.

Frameworks in Education

There are a few frameworks that are used by the primary and secondary education sectors to regulate the standards expected of teachers and management across the education occupation span.

Teachers Standards (Department for Education, 2011). These standards were first released in 2011, for use in the academic year beginning September 2012. They outline the minimum level of practice expected of teachers from when they are awarded Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) onwards. They are also used to assess teachers who are working toward QTS status' practice, as well as those working toward Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) status. The standards are linked to two pieces of legislation: the Education (School Teachers' Qualification) Regulations (2003) and the Education (School Teachers' Appraisal) Regulation (2012). The standards are made up of two parts: (1) Standards for Teaching and (2) Standards for Personal and Professional Conduct. The Standards for Teaching have eight components (see Department for Education, 2011, pages 10-13) and the Standards for Personal and Professional Conduct three separate but related expectations (see Department for Education [DfE], 2011, pp. 14).

Early Career Framework (ECF; Department for Education 2019). The authors recognised that early career teachers did not receive the amount of support they needed to thrive in their roles, nor did they have sufficient time to undertake meaningful professional development. The ECF demonstrates an entitlement to a fully-funded, two-year package of training and support for early career teachers.

Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Core Content Framework (gov.uk, n.d.). This framework outlines the minimum standard expected of trainee teachers. It is designed to support the development of trainee teachers in 5 core areas (behaviour management, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, professional behaviours), and maps these onto the 8 teachers' standards. The framework also mirrors the ECF in setting out two types of content: a. key evidence statements developed from high quality evidence from the UK and overseas; and b. practice statements, which allow trainees to practise key skills and learn from expert (experienced) colleagues.

The Trainee Teacher Behaviour Toolkit (Department for Education, 2019). In 2016, the government responded to the Carter Review of Initial Teacher Training, with the Education Secretary ordering a review of behaviour management in schools. This toolkit suggests that student behaviour needs to be tackled in two realms: proactive and reactive behaviour management.

Development of the Frameworks

Development of these various frameworks seem to have been done in consultation with a number of stakeholders. However, the exact methodology as to how they were developed is generally unclear.

Teachers Standards. The standards were developed through an independent review involving teachers, head teachers and other expert stakeholders. Unfortunately, there is little more information on the development available from our searches.

Early Career Framework. An Expert Advisory Group worked alongside the DfE to consult widely in the development of the ECF (DfE, 2019). The consultation included input from teachers, school leaders, academics, and other experts. The framework was subsequently independently reviewed by the Education Endowment Foundation to ensure that it is based on the best available evidence which has been appropriately interpreted.

Initial Teacher Training. Firstly, evidence gathered by the Carter Review of ITT in England was considered by the ITT framework developers. They then had a series of 18 meetings and roundtable discussions with: current trainees, NQTs, organisations, ITT providers, head teacher groups and organisations, alternative provision and mental health providers. There were also 58 written submissions of evidence. Evidence statements were developed via review of key literature from the UK and abroad. Gov.uk (n.d.) also provides an extensive bibliography of high-quality reviews and syntheses, meta-analyses and individual studies. Practice statements were developed with the expertise of an Expert Advisory Group.

Functions of these Frameworks

Teachers Standards. As noted above, the Teachers Standards Framework was developed in order to outline the minimum expected standard for teachers who had completed their teacher training, and were in the minimum first year of practice. The standards therefore ‘apply to the vast majority of teachers regardless of their career stage’ (Department for Education 2011, pp. 5). As well as outlining the expected standards for trainees therefore, head teachers use these standards to assess teachers’ performance relevant to their career stage. Head teachers and other appraisers’ judgements are therefore key to the application of these standards.

Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Core Content Framework (gov.uk, n.d.): One of the fundamental aims of this framework was to ensure that trainee teachers met the teachers’ standards in full by the time they completed their teacher training (DfE, 2016). The ITT framework therefore sets out what is required of their trainees before they can be considered to have met appropriate standards. It is explicitly underpinned by the Teachers Standards, and thus sets out the knowledge, practice and behaviour that providers must ensure that trainees are demonstrating in order to be sure that the standards have been met.

Early Career Framework (ECF; Department for Education 2019): The ECF is widely used to support the training and development of early career teachers. Indeed, the Department for Education (2023) website contains a series of documents which outline how the ECF should be used to support these professionals. Firstly, it sets out how the framework can be used to set up training for Early Career Teachers (ECTs), from appointing an appropriate body for delivering training to the role and support provided by tutors and mentors. Further, it outlines what should happen during ECT training, including how to handle those who transfer across to a new school, what funding is available and who is eligible for this funding, and provides advice and information to ECTs themselves as to what they should expect and receive.

The Department for Education (2023) commissioned a process evaluation of the induction programmes developed for the teacher Early Career Framework. To do so, evaluators followed first cohort participants over the two years of their induction programme. The evaluation concluded that there was some lack of

understanding among participants as to how much time they should be investing in their early career programmes; expectations of the programme were high from all involved (ECTs, mentors, etc), and this generally remained across the programme; mentoring is key as part of induction; both workload and expected time commitments were a continual difficulty for both mentors and those being trained; ECTs' confidence in their abilities improved across the year and most were going to continue with their induction.

Frameworks in Occupational Therapy

There are a number of key frameworks in use within the Occupational Therapy allied health profession (AHP) in the UK, which guide Occupational Therapists (OTs) throughout their career cycle. All of the reviewed literature on OTs' skills frameworks included below mention that they have been developed by dedicated steering-groups of professionals, co-produced with the AHPs, and/or via consultation with the sector and/or service users. As such, their functions are broad and often interrelated, stemming from personal development, personnel training and recruitment, wider workforce planning, and broadly sharing the knowledge of the profession's skills.

The Career Development Framework (CDF) was developed collaboratively and iteratively with a group of members of the Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT), the RCOT Learning and Development, and Research and Development Boards, and members of the wider profession (RCOT, 2021a). It comprises four Pillars of Practice (Professional Practice; Leadership; Facilitation of Learning; Evidence, Research and Development) with nine overlapping Career Levels mapped out onto them, although the latter are not synonymous with specialism. The tool's structure is used by OTs, support workers, and trainees in guiding their personal development within the field of occupational therapy and it seems it can support reflexivity and collaboration within this process. The framework also helps to manage expectations from clients' perspective in relation to the occupational therapy staff, articulating the scope of their skills and provision. Finally, whilst it is not a formal tool and thus it has not been designed to be used in personnel assessment, the CDF helps to inform coaching and recruitment efforts by informing tasks such as drafting job descriptions.

Development of the Frameworks

The Career Development Framework. The current CDF is the second iteration of the standards for continuous personal development, following an evaluation of the original version by Morais (2018, seen in RCOT, 2021a), user feedback, consultations and informal discussions (including those mediated by social media platforms, e.g. #OTalk via Twitter). The tool's co-production was informed by the Post-registration Career Development Framework (NHS Education for Scotland, n.d.b; see RCOT, 2021a, p.8) and the Skills for Health Career Development Framework (see RCOT, 2021a, p.8), which has since been replaced with the Employability Skills Matrix (Skills for Health, 2020) - the latter outlining employability skills for staff working in the health sector, enhancing stakeholder awareness of these skills at individual (employee), organisational (managerial) and commissioning level; the skills are divided across 9 levels of the Career Framework for Health (this framework fell beyond the scope of our review but see Skills for Health, 2020, p. 3).

Whilst the CDF should be viewed as one of the key documents in occupational therapy profession, the standards for the OT role are also outlined in the RCOT's **Professional standards for occupational therapy practice, conduct and ethics** (2021b), Learning and development Standards for Preregistration Education (2019), and standards from the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). HCPC's (2013; 2020) Standards of practice focus on what makes the OT practice safe and effective for the public, and state a minimum required for registration with the professional body. They have been developed with input from professional bodies and via a wider public consultation, and are regularly being reviewed and updated to account for the developments in knowledge and practice. Professionals registered with the HCPC are expected to continuously reflect upon their practice to ensure that they meet their professional standards. The difference between the HCPC's Standards of practice and the CDF is perhaps largely semantic, with the former stipulating the required standards for the OT profession, whereas the latter offering a more detailed list of actions to reach set goals.

The RCOT and Skills for Care partnered to develop the **Learning and development framework (LaDF) for occupational therapists: New or returning to social care** (Skills for Care, 2019). The LaDF was co-created through scoping workshops, stakeholder discussions and consultations with the workforce encompassing OTs, employers (managers and Learning and Development departments), and health and social care staff to identify

the key learning and development needs, including possible sources of support, for those OTs who enter or re-enter the social care sector – as such, this framework is more context-specific when compared to the CDF. The LaDF adopts the four Pillars of the CDF but focuses on skills relevant to higher proficiency levels. It has not been designed as an appraisal tool and, akin to the CDF, it should be used alongside the professional regulatory body's documentation.

Social Care Wales (2017) launched a **learning and development framework** targeted at OTs working in social care in Wales. Its aim is to facilitate personal development of OTs for maximum skill and effective service delivery. The tool draws upon the CDF's four Pillars of OT Practice, divided into Aspects of Practice, it aligns with the HCPC from the regulatory perspective and the NHS Allied Health Professions (AHP) post-registration framework (NHS Education for Scotland, n.d.b) in an effort to promote more integrated, multi-professional health and social services, offering flexibility for individuals to tailor their personal development across the whole health, social care and housing sector, and with a range of employers. The perceived benefits of this learning and development framework centred around providing guidance for occupational therapy professionals in understanding their personal development journey and how to evidence it, and for wider organisations to prepare their workforce and plan for future challenges within the sector, to help specify local training requirements, and (by indirectly benefiting the service users) support service delivery. As such, the focus of this framework is both on individual and organisational outcomes (Social Care Wales, 2017), the latter has been emphasised more than is the case, for example, in the CDF.

For those OT professionals who might be planning a career within Primary Care, Health Education England (2021b) developed the **Primary Care Practice Roadmap** to inform their transition to First Contact and Advanced Clinical Practitioner practice. This tool was created in a multi-stakeholder partnership, including input from practitioners as well as service users, and the capabilities listed within it, whilst targeted to the context of primary care, align with those in the CDF. OTs pursuing practice in primary care are required to work with a supervisor to build evidence towards satisfying the key knowledge, skills, and attributes requirements set out in the roadmap tool.

Frameworks in Youth Work

There are several key frameworks that conceptualise Youth Work in terms of its curriculum and what outcomes (skills) should be developed by young people through their involvement with the service. Arguably, knowledge and skills of practitioners can be indirectly assumed from those documents, but specific capability statements for UK youth workers are sparse. Those few identified by the current review are presented below, with relevant available outcomes reported.

