

The contribution of social workers to multi-disciplinary practice



BASW
England

The professional association for
social work and social workers

Acknowledgements

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1. Introduction

Ongoing policy developments in the English NHS and adult and children's social care services, are once again bringing multi-disciplinary working into the spotlight. BASW believes that this is a good time to highlight the historical role of social work within multi-disciplinary settings, whilst also noting the potential for broader contribution in the future. Social workers have been instrumental in co-ordinating the efforts of diverse professional, community and lived experience groups, working from a perspective which promotes social justice, ethical practice, person centred approaches and co-production.

The aim of this document is to succinctly outline the background to, value of and variety of social work within multi-disciplinary settings. It is not aimed at any one group, but it is hoped it will be a useful guide to fellow professionals, policy makers, community groups, and the wider public and act as a tool for social workers to refer to when explaining the role of social work.

The origins of [modern statutory Social Work](#) in England can be traced back to the Seebohm Report of 1968 and the subsequent [Local Authority Social Services Act 1970](#), which created the profession of Social Work. Both the report and the act articulated a specific intent that Social Workers should challenge the disproportionate power of the medical profession to support a move away from the dominance of hospital-based care, towards provision in the community, particularly for people with dementia, learning disabilities and mental ill health.





The recent history of multi-disciplinary working in England can be traced to the community care reforms of the late 1980s, many of which were given statutory force by the Mental Health Act 1983 and NHS and Community Care Act 1990¹. This saw a move towards the replacement of the broader, more holistic and transformational social work role, to that of a more transactional "care management" role, with less value placed on relationships, while the parallel implementation of the Care Programme Approach in the NHS created a similar role, the 'key worker'. Both roles shared a responsibility for co-ordinating the development of a care or support-plan and overseeing its implementation and maintenance, alongside providing a direct service to individuals and families according to their particular profession². The importance of multi-disciplinary and inter-agency working was also stressed in Children's legislation and policy documents, notably the 2003 *Every Child Matters* Green paper incorporated into the 2004 Children Act and in successive versions of *Working Together to Safeguard Children*.

Over the following decades, local joint working arrangements across the NHS, social services departments and the much more widespread involvement of the voluntary and private sectors, created a wide array of roles that could potentially be carried out by social workers across a range of organisational contexts. The purpose of this short paper is not to catalogue these, or to review the evidence of their effectiveness, but to highlight the unique contribution of social work and its relevance to plans for the next iterations of health and local authority social care and broader social and community services.

Whilst many social workers, work within multi-disciplinary teams, many are based within social work specific teams but regularly work with other professionals in teams formed around particular individuals and families. For the purposes of this document, we will be referring to the context of multi-disciplinary settings, to encompass the breadth of multi-disciplinary work undertaken by social workers.

2. Shared Principles, Knowledge and Values

The scope of this document is to recognise and highlight the principles, knowledge and values that social workers bring across the workforce, inter-professional working and wider multi-disciplinary settings. Social workers are situated within diverse professional spaces including but not limited to statutory social work roles with children and/or adults, directly employed by Local Authorities, health providers including the NHS and private sector, in commissioning, operational management, charity sector organisations, governmental roles, prison and probation services and independent social work practice. These roles can span



policy and legal frameworks covering child and adult support and safeguarding, physical health, mental health, learning disability, justice and courts services. Whilst employment in each of these roles will add to social workers specific knowledge and skills relevant to their specialism or area of practice, there will also be aspects of their principles, knowledge and values which are primarily underpinned by being a social worker.

Whilst this paper is not intended to be an exhaustive list of social work knowledge, values, principles and skills, its aim is to highlight some key features held by social workers regardless of the settings they are working in or the roles they are undertaking.

● **Anti-oppressive practice**

Anti-oppressive practice is an umbrella term and set of values that dates back over many decades but remains central to social work practice, due to the continued inequalities experienced by people, particularly those who may come into contact with health and social care professionals and particularly from communities traditionally excluded from power. Dominelli and Campling, discuss the positionality of social work and discuss the importance of social workers recognising the power dynamics at play when working with people and staying vigilant to oppressive practices³. Anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practice are also central to the value base of social workers and underpin their work. Social workers are





key to the advocacy of the rights of people which includes at times challenging the very systems they work within where unjust or oppressive practices are being conducted. A social worker adhering to these principles will be acting, in line with their professional standards.

● **Legal literacy**

In order to qualify, a social worker must have completed a degree or post graduate qualification, which includes teaching on the law relevant to social work practice. Furthermore, many social workers undertake further legal training as part of their duties and ongoing professional development. Social workers are adept at working within legal frameworks such as the Children Act 1989, the Children and Families Act 2014, the Human Rights Act 1998, the Mental Capacity Act 2005, the Mental Health Act 1983, the Equality Act 2010 and the Care Act 2014. Social workers are experienced in enacting statutory responsibilities within some of this legislation, promoting individual rights, safeguard and challenge oppression. They may provide evidence to courts and may use their legal knowledge and skills to support their multi-disciplinary colleagues or services and decision making.

