

PCF

2026

Professional Capabilities Framework



Overview

BASW
England

The professional association for
social work and social workers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) is the overarching framework for social work practice in England, providing structure and guidance for social workers in every sector and at every career stage. It forms the backbone of social work education and professional development.

► PCF background

The PCF was originally devised in 2012 by the Social Work Reform Board, using partnership principles to build a fresh, values-based approach to the profession (SWRB, 2012). From the outset, it was intended as a 'live' document, with flexibility to adapt in response to changing context and need (Tompsett, 2011). Consequently, it has been reviewed and refreshed twice, with both revisions adopting the same collaborative, sector-led and evidence-informed approach as the original.

The first revision of the PCF was undertaken in 2017-2018, following the transfer of ownership from The College of Social Work to the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) in 2015. This revision was undertaken by BASW England in conjunction with Research in Practice, at which time key changes included the creation of the 'Super-Domains' with an associated change in the appearance of the fan, and content revisions for a better fit with the BASW Code of Ethics and international social work definitions (BASW, 2018).

In 2024, BASW England commissioned an independent evaluation of the PCF (Ravalier et al., 2024), with the goal of finding out what the profession needs from the PCF in the current professional context. The overriding finding was that the PCF continues to be fit for purpose and is valued by the profession, though there were a number of recommendations for how it might be updated and improved further.

The current 2026 PCF Refresh has been undertaken by the BASW England Professional Capabilities and Development Group and led by Polly Sykes and Gemma Webb. The PCF remains THE whole career framework that is owned by social workers: **created BY the profession, FOR the profession.**

► Approach to the PCF Refresh

The recommendations are informed by the findings of the independent evaluation (Ravalier et al. 2024) and a subsequent open survey (BASW, 2025), which were categorised under four main headings:

1. The PCF as a whole
2. Illustrative exercises and examples
3. Structure and mapping
4. Specific domain and descriptor recommendations

These were presented in a series of open consultation workshops, with an accompanying questionnaire, to establish the support for how these changes might be implemented (BASW, 2026).

In accordance with all of the feedback received, the 2026 revision process applied the following thematic principles for any changes:

Keep it simple, keep it clear, keep it universal

For each suggested change, careful thought was given as to whether it was necessary, how it would impact on the PCF as a whole, and whether the identified need could be met in some other way without changing or adding to the PCF.

A summary of the changes, within each of the four categories, is presented below:

1. The PCF as a whole

While respondents welcomed the consistency of the PCF, it was felt that the language could be modified in places for greater accessibility and inclusivity - including the language we use to describe issues of Equality, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EEDI) and generative AI.

There were also discussions about the reach and application of the PCF; respondents were keen to ensure that the PCF applies equally across the social work profession, regardless of employer type, sphere of work, or level of seniority.

2. Illustrative exercises and exemplars: a new PCF Resource Hub

Social workers wanted additional support to understand and apply the PCF in the real world, with a particular focus on specific areas such as 'leadership' at pre-qualification and early career stages, reflective supervision and social justice.

BASW England will embed a live, ongoing hub for gathering and maintaining a resource of accompanying materials sourced from within the profession and from those with lived experience of engaging with social work services.

This work will be overseen by an existing group within BASW England, who will create a hub for social workers and people with lived experience to submit

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scenarios, exemplars, videos and visual tools and simplified documents. This approach will allow for a variety of mediums and formats for broad appeal. Social workers may want to submit examples that may already have been created for other purposes such as regulatory CPD or student reports. The group will also find ways to acknowledge and celebrate those who take the time to demonstrate their leadership and professionalism in this way.

The PCF Resource Hub serves as a stand-alone recommendation, and it also cuts across the other three categories. For example, practice examples could provide support to social workers struggling to understand how the PCF and other standards fit together.

3. Structure and mapping

The concept of social justice was consistently highlighted as a priority. In the words of one workshop participant, it should be a "golden thread running through the whole of the PCF". Discussions noted areas of controversy, for example around different interpretations of social justice and ideal aspirations compared to the realities of practice. Participants were largely in favour of including social justice as a new foundational principle, rather than adding additional statements to individual domains - so that the concept is foregrounded without adding too much complexity.

The PCF domains have been renumbered to match the presentation on the fan and make it more logical. The 'Professionalism' domain was moved to the end of the fan in line with the corresponding super-domain in 2018, but was not renumbered at the time to avoid disruption. Feedback suggested that renumbering now would create a more cohesive fan, to the benefit of new social workers coming into the profession. The domains were not re-ordered, although this was discussed, in order to keep structural changes to a minimum.