The National Youth Work and Skills Framework by YouthLink Scotland (2023) conceptualises 7 impacts of youth work in Scotland, as informed by the perceptions of its service users (i.e. the changes young people experience from participating in the service). These impacts are depicted in the framework as outcomes with related skills, with indicators to allow for progress measurement. Specifically, outcome 1 focuses on young people building their health and wellbeing, focusing on confidence, resilience and looking after themselves. Outcome 2 looks at safety and effectively managing relationships through communication and assessing their own relationships. Outcome 3 is the application of learning and being able to describe their own skills and achievements, through organising, confidence, and leadership. Outcome 4 focuses on young people participating safely and effectively within groups and teams through a multitude of related skills. Outcome 5's aim is for young people to consider risk, take control and make reasoned decisions. Outcome 6 allows for youth to become active citizens by invoking their voice which enables change to happen. Finally, outcome 7 lets young people broaden their perspectives by new experiences and ways of thinking. The framework was first proposed in 2022, through a collaborative endeavour between YouthLink Scotland and the youth work sector, and whilst the resource does not strictly define youth workers' knowledge and skills, it is aimed to provide a structure for and inform service delivery. The framework is aligned with the Community Learning and Development (CLD) Competencies and Code of Ethics (CLD Standards Council, 2023), and the National Occupational Standards for Youth Work (CLD Standards Council, 2019). The Competent Practitioner Framework (CLD Standards Council, 2022) highlights the importance of a practitioner's reflexivity, lists fundamental values of practice (self-determination, inclusion, empowerment, working collaboratively, promotion of learning as a life-long activity) and key attributes and skills that can be drawn upon to facilitate collaborative, evidence-based, outcome-focused practice and career development. The latter standards define the key, nationally

recognised attributes required for the role of a Youth Worker, which are a subject to consultations and updates, and recognise the cross-national differences to how Youth Work is set out in the UK (CLD Standards Council, 2019).

The Career and Competence Framework (CCF; Skills for Health, 2021) was developed iteratively by a collaborative group of experts including service managers, commissioners, practitioners from clinical and non-clinical background from across the children's complex needs pathway in England, and by employing national consultation and feedback. The CCF supports professionals working with highly vulnerable and high-risk children and young people. There are several professions (role profiles) that the framework applies to (including Youth, and Senior Youth Workers – seniority Levels 4 and 5, respectively), which have common capabilities with statements that are tailored to their specific roles and responsibilities. There are also statements pertaining to learning and development within those roles. The idea behind the CCF is to enable a recognition of transferable skills and development needs that can be applied across staff that work as part of the high-risk children and young people's pathway. The resource is aligned with the National Occupational Standards (CLD Standards Council, 2019). By highlighting similarities and differences within the different roles, the CCF is suggested to be useful in workforce recruitment (including job analysis/recruitment ads, workforce planning), staff retention (transparency about the role), staff development (as a job resource i.e. opportunities for training and progression, and a job demand by driving up quality of service), and it reflects the principles of joined-up care.

The Framework for Integrated Care for the Children and Young People's Secure Estate (SECURE STAIRS) (Anna Freud Centre, 2023b) applies to those working for the children and young people's secure estate (CYPSE). The framework articulates a new way of delivering CYPSE service by promoting staff proficiency in trauma-informed, developmentally-attuned, psychologically-informed care. Since its introduction, the framework has undergone a mixed methods evaluation comprising surveys, analyses of administrative data and stakeholder interviews (Anna Freud Centre, 2022), which found that the framework changed CYPSE culture and practices, albeit to varying extent depending on the setting (e.g. young offender institutions vs the secure children's homes). Several stakeholder outcomes were reported, including children and staff feeling empowered, with youth workers' knowledge and skills increasing and thus facilitating better care. Supportive leadership was instrumental to facilitating the changes.

Youth Work Wales (2013) set out the **Youth Service Curriculum Framework** that facilitates planning, development, and delivery of youth work in Caerphilly and aligns with the Five Pillars of Youth Work conceptualising youth work as Educative, Expressive, Empowering, Inclusive, and Participative (Torfaen Youth Service, 2022). A planning model within the Curriculum Framework has been developed to ensure that work is focused on the needs of young people and around five curriculum focus areas: 1) citizenship 2) creativity 3) recreation 4) health and wellbeing 5) life skills. There were practical expectations set out to satisfy the focus areas, such as one night a week being devoted to a club or project equating to 3 sessions per year on each curriculum area. The planning of the activities was said to contribute to youth workers' continuous learning and development, and the framework emphasised user involvement and alignment with the National Occupational Standards (CLD Standards Council, 2019) as being key to meeting the outcomes for each core area.

More recently, the Youth Work Strategy for Wales (Welsh Government, 2019) outlined five key aims of Youth Work based upon an evaluation of the Welsh Government's strategy and a consultation with "young people, youth workers and volunteers, and voluntary, local authority and independent youth work networks and groups" (p. 9). Key competencies of youth workers have been accounted for in the strategy document by emphasising sources of support and practice improvement (e.g. via the Coherent Route of Recognised Youth Work Qualifications in Wales, professional registration through the Education Workforce Council, Education Training Standards, and a proposal to create a Workforce Development Plan - see Welsh Government, 2019).

The National Youth Agency (n.d.) offers a recruitment resource for Youth Work employers to help with assessment of individuals' competences such as experience and knowledge, qualifications and training, personal attributes and awareness of health and safety regulations. In Northern Ireland, the Education Authority (2019) introduced a Quality Assurance Framework targeted at improving the quality of service delivery. The framework was created as a result of a sector-wide consultation and following pilot reviews, and it depicts the core values of youth work as divided into 3 domains: Developing People, Developing the Organisation, and Developing Youth Work Practice.

Hennell (2022) describes a relationship framework for youth work practice which centres around helping young people connect with and maintain positive social relationships within their micro and macro networks (e.g. peers, community). Whilst, similarly to the National Youth Work and Skills Framework (YouthLink Scotland, 2023), the relationship-based framework does not articulate youth workers' skills per se, it does align with the National Youth Agency's (2022) values around facilitating young people's skill and stronger relationships development. Relatedly, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) offers a youth work qualification at levels 6 and 7 that requires candidates to illustrate how they can aid relationship development, promote mental health and correct safeguarding (SQA, n.d.).

NSETS (2016) proposed a Framework for the Inclusion of Ethics in Youth Work Education and Training, which draws upon the ethical obligations of Youth Work practitioners. This resource can be used by educators to inform curriculum development and by those studying to become youth workers to encourage reflection around the proposed key ethical principles pertinent to the profession (primary consideration, social context, equity/equality, empowerment, duty of care, probity, confidentiality, co-operation and collaboration, self-awareness, boundaries, self-care) collated from a review of various international ethical codes of practice. NSETS (2016) emphasised that the guide was not exhaustive, and reviews/updates are expected.

Where social work fits

Through the PCF and professional standards, social work is well served in understanding the core competencies and standards expected of colleagues. Many of these standards and competencies are argued to be cross-career, with different expectations of knowledge and development expected of social workers at different stages of practice. We argue, however, that social work needs a career framework similar to that in education which is dedicated to early career social workers, and outlines a clear package of training and support available – particularly for developing the career of those new to the social work profession.

Findings: The Evaluative Survey

As described above, the next step within this project was to undertake a social work-focused survey, asking about the utility and practicality of the PCF in social work practice and education, and whether the PCF needs to be changed or improved in any way. Tables 2 to 5 summarise the findings, with a detailed commentary and exemplifying verbatim quotations offered in the latter part of this chapter, with spelling and grammar reflecting this.

Table 2: Summary of PCF nine domain questions, and themes from analysis.

	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4	Theme 5
Where the PCF is used	Academic: used in teaching social work students	Practice educators: used in supporting and assessing	Assessments and practice: everyday social work practice	Not at all: Not used in practice	Training: Used for CPD and recruitment
Domain 1 (Professionalism)	Used in practice	Modelling behaviour	Teaching and supporting students	CPD	–
Domain 2 (Values and Ethics)	Used in practice	Teaching and supporting students	Not used at all	–	–
Domain 3 (Equality and Diversity)	Used in practice	Anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice	Teaching and supporting students	–	–
Domain 4 (Rights, Justice and Wellbeing)	Advocacy of human rights	Social justice	Teaching and supporting students	Used in practice	–
Domain 5 (Knowledge)	Staff development and CPD	Teaching and supporting students	Supporting service users	–	–
Domain 6 (Critical Reflection and Analysis)	Education and training	Supervision and students	Group reflection and reflection spaces	Self-reflection	Helping service users
Domain 7 (Skills and Interventions)	Education and training	Communication and independence	Experience and confidence	Justification and policy	–
Domain 8 (Contexts and Organisations)	Multi-disciplinary working	Teaching and supporting students	Organisational development and change	–	–
Domain 9 (Professional Leadership)	Supporting students	ECR training and development	Training and development	–	–

Table 2 above provides an overview of the findings from questions asking about how and where the PCF is used across the social work employment lifespan, and how and where each of the nine domains are used. The themes referred to here represent the most frequently stated responses to each question.

Table 3: The PCF and social work CPD: should the PCF be built upon to provide a more comprehensive resource for CPD?

Should the PCF be built upon to provide a more comprehensive resource for CPD?	Yes: 47.7%	No: 33.0%	Other: 15.5%
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*Note: there was some missing data here, so percentages do not add up to 100%

Table 3 above outlines the responses to the question: “should the PCF be built upon to provide a more comprehensive resource for CPD?”. The aim of this question was to understand whether there could be more information provided around the PCF (not necessarily more information added to the PCF) in order to understand whether the PCF’s domains can be used as the source of support and guidance for social work CPD. The majority of respondents answered that it could be – nearly half of respondents did so.

For those who responded ‘other’ to this question, we also asked for them to elaborate on their answers. Most of these elaborated answers suggested that the PCF as a piece should not be expanded at all (although there may be space to clarify particular domains), but that more support should be put in place around the PCF. In particular, more information should be provided about the PCF and social worker CPD.

“it’s fine across profession if it’s one framework used...the last thing social workers need is even more frameworks” (Participant 8).

“just as suggested – maybe expand detail on a few of the domains to make them clearer, but please don’t over complicate what is already a substantial document” (Participant 73).

“The PCF should be maintained as it is, but as SW’s choose a career area then additional specialist PCF routes may be useful which include specific expectations around knowledge and skills. KSS should be scrapped in favour of these specialist PCF routes” (Participant 75)

Table 4 outlines the findings for the question which sought to understand social workers’ views on whether the PCF should continue as a framework for practice, and asked: “Do you believe the PCF is fit for practice?”. Nearly 4 in every 5 respondents suggested that it is.

Table 4: Is the PCF still fit for practice?

Is the PCF still fit for practice?	Yes: 79.2%	No: 20.8%
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The final question set within the survey sought to understand the utility of the three super domains, how the PCF is used in supporting the diversity of the sector, and how/whether the PCF should be improved in future. These findings are reflected in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Summary of PCF improvement and identity questions

	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4
Improve the PCF	No changes	Working conditions and wellbeing	Social justice/ injustice	
Missing from the PCF	No changes	Combine frameworks	Need additional elements	Condense/ simplify the PCF
Super domains fit core social work role	Super domains are relevant	Supportive for those with lived experience	The PCF needs development	
Supporting the diverse sector	No changes needed	Sector-specific PCFs needed		
Professional Identity	PCF is a valuable resource	Useful for professional identity	The PCF is not adequate	Education and training

Question 1: PCF in social work role

The aim of this question was to determine whether, and how, the PCF is currently used within their role. 215 individual codes came out of the analysis, representing 16 potential themes. There were three most frequently discussed themes, all distinct from one another, although there is some relationship between two of them.