● **Relationship-based practice**

Underpinning social work values are relationship-based models of practice, which have an emphasis on the person being an expert of their own life. These approaches embed social workers' values of empowerment and self-determination. Social work practice is described by Ruth, Turney and Ward as "*demanding, confusing and paradoxical at times and requiring of the worker the ability to stay with people in distress or turmoil and continue to provide a mixture of personal support and pragmatic guidance, largely through the medium of a reliable, engaged and constructive relationship*".⁴

This involves using knowledge from a range of sources, to select and make skilled use of a range of social work approaches and methods to fit the particular circumstances. Though some methods and skills are specific to social work, some are shared with other professionals (e.g. basic counselling skills, signposting, advocacy, mediation, family therapy).

A reassertion of the importance and value of relationship-based practice is occurring against a backdrop of systems which are overly bureaucratic and managerialist [80-20 Campaign | BASW](#)

3. Approaches to professional practice as a social worker

Relationship-based support is central to practice as a social worker and can occur across a number of areas of practice including but not exclusive to:

- Community/neighbourhood social work.
- One-to-one or family social work with people across age groups who may request or be assessed as in need of a social work or broader social care service.
- Social group-work including in residential and day care settings, or chairing 'team around the person' or inter-professional meetings.

The specific components of relationship-based social work are:

- Seeking out and analysing relevant information, using appropriate theories for understanding the issues and for understanding which knowledge-based

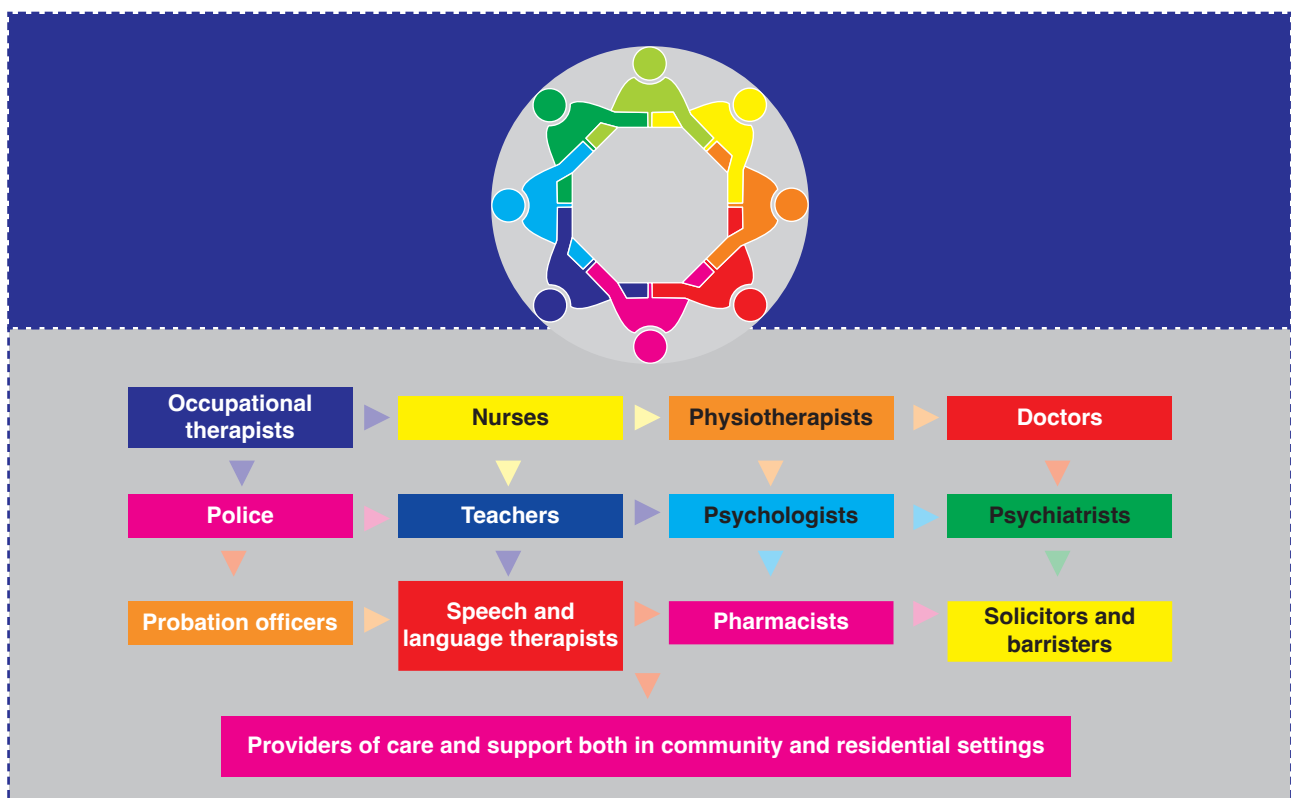
social work approaches, methods and skills may be appropriate in the particular circumstances.