Note: all quotes here are verbatim as provided by survey or interview participants.

► Theme 1: Academic

Within this theme, respondents outlined how the PCF is a core component of their academic teaching of social work. As such, social work academics both teaching and researching in the subject use the PCF as the underpinning of their practice. 42 of the 215, or 19.5%, codes therefore were Academic in nature, and were the most frequently mentioned of all codes covered.

“It is the framework for establishing fitness to practice curriculum. Every aspect of this framework is linked to teaching across academic and practice modules, assignments and practical assessment,” (Participant 6)

“I am a qualified social worker and university lecturer teaching on both an undergraduate (UG) and post graduate (PG) social work programme. As module leader for first year students on the PG programme, the PCFs are one of the first things I make the students aware of. The PCF are the underpinnings of my teaching on one of their first modules - Preparation for Practice Learning.” (Participant 23)

“Applied directly in my modular mapping teaching and modes of assessment.” (Participant 40)

► Theme 2: Practice Educator

Despite practice educators making up a minority of the respondents, use of the PCF within the practice educator role was the second most populous response. As such, practice educator respondents outlined how important the PCF was in the support and assessment of social work students, and therefore that the PCF underpinned everything that they did in their role as practice educator. They also suggested that they modelled good practice, to show students how it should be used. Overall, this was mentioned 41 times out of 215 mentions.

“As a practice educator I use it to support students development. I also use it when doing my own CPD logs.” (Participant 43)

“I am a practice educator and so I have to verify that a student is achieving all of the PCF levels to pass the placement.” (Participant 54)

“As an independent practice educator - I use it on a regular basis in the training and assessment of student and newly qualified social workers.” (Participant 73)

► Theme 3. Assessments and Practice

Distinct from the academic/practice educator role in use of the PCF, but mentioned just as frequently, is how the PCF is used in everyday practice and assessment of service users. Respondents therefore outlined frequently that they use the whole of the PCF, or at least particular elements of it, during their everyday social work practice. This was therefore the third most frequently mentioned theme, discussed 35 times out of 215 codes.

“All domains are applied in my day to day practice and theory is used to make meaning of situation and on how to apply interventions within policies and procedures.” (Participant 51)

“All PCF’s are present in my role. I incorporate all PCF’s with my skills, knowledge, and values I use in practice.” (Participant 60)

“The PCF domains captures the majority of my role. For example, professionalism. When out on visits, I demonstrate a level of professionalism in the way that I conduct myself and speak to service users to a level that is able to represent the profession.” (Participant 130)

► Theme 4: Not at all

Surprisingly, the joint-fourth most regularly outlined theme was that respondents do not use the PCF at all following completion of their social work studies. As such, despite the PCF potentially informing practice without them knowing, 18 individuals suggested that they did not use the PCF at all in their work. The understanding therefore is that the PCF is supposed to be used, but is often not actually used in practice.

“Very rarely used explicitly day to day, only when supporting students on placement now. However, our role will have elements day to day.” (Participant 67)

“I am a student social worker. I hear about it all the time at university but have never heard of it at work before.” (Participant 74)

“Not used or referenced at all in current role.” (Participant 118)

► Theme 5: Training, Assessment, and Recruitment

A similar number to those who said that they did not use the PCF at all suggested that it is used for the training, assessment, and recruitment of social workers. Therefore it has been utilised in all areas of staff development and recruitment, supporting the social work workforce for the betterment of the profession.

“in evaluating staff competence for career development opportunities and as a tool for reflection as part of staff’s annual professional development reviews.” (Participant 44)

“I use the PCF pretty much every day because I supervise students, newly qualified social workers and practice educators so I am always assessing people’s practice and looking for evidence for student/ ASYE Portfolios, assignments and mentor reports.” (Participant 147)

“I deliver training so ensure refer to the PCF.” (Participant 152)

Summary

Overall, therefore, the PCF is still being used in all aspects of the social work role. From training and educating social workers, the PCF is used frequently within social work practice and within strategic roles, and within training, development, and recruitment of social workers. However, there are also a sizeable number of respondents who do not use the PCF in their practice, and have not done so since training. This may reflect one of two points: perhaps the PCF needs to be updated to ensure it meets the needs of all social workers in this country, or there are social workers that should be using the PCF at the heart of their work, but are not currently doing so.

Domain 1: Professionalism

The aim of this question was to determine how the 'Professionalism' domain is used across the social work employment spectrum. Professionalism in the PCF is defined as identity and behaviour as a professional social worker, and one who is committed to professional development. Sixteen separate themes were found within the data, with four being discussed most frequently.

► Theme 1: Used in Practice

The use of professionalism within social work practice was the most prevalent theme by far – mentioned three to four times more frequently than any of the remaining themes. In particular, it relates to the use of professionalism within every day social work practice, with participants outlining that professionalism is key to all that they do, including when working with colleagues and partner agencies, within training and development, maintaining professional boundaries, and being respectful in all aspects of the social work role.

"I guess I use as when writing on my personal and professional development plan. I think the domain 1 is implicit in all my practice, but I do not use explicit as I tend to concentrate in the domains that I found more crucial for my practice." (Participant 115)

"Yes my practice is underpinned by this domain, As in my practice I am professional and respectful to clients and colleges and partner agencies, in the way i speak and conduct myself at the standard required, and I regularly engage in training to develop my practice when ever i get the opportunity." (Participant 11)

"Yes, we must maintain professional boundaries at all time, the work must be presented in a clear way and professionally, in that it is respectful, but transparent and honest." (Participant 49)

► Theme 2: Modelling Behaviour

The second most frequently discussed theme was modelling behaviour – and this was discussed by social workers, academics, and social work managers. As such, aligned with the 'professionalism' domain, respondents discussed the importance of modelling professionalism in all of their work – whether that means modelling to colleagues, to those working for them, to students, or to those who are recipient of social work services.

"I use this in my role as [removed for anonymity] manager. I model professionalism in my approach and support the professional development of the Social Work workforce in my LA." (Participant 59)

"daily in modelling behaviours, language and maintaining my reputation." (Participant 2)

"to model my behaviour and demonstrate this to learners, in the context of personal and professional boundaries and consider diary management, meeting timescales." (Participant 26)

► Theme 3: Used with Students

Social work academics described the importance of the professionalism domain in their work with social work students. This means, in addition to modelling professional behaviours, the domain is used from the start of their studies through to the end, being included in student inductions to set the expected standards, through to assessments and feedback, to placements and more.

“Professionalism is the first PCF domain the students are introduced to. This domain is covered in student inductions. I see this theme as crucial to helping students understand what they have signed up to, as different to other non-professional programmes.” (Participant 23)

“In placement activity it is most strongly assessed but also across the course itself.” (Participant 30)

“This domain is relevant to all social work activity, including that undertaken by Practice Educators with students. It is an essential component of the PCF.” (Participant 82)

► Theme 4: CPD and Staff Development

Finally, the fourth theme is participants describing that they are professional in their work, but that there is insufficient support and opportunity for meaningful development and training to enhance this. In particular, those who are not senior social workers described having a distinct lack of meaningful training opportunities, and senior social workers that there were few – if any – opportunities at all. Furthermore, while it is clear that CPD and personal/career development are important, some do discuss CPD as being more important for Social Work England registration than anything else.

“I feel I behave as a professional social worker however find professional development is limited to short training sessions. As a [removed for anonymity] i don’t feel i have the time or resources to attend training that would progress my career - such as practice education training.” (Participant 79)

“The PCF’s are rarely referred to at my senior level (sadly) although I take notice of them for my own personal development and when I refer to them I am aware that I cover them without be consciously aware that is what I do. I am constantly aware of the need to be professional.” (Participant 72)

“Yes, but training can be difficult to access the further into management a social worker travels” (Participant 97)

“I have core social work values but not sure the organisation I work for or with have.” (Participant 135)

“It is paramount that personal development is undertaken regular as this is a requirement of our CPD under our registration to Social Work England.” (Participant 57)

Domain 2: Values and Ethics

The aim of this question was to determine whether, where, and how the second PCF domain, Values and Ethics, are used across the social work training and employment spectrum. Altogether nineteen individual themes were present within the data, with three themes being most prevalent.

► Theme 1: Used in Practice

The most frequently discussed theme was 'Used in Practice', in which practicing social workers use Values and Ethics regularly as part of their social work practice. In particular, respondents described the importance of having sound values and ethics in treating people with respect, and having respect for differences, such as those with protected characteristics. However, while respondents discussed the importance of values and ethics in social work practice, it was at times difficult to practice in such a way. In particular, when resources available to support those receiving support from social workers were limited, this also limited the ability of social workers to make appropriate and informed decisions. This, therefore, could limit the ability to make ethical decisions.

"Yes my practice is underpinned by this domain, respect difference and treat people with respect, and fairness and have respect for their race culture and sexuality and, in the way I practice, to ensure equality and respect difference, in the way I speak to them, and support them to take control of their lives, by listening to them, and helping them to explore and take control of their lives, and me not dictating what should happen or how." (Participant 11)

"I apply ethical principles and values to guide my professional practice and that of others, but often find that this creates great difficulty due to the wide range of quality in social work practice where often there are unethical decisions made without question - sometimes due to resource." (Participant 19)

► Theme 2: Used with Students

The second most frequently discussed theme was the way in which academics use and teach Values and Ethics with and to their students. Respondents described values and ethics as being key to the teaching of social work, because it is a key aspect of the social worker role. As such values and ethics are included across all social work education, from underpinning the curriculum to being included within assessments, placements, and in practice scenarios.

"Ethics and values are fundamental to social work education - integrated throughout teaching and assessment activity." (Participant 17)

"Absolutely! This is an assessment criteria in several modules in both UG and PG assessments. In my own teaching, students are provided with scenarios that require them to identify and critique sw ethical principles and to consider ethical dilemmas." (Participant 23)

"Used mainly during assessed practice placements + professional ethic related modules e.g. applied case study scenarios." (Participant 40)

► Theme 3: Not used at all

The third most prevalent theme here was that the Values and Ethics domain was not used in social work practice at all. As such, it would appear that Values and Ethics are not a part of the social work role for some respondents. However, many of these responses relate to not using the BASW PCFs specifically in practice. This does not mean that individuals do not practice using Values and/or Ethics at all. Rather, respondents do this as the basis of their work irrespective of whether it is part of the PCF or not.

“People do what they do; little thought is given to whether it fits into BASW’s delusional and overly complex PCFs.” (Participant 159)

“When I look at this I can see I work to it, but it’s not consciously used or referenced to support and challenge when this is more challenging.” (Participant 177)

Domain 3: Equality and Diversity

This question aimed to understand perspectives on the Equality and Diversity domain, and how/where it is used within the profession. It asked how EDI is used and incorporated within social work practice and education, and how it is applied within anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practices.

► Theme 1: Used in Practice

This was once again the most frequently discussed theme. It reflects how social workers use and consistently consider the importance of quality and diversity in all that they do. Many see this domain as being part of the bedrock of social work practice, and incorporate its use in both their social work practice and everyday lives. They also suggest that the PCF does a good job of covering and emphasising the importance of equality and diversity.

“This is such a bedrock value of SW it is hard to state where I begin with it in practice but I find the way the PCF captures it is wide ranging and all encompassing. It is fit for purpose.” (Participant 7)

“I am very rights-based in my work, and this includes being conscious of inclusion and diversity. I seek to always maintain fair treatment of those I work with and promote their equality and dignity.” (Participant 19)

“Social Work has an honourable tradition of championing the rights of those historically excluded by virtue of their sex, gender, disability, age, neurodiversity or any other characteristic.” (Participant 150)

► Theme 2: Anti Discriminatory/Anti-Oppressive Practice

Mentions of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practices were the second most frequently cited theme. Respondents focused on the use of anti-discriminatory and/or anti-oppressive practices to best support service users, in addition to making a difference to the environments within which respondents lived and work. Furthermore, respondents highlighted the importance of these practices in supporting and understanding other cultures, and the need to consistently reflect on issues of power, bias, prejudice, and privilege.

“As we deal with clients from diverse backgrounds race and culture, in my practice I ensure clients are treated equally, by helping them overcome barriers to accessing support they may need, for example, supporting them to access interpreter if language is a barrier to them accessing a service they need, and advocating for them with providers of care services, to ensure reasonable adjustments are made so they can access services regardless of their disability, or personal circumstances, I ensure I practice in an anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive way, for example some clients with disabilities, need reasonable adjustments to help them communicate, either by using their best communication tool, and ensuring they have the choice to express themselves and give their views, and that they are listened to.” (Participant 11)

“Yes - My home town is becoming more ethically accepting and like to feel I have a role in promoting diversity and equality to individuals where I live.” (Participant 149)

“Daily, I ensure that people are treated equally and fairly and that I show respect to an individuals uniqueness and ‘difference’. This is crucial in my role, so to ensure that I do not act in an oppressive or discriminatory manner.” (Participant 161)

“Understanding, empathy, anti-racism, recognising difference and celebrating cultural difference.” (Participant 101)

► Theme 3: Students

The final theme from this domain was the consideration of equality and diversity in the work that academics and practice educators do with students and recently qualified social workers. Insisting and instilling the importance of equality and diversity, challenging and redirecting behaviours and work which may run counter to this, and ensuring that students gain an understanding of the importance of these factors throughout and beyond their training and development.

“In conjunction with BASW Anti-Racist Strategy, EDI Policy and ADP principles this domain ensures that students and other learners demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice.” (Participant 18)

“Yes. I view understanding of these issues as essential to understanding of the social work role and remit in its entirety. These issues are integrated in all aspects of my teaching, assessments, role play and class activities. Where attitudes or values are considered to be oppressive, they are challenged and where appropriate, additional learning is sometimes provided for individual students or groups.” (Participant 23)

Domain 4: Rights, Justice and Economic Wellbeing

This question pertaining to the fourth domain sought to understand whether and how social justice and economic wellbeing are supported and advocated for within social work practice and education. Three main themes were discussed most frequently by participants here.

► Theme 1: Advocacy of human rights and social justice

This was the theme which was referenced most frequently: the importance of advocating for clients or service users in terms of their human rights and social justice., including in an educational context, with students where they are encouraged to consider different scenarios and refer to different legislation and laws. This teaches the trainee social worker how to respond once qualified and working with clients. In the context as a practitioner, responses also indicated the importance of advocating for clients during and after their assessments, including when working with children, with the elderly, in hospital settings, and more. It also relates to the work social workers do with different agencies and ensuring that the service users are supported. As part of this topic including poverty and financial support and wellbeing are also covered. There was often a reference that this domain underpins social work.

“We are focused on promoting the rights of all we work with from parents to children . this underpins the profession.” (Participant 2)

“Students are encouraged to explore these issues through case scenario work, in class discussions, and through application of a range of theory and legislation that promote service user choice; promote human rights; promote social justice; and place a duty on social workers/student social workers to act to promote these principles. E.g. Human Rights Act; Principles of the Children Act 1989; Principles of the Care Act 2014; Principles of the Mental Capacity Act; Etc.” (Participant 25)

“Whilst advocating on behalf of service users or whilst undertaking Human Rights Assessments (in addition to standard assessments).” (Participant 43)

► Theme 2: Students

The second most frequently referred to theme was the domain being used within the respondents' own student-facing role or as part of students' education to become social workers. It has been identified as a key principle, on which students are assessed and is vital for students to adopt in order to be fully prepared for their role as social workers upon completion of the course. The domain is not only important for day-to-day work but also when referring to application for different sources of funding. It has also been identified as the domain which already underpins many of the values social workers and students have. Some comments suggested that the domain has been used in training and for ASYE, but it is not explicitly used in practise, with some respondents who stating that they do not use it.

“Used to support teaching on SW programme. Criteria for readiness of practice. Role modelled in roles of lecturer and tutor.” (Participant 4)

“I support students and newly qualified social workers with funding applications where we look at human rights, all sources of funding and best interests principles.” (Participant 36)

“The right to empowerment and the right of a quality life underpins many of the social work values our students have.” (Participant 52)

► Theme 3: Practice

With a similar number of responses to the first and second themes here, this theme illustrates the domain being used directly with work related to supporting clients and/or service users, with the cost of living crisis being mentioned. Specific groups of people whom this domain has been used with include foster carers going through financial difficulties as well as care leavers. Aside from financial challenges gender and sexuality as well as race and having a safe space to share information have also been identified as vital points during which this domain has been applied. However, the issue with time during statutory work has been identified as a barrier to incorporating this domain fully and there has been a recognition that more of this is needed. This is especially as access to services is not always easy for marginalised groups.

“Since completion of community development post grad course this is something I am more conscious of, in stat social work I was often too busy to really implement this domain.” (Participant 26)

“I would love to be able to do more in this domain and think it’s paramount to change for people I can only signpost people and guide them to services that may help.” (Participant 67)

“I do use this. The roots of social work lie within this area and have a duty to ensure that opportunities are promoted and enabled. However this is another area where social workers experience challenges because we primarily serve marginalised individuals and access to the right services can be filled with obstacles.” (Participant 51)

“Yes, foster carer’s are currently going through financial hardship and I’ve had to speak to them and advocate around cost of living, and writing letters to landlords and councils.” (Participant 48)

Domain 5: Knowledge

The ‘Knowledge’ domain describes how social workers should apply the relevant knowledge across disciplines (including the latest research across disciplines) to their practice, as well as ensuring that the voice of those with lived experience is integrated throughout. Once again three themes were the most prominent across responses.

► Theme 1: Staff development (including own knowledge and understanding as well as CPD)

From the responses, most references were made to theoretical knowledge. Individuals were willing to complete courses and learn new information in their own time to feed their curiosity and then use it within their practice. In addition, there are expectations that certain CPD courses will be completed too. This adds to individuals’ learning due to their own initiative. Gaining knowledge was relevant for both students and practitioners and it was often described as vital for underpinning social worker practice. A recognition for the importance of theory and research in informing practice was emphasised, with this mostly occurring during training but with time constraints preventing it from being as easily achieved afterwards.

“Throughout my role, my focus is on developing my own knowledge around research topics, as well as supporting students to develop their knowledge of law and theory, practice and subjective experience.” (Participant 17)

“To meet CPD requirements, one need to undertake training. Personal development and progression opportunities.” (Participant 49)

"I am developing my knowledge as part of the social work training that I'm undertaking. I am getting to grips with social work theory and beginning to see how this can be applied in practice. As part of my reading I have been looking at serious case reviews and have been able to apply some of the findings from these to my current practice. I have had the opportunity to speak with service users as part of my course and have become aware that what service users want is to be listened to and to have a positive relationship with their worker."
(Participant 143)

► Theme 2: Students

The second most popular theme pertinent to the 'Knowledge' domain was, perhaps unsurprisingly, related to student education. The emphasis was placed on teaching students to use evidence-based practise as well as making the link between legislation, the law and everyday work as a social worker. Using this information within teaching sessions enables the information to be learnt in a practical way, preparing students for their everyday job upon the completion of the course. Due to its importance, evidencing knowledge as part of the domain also features as an assessment. This domain is also often referred to when providing additional courses for newly qualified staff. However, it is also important to recognise that some respondents have indicated that this has not been used as much due to time constraints.

"Used to support teaching on SW programme. Criteria for readiness of practice. Role modelled in roles of lecturer and tutor." (Participant 7)

"The knowledge domain is vital to support learners to develop evidence-based knowledge and understanding of how social work practice is informed by theory, models, values, legislation and research." (Participant 21)

"Students' assignments must demonstrate their practice is based on a knowledge of social work theory and research. There is an expectation that this knowledge base forms the foundation for critical analysis."
(Participant 90)

► Theme 3: Supporting Service Users

The third theme from this domain depicts knowledge being important for supporting clients and service users. This can be particularly helpful for complex cases or individuals who are leaving the hospital and need a support plan and are also part of support networks for staff. Although some responses indicate that this is used daily, within their work, others suggest that it is only relating to case work due to time constraints. This is perhaps a disparity in the type of work that social workers are employed to do, leading to variability in evidencing the knowledge domain.

"This is my passion as i use theory and models to make meaning of my daily practice especially in complex case management." (Participant 58)

"Yes, but only in as much as it relates to case work, we rarely have time to think in a wider context such as research, law or other professional and relevant fields. We have customer feedback forms to support development of services." (Participant 94)

"I try to embed these areas of knowledge within our social work forum and reflective practice group."
(Participant 104)

"Once again, when on visits, families have questions about services that are available. It would be my role to provide that information or find that out for them. Furthermore, it is important for me to have a knowledge base around legislation and theory as this informs my practice." (Participant 158)

Domain 6: Critical Reflection and Analysis

Five themes were most frequently discussed here. The critical reflection and analysis domain outlines the importance of applying a critical perspective when making decisions, and using this information in the analysis of one's practice.

► Theme 1: Education and training

The most frequently discussed theme within the 'Critical Reflection and Analysis' domain was its use within education and training support. This was shown in those who train or teach new social workers/practitioners and as part of people's own training. Reflection was often a task individuals would encourage their students/trainees to help them reflect on their practice. Reflection was also displayed as something that they taught and assessed the students/trainees on. Furthermore, some expressed reflecting on their own teaching too.

"most importantly for me - do my students have the capacity and skills to reflect on situations, other people and themselves to consider the pros and cons of their practice and ensure ongoing development." (Participant 74)

"Used to support teaching on SW programme. Criteria for readiness of practice. Role modelled in roles of lecturer and tutor." (Participant 9)

"Use wide range of critical reflection methods within teaching and assessments." (Participant 20)

"I teach critical reflection, and apply this when marking students work / giving feedback." (Participant 18)

► Theme 2: Supervision and Students

Reflecting on their practices is one of the main purposes of supervision. Participants explored reflecting on their sessions/work in their supervision with their own managers or supervising other practitioners and trainees reflecting on their practice. Reflection is therefore clearly important to the social work role and practice, and should be adequately supported by managers.