- In partnership with individuals, family members, carers, wider support network and other professionals, agreeing, coordinating and reviewing appropriate packages of practical help, support, protection, care and therapy.
- Decision-making about service provision in the context of the legal mandate and service setting– including decisions about voluntary or involuntary residential placement.
- In collaboration with individuals, family members and wider support networks, compiling case notes and recording work undertaken for purposes of safeguarding, supervision, quality assurance and the collection and appropriate sharing of accurate data to aid future planning at national and local level.

INFOGRAPHIC 1:

Who we work with in single agency and multi-disciplinary settings

Whilst the majority of their joint working will be with people, families and carers they are supporting, within multi-disciplinary settings, social workers will also work alongside a wide range of other professionals including but not limited to:



- Depending on the setting and legal mandate, direct provision of a short or longer-term rights-based, person-centred social work service.

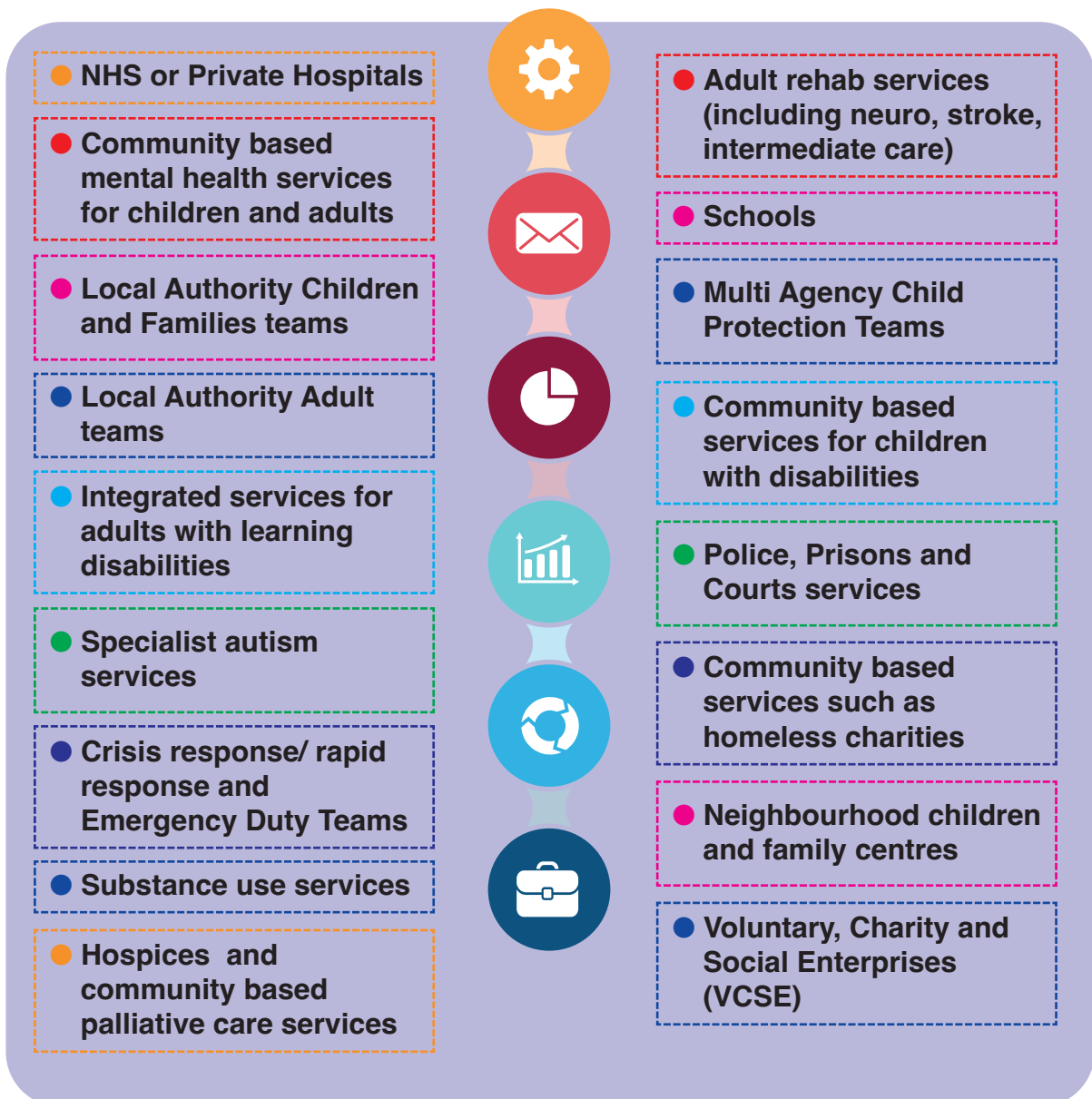
Social workers often play a pivotal role in developing and maintaining multi-disciplinary relationships, around the person they are working with. They often take on the role of coordinating and bringing together other disciplines, professionals and organisations, because of their holistic and contextual approach. Social workers know that understanding the often multiple and