"i reflect on my practice and use supervision to identify gaps and areas I need to improve upon." (Participant 179)

"This is such an important part of my supervision, to pick cases apart and help me recognise why I have made particular decisions and how I may have approached things in a different way." (Participant 135)

"I use Supervision sessions as an opportunity to critically reflect on case situations to identify what might have worked better, what did work well etc with cases I have dealt with or am dealing with, as a way of developing my own practice." (Participant 139)

Many people specified that they used reflective practice daily or all the time. Some others said regularly, and a couple responded occasionally or indirectly. This demonstrates the necessity of reflection in social work. However, a similar number said that they did not use it, did not use it much or used other tools instead. Some also suggested that it was not needed or that it is an area they or their students struggle with due to time constraints, a lack of supervision/someone to reflect with, or as a weak point for some trainees/students. This also demonstrates the importance of including reflective practice in the framework as it will help encourage those who have difficulties to seek out opportunities to reflect, and demonstrate the necessity of the skill to students/trainees.

“often the domain that students struggle to evidence early on in their training, but immensely helpful to have it as a goal (and essential to the task).” (Participant 76)

“I find this difficult in the organisational context which is not set up for reflection. I find myself trying to reflect in action or in clinical supervision but this is not always possible.” (Participant 81)

“it can be difficult the higher up in your career you travel as you need the right managers / peers to be able to effect this.” (Participant 100)

“I am a reflective practitioner who daily reflects on my own practice.” (Participant 60)

“I often reflect on my practice and often change my decisions due to this reflection.” (Participant 77)

► Theme 3: Group reflection and reflection spaces

The other main place to reflect, and thus engage with the sixth domain of the PCF, are group reflection sessions where everyone is encouraged to reflect on their sessions/work together. Sometimes this was also displayed through having dedicated reflection places/pods. A few even discussed their workplace being an environment of reflective culture, which was encouraged by the leaders within their teams and/or organisations.

“As Practice Educators it is important that reflection is part of supervision. It is also a central part of peer discussions.” (Participant 125)

“We have reflective pods and reflective supervision.” (Participant 52)

“Additional the culture i have created in my team is professional curiosity, thinking outload, looking at options having a cost benefit analysis of options.” (Participant 64)

► Theme 4: Reflection in Practice

A prominent role when using the reflective domain of the PCF was taken up by reflection during practice in order to improve one’s practice, and thus outcomes for the recipients of this practice. Some survey respondents also discussed self-reflection being important for one’s self-care and to foster creativity.

“I aim to reflect in and reflect on every intervention in how I have presented myself, how the intervention is or has affected them and how effective i have been.” (Participant 79)

“address those often intractable issues that require more unpicking. Also hugely important in self care and reconciling dilemmas/mitigating against compassion fatigue and burnout.” (Participant 157)

“Yes a natural reflector and consider this a brilliant way to improve and develop in my role and my practice.” (Participant 140)

► Theme 5: Helping Service Users

The fifth and final theme was the use of reflective supervision in providing help and support to clients and service users. Practitioners/social workers would often help their clients by reflecting with them. This could be when guiding clients through problem solving or planning, or reflecting in order to form assessments, reports and interventions.

“I base my assessments and interventions on reflections to enhance post action improvements in my work with service users.” (Participant 41)

“while delivering excellent care plans to suit the needs of service users, I utilized active listening skills, strength based approaches and personalised care to intervene appropriately and support my clients.” (Participant 116)

“I often use critical reflection to analyse my practice, for example why did I do it this way, could it have been more effective if conducted in another way, and understanding how the desired outcome can be achieved, for example allowing clients to offload their views, not interrupting, enabling them to express themselves, and respecting them in the way I reply, asking them why they have shared this information, and discuss and agree way forward with them.” (Participant 14)

Domain 7: Skills and Interventions

The skills and interventions domain outlines how social workers should use their judgement and knowledge to work with and support service users. By doing so, social workers should therefore promote independence and prevent harm, leading to better outcomes for those that social workers work with. Four themes were most frequently discussed here.

► Theme 1: Education and training

This was shown to be the largest and most frequently discussed theme. This referred to teachers and trainees describing their classroom and in action learning, teaching, specific training sessions and being assessed on the skills and interventions domain including how to manage and make difficult decisions when applying interventions, appropriate application of knowledge or models, explanations of real-world examples and role play and how to approach the use of assessments and policies.

“teach range of intervention techniques and models and use these within classroom. share experience of family therapy and direct work skills in class.” (Participant 20)

“I attend visits/meetings with newly qualified social workers to model skills such as assertiveness in chairing meetings, how to gather information for a social work assessment, providing information and advice.” (Participant 150)

“Students attend skills days through the course, they also have to demonstrate this domain on practice learning. Often practitioners come into deliver sessions, students might undertake role plays.” (Participant 156)

► Theme 2: Communication and independence

Several participants also mentioned talking and listening skills and encouraging service users to make their own decisions as important parts of the domain, both as practicing social workers and for teaching. Being supportive, respectful, empathetic, sharing information, using a holistic perspective, and trying to understand the users' background and every possibility is key. Merely guiding their decision making and allowing for the service users' independence and participation, adapting interventions and approaches to each individual or family, was all linked to practicing this domain.

“soft skills around communication being able to be flexible and adaptable to engage with different groups of people.” (Participant 71)

“Being empathetic and caring in my approach. Responding and listening in a timely manner whilst empowering families.” (Participant 141)

“promote co-production, independence and hope to reduce harm.” (Participant 177)

► Theme 3: Experience and confidence

Participants also said they are using the skills and interventions domain through their direct work, when making assessments and teaching to prospective students. Using their own past experiences (for example, of other interventions) as a social worker and their continually developing skills when making decisions about interventions to help people. Acting instinctively, with confidence and adaptability, and reflecting back to previous situations/decisions and reflecting on the current case in order to intervene and make decisions in an appropriate way.

“encourage application of gut instinct and experience. Interventions are also guided by similar interventions and those outcomes.” (Participant 64)

“Working with families can be challenging so having the skills and the confidence in your decision making is essential.” (Participant 135)

“Having a toolkit of skills gained from training, ... reflecting upon effectiveness allows for re evaluation and implementing other skills.” (Participant 99)

► Theme 4: Justification and policy

This theme was demonstrated in answers relating to understanding legislation, procedures, tools, and frameworks/guidelines for safeguarding or good practice. This allowed participants to justify decision making and helped them decide on appropriate interventions that are in alignment with current policies and practices, or when exerting challenges and advocacy. Sometimes the most appropriate action is to refer service providers, and sometimes human rights must be weighed against risks of the intervention.

“there are times I have to exert professional challenge with other professionals or on behalf of a customer in the form of advocacy or in challenges when preventing harm asking the right questions and presenting my evidence in panel or to customers.” (Participant 5)

“Understanding that delicate balance of legislation and applying that legislation, for example, in practice is so important.” (Participant 111)

Domain 8: Contexts and Organisations

This domain, rather than focusing on practice per se, aims to look at how social workers should engage within organisational and political/policy contexts. The domain therefore outlines that social workers should be able to operate adequately here, including having a good understanding of what it is that multi-disciplinary and multi-agency workers also do. Three themes again were identified here.

► Theme 1: Multi-Disciplinary Working

This theme, which was discussed most frequently, outlines the importance of social workers practicing in a multi-disciplinary manner. Respondents regularly outline the frequency and importance of working in a multi-disciplinary manner, the importance of this multi-disciplinary working, and gaining an understanding of how difficult it can be to do this. It helps to gain an understanding of how other professionals work, and how to work together in order to deliver the best possible outcomes for service users.

“This is used in my role as I work in a multi-professional team and work with professionals across different agencies. I have developed considerable knowledge of how other agencies work, including their strengths and weaknesses so this has enabled me to support families much more holistically.” (Participant 19)

“We work in a multidisciplinary team with health. I speak with health colleagues on a regular basis including GP, family members, LFB, mental health, district nursing etc.” (Participant 36)

“This is another area that ensures we are able to develop well rounded social workers with a good understanding of multi-agency working. If anything, this domain can be overlooked.” (Participant 73)

► Theme 2: Students and Teaching

This theme again outlines how the PCF – and Domain 8 in particular – is used in the teaching and assessment of social work students, and how it is used within placements. Additionally, however, it also outlines the importance of teaching students about multi-disciplinary working, and the difficulties which can be inherent within the role when working with others.

“I work with students to look at multi agency and multi disciplinary working.” (Participant 36)

“Yes - do my students understand the legal, political, social context within which they work and fulfil their role accordingly.” (Participant 71)

“Placements are provided across a range of statutory and non-statutory organisations. Students’ assignments are expected to demonstrate an understanding of how organisations work together in a multi-disciplinary approach. They need to understand that each profession has its own value base and priorities which can cause disagreement about practice.” (Participant 77)

► Theme 3: Organisational Development and Change

This theme outlined the way in which respondents deal with and work throughout organisational change. It is suggested that there are numerous, organisation-level changes which occur either due to political pressures and decisions, or organisational ones. This theme therefore outlines how important it is for respondents to keep up with organisational change, even when they do not believe that organisational change is not particularly helpful to social work practice.

“This is an ongoing adaptation within my organisation. the covid way of remote working is a very good example of this domain.” (Participant 51)

“To be able to follow organisation policy as well to quickly able to adapt to change of policy.” (Participant 102)

“My organisation is ever changing requiring me to change and adapt to new concepts all the time.” (Participant 123)

Overall, however, there seems to be some confusion with how this PCF’s domain is – or should be – used within the profession. While some use it as a consideration within their own organisation (such as organisational communication and change), others reflect on how it is used with external partners in multi-disciplinary teams and/or resources available for service users. Despite this, most respondents do indeed use the domain as the basis of some of their work. We suggest, therefore, that this domain is still important to social work practice but needs to be re-framed, re-thought, or at the very least more clearly defined.

Domain 9: Professional Leadership

The ninth domain, re-positioned following the 2018 refresh of the PCF, is Professional Leadership. This involves positive promotion of the profession and good social work practice, as well as supporting the development and leadership of the organisation and the profession more widely.

► Theme 1: Support

The first theme which respondents suggest most frequently was that of support, and in how they provide support to colleagues both within their own organisation and in wider multi-disciplinary teams. Respondents therefore outlined how they share experiences and knowledge in both formal and informal settings, outlining supervision as one way that they can do this with colleagues while developing best practice guides and support with their own and wider teams.

“I am a PE, I also support colleagues when they need answers. I also have influenced change within the service such as raising concerns on behalf of colleagues with management.” (Participant 49)

“This is important because it provides an opportunity to share knowledge, experience and role model.” (Participant 52)

“I will often share my learning with colleagues and my supervisees. I share updates with colleagues of processes and procedures and will write up how we do things.” (Participant 67)

► Theme 2: Student/Early Career Training and Development

The second most frequently discussed theme was that of providing support and leadership for students and those very early in their social work careers. This support is provided in a number of ways, including modelling behaviours and sharing best practice.

“As a practice educator my role is to support and assess the students on placement to build their learning and to develop their practice providing training but also supervision and constructive feedback. Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning and to support their colleagues learning.”
(Participant 81)

“The best thing ever for an NQSW in my experience is towards the end of the ASYE year, to show the next NQSW, or a student what they do.” (Participant 169).

► Theme 3: Training and Development

Thirdly, respondents outlined the use of the ‘Professional Leadership’ domain across their training and development. Somewhat similarly to theme 2, although with more experienced social workers, respondents suggest supporting others’ development, both in their practice as a line manager but also through both official and unofficial supervision. They outlined providing clear guidelines for practice, sharing the good and improving on that which needs it.

“I use professional leadership as i take leadership for any cases i have dealt with as it is my case.”
(Participant 85)

“Yes- sharing learning with others. Seeking to contribute to a restorative work culture.” (Participant 86)

“I take personal responsibility for my own learning and development as well as sharing my learning with others.” (Participant 93)

Can the PCF be Improved?

The following set of questions sought to understand the impact of the PCF on the social work professional identity, and how/whether the PCF can be improved. The questions also sought to understand how the PCF reflects the diversity of role and perspective within social work, and how the PCF is used with social worker career and professional development.

Question 11: The social work identity

An important part of the PCF is that, as one unified framework and set of standards for social work, it should help to support and foster one overarching social work identity. This question therefore sought to gain an understanding of respondents' reflections on this role which is expected of the PCF.

► Theme 1: It is valuable for social workers professional identity

This was the most frequent theme throughout this question, with 49 participants expressing that the PCF is valuable for aiding their professional identity. Professional identity is the concept of acting and behaving as a social worker is expected to, focusing on their development, and striving for career development. Quotes illustrate how despite having a common aim, each participant has personalised their approach to how they interpret the PCF and use it to better their work.

"its the pillar on which social work practice stands. It enables me to evaluate my daily practice and identify the lapses and needs for change in my practice." (Participant 12)

"The PCF gives clear indications of how a social worker should work, behave and consider their own values when practicing. For me, being a social worker is about being that professional within a "helping role" that fosters and encourages self-belief, self-efficacy and autonomy whilst supporting individuals to be heard." (Participant 98)

"The PCF allows me to have a distinct professional identity when I'm working with colleagues from both within and outside of the profession. It is more comprehensive than simply a list of things to know / do or any specific activities, it facilitates a transferrable and critical approach to the knowledge and skills used." (Participant 101)

► Theme 2: The PCF is not adequate for this aspect and not used

It was reported by 35 participants that the PCF was not detailed enough to be properly used for the domain of professional identity. It was further mentioned that it was also not used, and that it was often neglected by higher management. This questions the applicability of this aspect of the PCF as it needs to be not only concise but used in application throughout every stage of social work, including management to set a high standard. The results suggest that further research is needed to aid development of the PCF.

“However it is not great that the knowledge and skills statements run alongside these as well as my employer expectations. Three different ‘standards’ to work to.” (Participant 86)

“When I read each domain and the level to which it applies to me, it makes sense. The domains do not stand alone but are integrated with each other. This can make them more challenging to write up evidence. The PCF are the nuts and bolts of the profession.” (Participant 125)

“I find it really helpful that the PCF provides a structure to different levels of practice and learning. I think it provides this very well, although I don’t think that after ASYE level peers or managers make reference to it.” (Participant 151)

► Theme 3: It is valuable for the use in education and teaching

The PCF has been used since its implementation throughout social work education and by social work educators to explain the best standards of work set out for those in training. By setting out these standards in training, it should set social workers up with the correct attitudes and knowledge to be able to develop themselves throughout their career. 17 participants reported that the PCF is useful for professional identity within education and development, but this also mentions how it is sometimes left in education and not properly translated over to being used in the workplace.

“It was meaningful at university and i believe i align with the values however it is not something I have thought about much since completing my ASYE.” (Participant 53)

“In all honesty I am not sure it does. It feels at times it is another thing required for students or ASYEs but then not really considered after that. It is never used in supervision or appraisals where I work.” (Participant 133)

“I think the PCF can form a basis for Job Descriptions and role progression in SW agencies, and it is very helpful in student capability assessments. Its issue is it completes with the regulator conditions of licence so once a registered practitioner that takes precedence and the PCF is relevant as a HR exercise for JDs benchmarking.” (Participant 191)

Question 12: Core social work and the 3 super domains

Super domains are the three overarching themes within the PCF framework: purpose, practice and impact. The PCF then breaks these down further into 9 other ‘subdomains’ that make up core elements of the model, as shown on the 2018 infographic of the PCF (Allen, 2022). The framework has level descriptors to further aid development of social workers at every stage of their career, making it increasingly important that it is flexible enough in its applicability. Additionally, the level descriptors have become inclusive of non-statutory workers. The PCF was designed to be used within both practice and education by those involved with social work to focus on what is regarded as the key elements that make up a good standard of work to strive for. This question aimed to determine whether social work respondents agreed that the three super domains reflect all of social work practice.

► Theme 1: Super domains being relevant within the role of social work

This is the most mentioned theme with participants stating that they felt the super domains were relevant and reflected in their work. Therefore, the super domains seem to reflect the core components of social work practice, from the perspective of social workers from across the employment lifespan.

“The key elements of social work for me are to work with people to understand their problems and to coproduce solutions to these problems. I think this is adequately captured by purpose, practice and impact.” (Participant 15)

“I think the super domains capture this well. I really like that values and ethics remain part of the PCF- these have been missed elsewhere such as the KSS. Values are an integral part of our profession and should be embedded in all our practice frameworks.” (Participant 16)

“like the introduction of the 3 Super Domains. I think they help students and practitioners focus on what is important and stay focused. Perhaps something could be added about how when we are considering Impact we can ‘Review’ to promote improvements where concerns or shortfalls are apparent.” (Participant 23)

► Theme 2: Working with individuals/supporting vulnerable individuals with lived experiences

Social work requires interaction with a variety of different individuals, some with additional needs or coming from underprivileged backgrounds. As such, it is of increasing importance that individuals are able to be supported, especially with the current cost of living crisis. This was highlighted as being a core element of social work, being able to effectively help and communicate with individuals. The theme is the second most mentioned for this question.

“To empower and try to improve a persons situation, to enable people to be in control of their own lives while completing assessments to determine what the level of need is.” (Participant 157)

“Ability to communicate well, in an approachable, supportive and engaging manner, without blame, shame or judgement. To be clear and efficient with processes and systems to complete the demands of administrative duties which can be hard to manage on a day-to-day basis. To listen and act upon feedback, and recognise when you have done enough to support the person to have the strength and hope to take their lives forward and find ways to achieve their goals and outcomes without needing your support. To end our involvement knowing someone is as safe as possible.” (Participant 133)

“In practice I often talk about these and link them to working with children and families for example, the purpose is the intent we have when working with families, the practice links to our intervention and the impact is obviously impact. I have just become a year coordinator in my university and intend to focus much more on PCFs during induction to embed these into the curriculum at an early stage so this will hopefully impact SWs of the future in the same way they have supported my SW career.” (Participant 109)

► Theme 3: Need for development within the framework

In various ways, participants pointed out how the PCF should move towards a more concise framework. In some ways, aspects were felt to be missing within the current model, with no suitable place for them currently. For some it can be detailed and not easy to follow, which is problematic as it is meant to be a way to unite everyone’s standards which cannot be done if it is not universally clear. As previously discussed, super domains were mentioned most frequently in a positive response, this demonstrates that this element of the framework should be kept but potentially restructured around.

“I believe the three domains are based on common sense. The core elements of the role may benefit from modernisation, by considering the influences such as radicalisation, exploitation.” (Participant 52)

“I think more and more, social justice and the need to be more “political” in our approach is really important.” (Participant 63)

“These are all valuable but I think that the PCF is becoming overcomplicated- the super domains underpin practice.” (Participant 69)

“I like the 3 super domains but for some reason, I find it difficult to associate them with the 9 domains. I almost see them as two separate frameworks. But it is still helpful to have them in one diagram.” (Participant 99)

Question 13: Are elements of social work missing from the PCF?

One of the two most important questions asked within this review and evaluation is whether the PCF can be improved or updated, and whether there are elements missing from the PCF as it currently stands. Question 13 in the survey aimed to answer the second half of this question: is there anything missing from the PCF that respondents would like to see in any future iterations?

► Theme 1: The PCF does not require changes

The most described theme, participants have argued that the PCF is adequate in its current form, and do not feel that there are core elements of social work practice that are not adequately addressed or missing within the PCF. Some participants state that the PCF is comprehensive and thus there is no need for any updates or improvements to the framework.

“No it is concise yet complete.” (Participant 7)

“No. The PCF Framework is comprehensive.” (Participant 92)

“I cannot bring any to mind. I have supported students on practice placement to reflect on the 9 domains and they provide a holistic assessment of their knowledge and skills.” (Participant 175)

► Theme 2: Social worker working conditions and the effect on wellbeing

However, the second-most discussed theme was that participants referenced the need for the PCF to more helpfully address the working conditions of social workers. This includes the need for a recognition of the emotional labour faced by social workers, as well as the impact of the workplace culture and management on wellbeing. Participants highlighted the need to address the significance of relationships within social work.

“Pressure of the role. Nowhere does it mention the capacity to do all of these things under immense pressure as was highlighted by the Macalister Report.” (Participant 86)

“wellbeing and the importance to manage this as practitioners.” (Participant 61)

“the limitations of having little to no control over how much work you are allocated without any measure of the complexity of increasing needs and demands on the services.” (Participant 66)

“I think a potential challenge is that the PCF primarily focuses on the individual’s responsibilities, arguably employers do not have the same stipulations, leaving a potential disconnect between professional values and employer imperatives.” (Participant 47)

► Theme 3: The PCF requires an improved focus on social justice/injustice

A similar number of participants also discussed forms of social justice and injustice that they feel are not appropriately considered within the PCF. This primarily includes racism, discrimination, equality and inclusion. Participants argued that the PCF needs to be updated in order to better represent and support individuals facing these forms of injustices.

“No, but equality and diversity should have a greater emphasis and the role of social work in this be more specific.” (Participant 28)

“The need to address structural issues (racism, class and gender inequality) are not reflective of the contemporary themes (white fragility, transgender issues).” (Participant 151)

“I think it is important not to lose sight of Anti-Racist policy with the focus now on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. The core descriptors for the three domains within the Purpose Super Domain need strengthening and extending with more links to social work values and ethics.” (Participant 18)

“I think some of the core elements could be refreshed and updated in line with practice changes and the language used such as using key terms such as being culturally competent, the need to challenge discrimination and racism (not just to identify this - but do something). We needs something around how social work is impacted by political agendas - many social workers are still not making these links. Other than some updating I believe the PCF is still a great framework.” (Participant 16)

Question 14: Other Improvements to the PCF?

In addition to Question 13, which asked whether anything was missing from the PCF, this question asked about any other improvements which should be made. This question therefore aimed to find out what respondents from across the social work employment lifespan wanted to see improved. Four themes were discussed most frequently here.