overlapping potential causes of oppression and being able to see an individual or group through a systems thinking approach is key to understanding what matters to that person and how to help them.

In summary, though in some specialist settings, social workers may use a tightly defined 'evidence-based' therapeutic approach or method, it is the breadth of the knowledge-base and the range of approaches and methods that flag up the specific contribution of the social worker.

INFOGRAPHIC 2: Where we work collaboratively with other professionals

Social workers are key members of multi-disciplinary teams in a wide range of publicly provided, not-for profit and private sector agencies and settings. The following are examples but not an exhaustive list:



4. Professional roles and regulation

'Social Worker' is a protected title, meaning a person cannot call themselves a social worker in England unless they are registered with Social Work England, who is the Professional Regulator to whom they are accountable. Some social work roles require additional annotation to the SWE register, based on additional qualifications of Approved Mental Health Professional (AMHP) or Best Interests Assessor (BIA). Social workers are united by a commitment to their professional standards which include the promotion of the rights and strengths of people and their communities, the importance of establishing and maintaining trust and confidence, accountability, practising safely, respectfully and with integrity and a commitment to continuous professional development. In addition to this,

a large number of social workers also hold membership with the British Association of Social Work and as such, are also unified through overarching [code of ethics](#) and principles of purpose, practice and impact outlined with their [Professional Capabilities Framework \(PCF\)](#).

Prior to 2003 social workers in England qualified at diploma level, however following the establishment of the General Social Care Council in 2001, social work education moved to degree status in 2003. Post qualifying, social workers are expected to complete an [Assessed and Supported Year in Employment \(ASYE\)](#), a programme which all employers can access, but remains non mandatory. Whilst social workers may be line managed by people with other professional



backgrounds, in line with their professional standards⁵, social workers are expected to actively participate in professional or clinical reflective supervision, with another social worker or social workers if group supervision is provided by the employer.

Funding streams to support social work specific CPD is not currently equitable to those from other professions for NHS employed social workers in England. Within local authorities the role of the Principal Social Worker (PSW) was established under the Care Act 2014 but only applies in legislation to local authorities. Social work leadership is varied across the NHS and amongst other non-local authority organisations, making it difficult at times for the voice of the profession to be heard. This document aims to strengthen the understanding of the valuable role that social workers play in society and specifically within multi-disciplinary practice. It also aims to promote the need for equity in terms of professional development opportunities and the value placed on the profession of social work.

INFOGRAPHIC 3: Types of work we undertake in multi-disciplinary settings

Whilst details/focus of functions will vary on the role, the following are common strands of activity



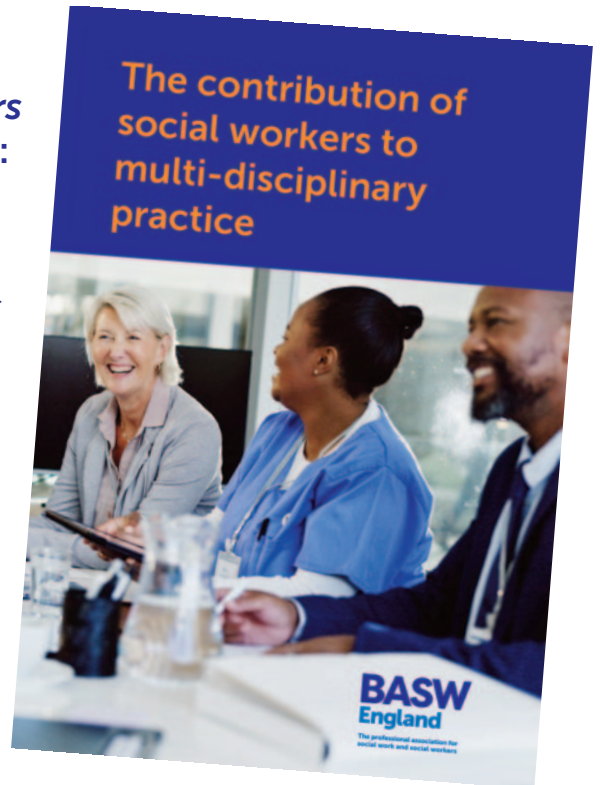
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