► Theme 1: Retain PCF Without Changes

Once again, more participants comparatively expressed that the PCF should be retained without any changes made. These participants suggested that the PCF sufficiently achieves its purpose, whilst some participants additionally referenced their reluctance for any more changes within social work. Participants also highlighted that they like the consistency of the PCF in its current form. However, these quotes also illustrate that should changes be made, they need to be carefully rationalised and thought through.

“no i like that its been consistent for some years!” (Participant 179)

“Why not just leave the PCF as it is .. there are too many changes all the time in social work never allowing one thing to embed .. practice educators and employers are now familiar with PCF and can use it properly to assess .. instead of wasting time on changing this why not see if instead we can have one set of standards instead of PCF SWEPS KSS and apprenticeship.” (Participant 8)

“I believe it is sufficient and fit for purpose. Sometimes changes can be disruptive.” (Participant 39).

► Theme 2: Combine Existing Frameworks/Standards

A number of participants have highlighted their desire for there to only be one standard framework, as opposed to having multiple frameworks, including those outlined above. Participants argue that multiple frameworks are harder to follow, and are more confusing. By creating one unified framework, practice standards could become clearer.

“I would like the PCF, KSS and possibly even the social work England standards to be brought together in a single set of domains. It’s OK for me because it is my full time job to write things against the standards, but even if you think about the KSS and PCF this means 19 domains to remember. Imagine going to a supermarket to buy 19 things in your head and remembering them all. It’s impossible. And there is a lot of overlap, so you would also need to remember where this happens.” (Participant 169)

“I would get rid of it, and use the Post Qualifying Standards, why have different ones for students, and then when you actually practice social work you then have to leap onto the KSS. We then also have the PEPs for practice education in social work. Wouldn’t it be great to look at all of these standards and have one set, but maybe tweaked for students and Practice teachers.” (Participant 88)

“I would like to see a single set of standards, I find that different agencies have different standards which is confusing and contradictory. The relationship between the KSS and PCF could be clearer and even better within one framework in my opinion.” (Participant 122)

► Theme 3: Need for Additional Tools/Elements Within the PCF

A similar number of participants referenced additional tools or elements that should be added to the PCF in its current form. Whilst the elements that have been suggested are not often repeated themes themselves, the frequent discussion of this theme overall highlights a general opinion that the PCF should be revised, often with a focus on the small-p-political, critical, and radical nature of social work practice and on integrating CPD.

“Providing ways to challenge policy changes that negatively affect our clients; such as budget cuts. We need changes and ways to challenge case loads and amount of time spent in writing notes when we should be spending that time with clients.” (Participant 116)

“There is nothing (I can see) about the role of ritual and community in PCF. Recognition of the value and necessity in ritual from different perspectives: Ethics and Values, Knowledge, Ethnicity and Diversity (support), Professionalism (provide).” (Participant 151)

“An accessible CPD mapping tool for the profession which requires regular periodic review.” (Participant 40)

► Theme 4: PCF Needs to be Condensed/Simplified

In the fourth and final theme here, participants discussed their view that the PCF should be simplified and condensed. Participants highlighted that there is a frequent “overlap” within domains, as well as the use of unnecessarily complicated language. Simplifying and condensing the PCF would improve its clarity and utility.

“The whole PCF seems very outdated and clunky. The domains are confusing as they seem to overlap a lot and they are particularly confusing for those with neurodivergent issues to deal with.” (Participant 25)

“I think it needs to be simplified. There is far too much information and criteria, when the domains could be met more naturally as professionals.” (Participant 48)

“I think the wording could be simplified. We alienate people by using terminology and academic words, we can humanise these PCF’s by ensuring they are simple and to the point.” (Participant 100)

Question 15: The PCF and a diverse sector

This question asked about how the PCF is or should be used to support the diversity within the sector. However, respondents took this mostly as a question about the diversity of role within the sector. Just two themes were discussed most frequently: firstly that no changes were needed to the PCF to support the wider diverse sector, and secondly that there should be sector-specific PCFs in order to demonstrate greater clarity, understanding and recognition of the breadth of roles within social work.

► Theme 1: No Change

Among the participants, most respondents expressed the belief that the PCF effectively upholds the strengths of a diverse sector, perceiving no requirement for any modifications. Participants acknowledged the PCF’s adaptability to cater to the diversity within the sector, and thus there is no need to make any further adaptations.

“I think the PCF’s flexibility allows it to be applied in a wide range of settings.” (Participant 106)

“I think it already does support our strengths as a diverse sector far better than any other set of standards has ever done.” (Participant 165)

“I think that they are fine as they are as they would cover a very diverse working environment.” (Participant 55)

► Theme 2: Sector specific PCF

In order to address the specific needs and contexts of various fields within social work, participants suggested the development of sector-specific PCFs. They highlighted that having distinct PCFs for different areas, such as children’s services or mental health, would ensure greater relevance and alignment with the unique requirements of each field. However, caution was advised to maintain the complexity and depth of social work practice without diluting its essence. To achieve this, it was proposed to establish working groups comprising social workers from diverse sectors to identify common skills and abilities across the social work spectrum, while also considering the option of separate PCFs for children and families versus adults.

“By having a different PCF for each field of social work. Forensic social work has its own PCF, which is much more relevant to the work done and the environment.” (Participant 49)

“It may be useful to have individual pointers for children and adult services as there are some clear differences between the two.” (Participant 171)

“It would be useful to have a working group of social workers from across the different sectors to identify those skills and abilities that are common across the social work spectrum, or possibly separate ones for children and families/CAMHS settings and Adults/CMHT settings. Although I’m hesitant about that idea given the generic nature of core social work training as separating adult and child disciplines reduces opportunities for cross-fertilisation of our practices, and necessarily social workers work with people across the lifespan whatever role they are in.” (Participant 88)

Question 16: The PCF and social work CPD

We asked the question: should the PCF be built upon to provide a more comprehensive resource for social work CPD, in addition to the Assessment and Career framework already provided? The breakdown of responses was as follows:

Yes: 51%

No: 32%

Other response: 28%

Out of the participants responses, just over half of respondents said that the PCF should be built upon to provide a more comprehensive resource for social work CPD. However, a differing perspective was held by almost one third of respondents, who suggested that the PCF needed no further updating. A small number of respondents also suggested that the PCF would be best integrated with existing frameworks, providing social workers with a unique and unified framework to work from and towards.

“There are already enough different frameworks and documents, and efforts should be focused on integrating the PCFs, SWE Professional Standards, and KSS.” (Participant 16)

“PCF should be the basis of the career framework.. we need one framework not 5.” (Participant 33)

“We need one set of things all in one place and set out as simply as it can be for people to understand and follow.” (Participant 176)

Question 17: Is the PCF still Fit for Function?

This final question was designed to see whether or not social workers from across the employment spectrum believed that the PCF was still fit for function. The overwhelming feeling was yes – the PCF is still fit for function in a modern social work role.

Yes: 79.2%

No: 20.8%

Findings: The Interviews

The aim of these interviews was to gain a better understanding of what was revealed from the survey data, and therefore to gain a depth of understanding and perspective from respondents who are employed or work across the whole of the social work employment lifespan. Survey participants were asked to leave their email addresses if they were interested in taking part in a survey, and if so, they were contacted at random. Interviews were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), and the predominant themes and sub-themes from this analysis are demonstrated below.

► Theme 1: A Framework by the Profession, for the Profession

An important consideration within the discussion of the PCF was the ‘ownership’ of the PCF, and in particular a discussion of the importance of the PCF remaining within the ‘hands’ of the profession. With the PCF being such an important framework outlining both social work education and practice, and the (small p) political and social justice-focused nature of the profession, it should remain looked after and held by the profession. By ensuring that the basis of social work education and practice is held and looked after by the profession, it means that the profession cannot be asked to do things which are not within its nature. The framework being developed and held onto by the profession is therefore very important.

“And so for me it’s the expression of what people can expect from us. As a professional group of people and the reason for having it is to hold ourselves to a standard that enables people to kind of trust in what we’re gonna do and have confidence that we have the right level of expertise and the right ethical approach to be of some use to them.” (Participant 5)

► Theme 2: The Professional Identity

The Professional Identity is one which is – or at least should be – steeped in social justice and strong professional ethics, and while the PCF should support this, there may be other support and frameworks which do so more clearly. Therefore the role of the PCF in supporting the professional identity of social workers needs to be thought through, and in particular how the PCF can be used as the single unifying approach in supporting the identity of the profession.

“I suppose it keeps it relevant to what we do if that makes sense... it’s kind of making sure we’re still in touch with the people, and we’re enabling them to communicate in a more professional way.” (Participant 10)

In particular, the PCF can be important in supporting the profession to uphold their ethics and values, keeping social justice at the forefront of their minds, and challenging behaviour and practice which may be unethical, such as in an example below:

“Now we have policies that aren’t in line with their ethics in this country around how we might treat asylum seekers.” (Participant 5)

► Theme 3: Use of the PCF

The third major theme from the interviews regards the use of the PCF in social work. In particular, this set of questions asked how and where the PCF is used in both practice, education, and more widely. Three sub-themes presented below help to depict patterns in the data that help to answer these questions and reflect virtually the whole of the social work employment experience, from education through to senior social work and leadership roles and personal/career development.

3.1 Career and Professional Development

The first sub-theme discusses is where and how the PCF is used for personal and career development of social workers. Respondents reflected on how the PCF is used to plan and document their career development, and in particular how they use the PCF to both plan their training needs as well as using the PCF as the basis for their professional development reporting to Social Work England.

“when I’m coming to do my registration as a social worker every year, I think about the professional capabilities framework alongside the Social Work England.” (Participant 3)

“Yeah, I think it would be really helpful if it was, if it was, if social work England drew on it.” (Participant 12)

3.2 The Social Work Role

All interview respondents discussed the important role that the PCF plays in their everyday practice. Whether that is the role of the PCF in securing the appropriate support and resources for service users, or simply the way in which they use the PCF to support practice, it is important to the role that social workers do. Therefore, the PCF is important for securing the best possible outcomes for both social workers and their service users.

“So we’d use it and kind of lobbying and saying, actually the thing that’s holding us back is that we can’t act on the contexts and organisations.” (Participant 12)

“I think what I tend to do is use it in regards to say, if a case is a tricky case, you can always boil it back down to a PCF.” (Participant 1)

3.3 Use in Social Work Education

The PCF is absolutely key to social work education in England. Throughout interviews, whether respondents were currently in social work education, delivering this education, or had simply been through it/seen someone go through it recently, the PCF was absolutely key to learning. The PCF therefore forms the heart of social work education, from what is taught to students through to how students are assessed inside and away from placements. The PCF therefore is an integral resource underpinning social work education.

“Well, as regards students. most of the students. Well, yeah, all of the students. I’ve got the PCFs to the key thing to pass them. So yeah, you’re you’re kind of basing their fitness to practice against the PCFs.” (Participant 1)

“we talk about the PCF, that’s how we are now we train our perhaps educators to assess students on placement with them.” (Participant 2)

► Theme 4: Fit for Purpose?

This theme reflects participants' views on whether the PCF is useful for supporting social workers, and whether it can be used on its own to support practice and education. Two sub-themes were generated here. Firstly, that while the PCF is an important and interesting resource, it does not exist in a vacuum of its own for supporting social work education, practice, development, and more. Indeed, the number of frameworks can be confusing, and there should be greater signposting across the various frameworks. Secondly, the utility of the super domains was unclear, and needs refinement.

4.1 Combining Frameworks

Participant expressed how the PCF is an excellent framework for demonstrating what social workers should do across their employment lifespan. However, as is discussed in the survey findings, interview respondents also discussed the sheer breadth and number of frameworks which can be related to social work. While these frameworks may all be important in and of themselves, the PCF could be the one overarching framework for practice. Furthermore, there should be some coherence across the different frameworks, ideally by having frameworks feed into and signpost into each other. Therefore it is clear that across frameworks there is perception of their utility, but these tools need to more clearly feed into each other.

*"I think that the social work profession can't do without the professional capabilities framework because we have to have something that we hold ourselves accountable to, rather than being held to account by something that someone else develops, like government might develop something or regulator might develop something, or the public might develop something or an organization might develop something."
(Participant 8)*

*"I guess under the umbrella of the professional capabilities framework, but they have to be separate because the regulations standards need to be, need to be there too."
(Participant 5)*

4.2 The Super Domains

Generally, for those not in a senior role or who have not worked directly with the three super domains, it was unclear how they are used in practice. In other words, while they were seemingly argued to draw together the nine domains well, their actual use within everyday social work practice was unclear.

*"So those three areas, it makes sense to put the 9 domains into those three areas."
(Participant 4)*

*"It's like they appeared. And you go, what do we do with these? Because in a sense, we're already looking at that. If you talk about value statements, we've already got, you know, values and ethics within that."
(Participant 7)*

► Theme 5: PCF Improvements

The fifth set of themes that were generated focused on the specific improvements that could be made to both the PCF itself, as well as the presentation of the PCF. The five sub-themes below depict these ideas and outline the need for clarity and extension to the framework, rather than anything being removed from the PCF.

5.1 Improved Career Framework

Respondents felt as though the career framework, and how and where the PCF feeds into the different stages of the career, is generally very good. More specifically, the PCF and associated framework is good for those who are in the earlier stages of their career. However, interviews with social workers who were later in their career (and, perhaps, higher in the career hierarchy), revealed that there was perhaps less clear guidance relevant to them. As such, the career framework (and how the PCF feeds into this framework) could be more clearly laid out.

“I think the other thing that maybe people have mentioned as well is that the career framework needs a little bit more development, particularly for the senior more specialist roles.” (Participant 12)

“It’s like they appeared. And you go, what do we do with these? Because in a sense, we’re already looking at that. If you talk about value statements, we’ve already got, you know, values and ethics within that.” (Participant 4)

5.2 Accessibility/Examples

Interviewees suggested that they would like the PCF materials available to social workers (e.g. via the BASW website) to have more and clearer examples of its use, in order to make the framework much more accessible and understandable to those who aim to use it. This therefore reflected two key points: first of all making it more broadly accessible – perhaps by using different mediums to present information about the PCF – and secondly providing clearer and more tangible examples of how to include the PCF in practice and personal development.

“It’s helpful for people the more accessible it is... the easier it is to kind of get into it and find... the information you need at the level you need and the domain you need, and in language that is really accessible...” (Participant 8)

“I also feel there’s not many examples. You get the university training, but for instance, if you look at all these PC FS, there is no examples anywhere.” (Participant 10)

5.3 Social Justice in Social Work

Participants discussed the need to have social justice embedded in all of social work practice and education, and that while it is clearly present in Domain 4 (Rights, Justice, and Economic Wellbeing), there is clear overlap with the Values and Ethics of social work (Domain 2), amongst others. As such, the domain is very important and a key part of the social work role, but should be clearly more inherent across the whole of the PCF.

“It is in one of the domains, so it it’s there, but you’re quite right. It should be threaded through all of them in a way, shouldn’t it?” (Participant 9)

“You know, the issue of poverty and you know all of that, you know, to actually reflect modern day society and the pressures that people are facing and that social workers will experience. So we did start to look at that and yeah, I mean, I agree that you can actually. Include that you know it could be quite inclusive across all of them, really in different ways.” (Participant 1)

5.4 Reflection is Key

This sub-theme reflects respondents' descriptions of the importance and key nature of reflection in social work. They discussed how reflection can improve education, practice, and professional development, and therefore it should be inherent across the social work role. However, they felt that while a critical reflection on cases was clear within the PCF, that actual critical reflection and support of colleagues was less so.

"Having critical reflection in there just is just a reminder that you always have to think about how you apply your knowledge and skills." (Participant 2)

However, they felt that while a critical reflection on cases was clear within the PCF, that actual self-reflection element and support of colleagues was less so:

"I think that the reflective learning domain. To me, doesn't focus enough on the importance of self reflection and looking at sort of the models and tools that you need to do that and why it's so important you know, to actually learn by reflecting and building your knowledge that way rather than just you doing the same thing over and over." (Participant 9)

5.5 Domain 9: Professional Leadership

Participants suggested that they understood the importance of Professional Leadership domain, and that it does play an important part in some of the social work role. For those respondents earlier in their career, it was felt that it was almost impossible for them to display leadership to any real degree.

"So people seem... but both practice educators that I would be training and students seem to struggle with this idea of professional leadership. And I the one I always say is get the person, so I'm very, this is very much child's social work focus, sorry, but I would say to them you know you need to chair a children in needs meeting and you will be showing professional leadership by leading a group of other professionals." (Participant 8)

As such, this domain was felt to be less all-career encompassing, and more focused towards those either in or close to leadership roles. However, when done right the focus of the domain on leadership can lead to excellent outcomes for service users, but it can be very difficult to demonstrate particularly early in the career:

"(Students) do these slightly to turgidic presentations to the group, to the rest of their team, and sort of like they presented really got heads up over and all the rest of it. The best one I've have witnessed was one that's a really good student a few years ago, and [anonymous] was kind of doing the work anyway. So by unqualified social work, and just was qualified. But she was really good, really confident. And she how she basically held this meeting with the family, the agency. I think there was some health people there as well, and she just chaired this meeting, and it was so natural that to me was leadership." (Participant 11)

It was therefore suggested that this domain should be altered to be more clearly all-encompassing for everyone from across the career lifespan.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Below we present the combined findings from the three stages of the project, followed by the suggested recommendations for change, reflection, and improvement of the PCF. Overall, we suggest that the PCF certainly is still fit for purpose and that it should be the unifying and overarching framework used for practice and education. However, we recommend that (similar to frameworks used in other professions such as education and occupational therapy), there should be greater signposting of the various other frameworks used within social work, with those frameworks feeding into the PCF. We also recommend changes to the presentation of the three super domains and the Professional Leadership domain 9, while social justice should be at the heart of each and every domain. We recommend that tangible practice examples of the PCF should be more visible to support personal and career development, and a greater emphasis on reflection within training and practice. Finally, there should be a clearer career framework associated with the PCF too.

The PCF and Other Professions' Frameworks

The PCF, its use and utility, shares a lot in common with frameworks which support the practice of professions such as those in education and Occupational Therapy. The PCF therefore is in a good position to underpin the education and practice of social workers. However, we also suggest that there may be space within the PCF for an extended career development piece – particularly for those early on in their careers, which is similar to the Early Career Framework used in education. This is a two-year package of training and development for the most recently qualified teachers, and outlines both the financial and developmental support which should be provided to teachers. The proposed extended framework for social workers would therefore go beyond the current Assessed Year in Supported Employment, and recommend the continued training, mentoring, support, and development opportunities that social workers should be presented with across the two years post-graduation. We suggest that this may reduce attrition from the profession in the earliest years of practice, while also providing ongoing support within these earliest years of practice. It is also clear that there is often a lack of understanding where each of the frameworks sit within and alongside each other – including those not currently used.

Recommendations

Overall, we recommend that the PCF is still fit for purpose, although there are some points for improvement. The recommendations below have therefore been developed from the findings of the survey and interviews, while also being informed by the work of those in other professions. These suggestions for improvement are presented in no particular order of importance, and we would suggest that they should be acted on simultaneously.

- 1. Signposting Frameworks.** There are so many frameworks used in social work. In addition to the PCF there is the KSS, PEPS SOPs, Social Work England standards and more. Respondents across both the survey and interviews suggested that there are too many frameworks which do similar, yet slightly different things. We propose that the PCF should be an overarching framework for social work practice and education, but that the utility of other frameworks should at least be clearly signposted to within the PCF documentation, or at most built into PCF practices. We suggest, however, that the PCF should be the leading framework, with others feeding into it, because of its holistic nature.
- 2. Social Justice at the Heart.** Social justice is a key component of social work, and is at the heart of social work practice. Domain 4 of the PCF clearly covers this, and anti-oppressive, anti-racist practice is a core element of the social work code of ethics (BASW, 2021). However, we suggest that social justice should be at the heart of all of the PCF domains. This means clear reflection of and referring to social justice across all domains, to illustrate the importance of social justice to the social work role as a whole. An example here could be to have social justice as the one overarching superdomain for the PCF.
- 3. Integration of the Super Domains.** The use of the super domains is unclear. While those who provide social work education and professional development seem to understand the utility of the super domains, this understanding was not clear among those within practice or those currently undergoing social work training. We suggest, therefore, that the use of the super domains is more clearly described across the education and practice literature, and in particular reflecting on their use and utility for those training or already within the job. There is also, perhaps, the argument that social justice should be more greatly integrated into these super domains.
- 4. An Improved Career Framework.** It was acknowledged throughout the research process that the career framework was clear, and that there are good examples of the use of the career framework across the nine social work levels of employment. However, while the requirements asked of those in the earliest parts of their career seem clear, it is less so for those in the upper-most levels. Workload, lack of senior support, and other issues thus presented issues for development in these levels. As such we recommend that greater support is given to support social workers to move through the levels of employment. We also recommend that any career framework should clearly be referenced to those working outside of Local Authorities and the NHS, such as hospices and private hospitals.
- 5. Clearer Emphasis on Reflection.** Domain 6 reflects on the importance of critical reflection and analysis in decision making in social work. However, reflection is wider than this and includes reflective supervision, which is so crucial to good (and critical) decision making in social work. As such this importance needs to be emphasised more clearly.
- 6. Professional Leadership Difficult to Demonstrate.** Professional leadership is clearly an important part of social work. However, it can be difficult to demonstrate across the whole of the social work employment lifespan. We suggest that this domain needs to be made more inclusive of those at different levels of practice, and thus the name and/or emphasis on leadership need to either be altered or made much clearer. We suggest that this needs to be done via a working group, but it should reflect the support that is needed to be provided to colleagues and service users, with this being an integral part of professional leadership.
- 7. Illustrative Examples.** Social work students found it difficult at times to grasp the tangible nature of the nine PCF domains, and in particular how they are used in practice. Respondents requested therefore – particularly those early in their training and careers – specific and tangible examples of each domain in use across training, practice, and career development.

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