The research highlighted that social work regulation and guidance is increasing, which causes confusion and impacts on workloads. It recommended that the multiple frameworks be combined or aligned. While subsequent guidance is not under the authority of BASW England, the PCF Refresh will link to mapping documents that will help social workers understand the complementary nature of the PCF and other frameworks.

An additional resource will present the domain descriptors alongside a short additional statement describing how each domain links internally to PCF super-domains, and externally to SWE Standards. Links to other external guidance, along with practical materials, will be included in the PCF Resource Hub going forward.

4. Specific domain and descriptor recommendations

There were requests to clarify or add statements to specific PCF domains; particularly in relation to leadership and reflective supervision, alongside a variety of other areas including: whistle blowing and complaints, political literacy, inclusive language, generative AI and ethics. A number of changes have been made to PCF statements to make the PCF more relevant to today's practice.

There were requests for a separate career framework to be developed. The PCF applies throughout the social work career, from pre-qualification, to frontline social work, to managerial and strategic social work posts. In this way, the PCF itself forms the basis of a career framework, allowing social workers and employers to gauge activities against the relevant level within the fan. Noting crossover with work being undertaken by the Department for Education (BASW, 2024), changes have not been made to the PCF at this time, though materials will be added to the PCF Resource Hub particularly to support progression at senior levels.

► Summary

The high level of engagement with the research, survey and subsequent change process reflects the fact that the profession continues to value the PCF hugely and feels a sense of collective ownership. Contributors included social workers at all levels, stakeholder organisations and people who have lived experience of social work. The feedback showed that they appreciated the stability, consistency and ongoing relevance of the PCF.

Social work practice takes place within a fast-changing political and social contexts. External factors, from increasing poverty and inequality to technological advances, have a huge impact on those directly accessing services and on the work of social workers. Throughout this work, we have sought to ensure that the PCF is contemporary and future-facing, providing direction without being too rigid or specific - which can be a difficult balance to strike.

The core values and standards of the PCF continue to act as a guide for all social work practice. In order to successfully apply the PCF in day-to-day work, it is crucial that social workers operate within a context in which they themselves are valued, resourced and supported - in accordance with the PCF.

As always, the PCF is intended as a living and responsive document and further reviews will be necessary in the future. Work is now needed in order to develop, implement and embed the PCF Resource Hub and to implement and promote awareness of the refreshed PCF.

This document should be read alongside a wide variety of other practice guidance, including the Social Work England Professional Standards (SWE, 2019)

ABOUT THE PROFESSIONAL CAPABILITIES FRAMEWORK (PCF)

The PCF is a framework for the nine career levels of social work in England. You can use the framework to find which level you are, identify your professional capabilities and develop your career.

► What is the PCF?

The PCF is the Professional Capabilities Framework; it is the framework for social work practice and learning in England.

The PCF sets out nine common domains of capability that we expect to develop professionally as social workers and which others can expect of us. It promotes and underpins social work as 'one profession' across all specialisms, all organisations and all roles. It supports social workers to meet the requirements of the professional regulator, specific guidance and policy for particular job roles and is aligned with the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) global definition of social work (2014) and the BASW Code of Ethics for social workers across the UK (BASW, 2021). The PCF does not define all the specialist knowledge, skills or learning content that may be needed in particular work contexts or roles. For instance, the Knowledge and Skills statements are additional current governmental guidance on knowledge and skills for statutory children's and adults social work in England. Also, BASW has produced resources to support social workers working with people with learning disabilities and autistic people.

The PCF identifies how we should act and approach our work through common capabilities that relate to our purpose, practice and our commitment to having an impact and making a difference to people's lives. It underpins our continuous professional development because it helps us identify and map how to learn and improve through the different stages and aspects of our careers. It supports employers, workforce leads, managers and supervisors - as well as individual social workers in developing social work careers and ongoing professional learning.

The PCF has been our framework for social work in England since 2012 and its implementation across the sector - from qualifying training through to strategic workforce planning - is widespread and well embedded. The PCF may evolve as our profession and our learning evolve.

► What is a 'super-domain'?

The PCF 2018 introduced a new feature - the 'super-domains'.

These cluster the nine domains into three areas with the overarching titles of:

- **Purpose:** Why we do what we do as social workers; our values and ethics and how we approach our work
- **Practice:** What we do - the specific skills, knowledge, interventions and critical analytic abilities we develop to act and do social work
- **Impact:** How we make a difference and how we know we make a difference. Our ability to bring about change through our practice; through our leadership; through understanding our context and through our overall professionalism

Each super-domain sits over three domains that particularly relate (in a common-sense way) with the super-domain above. However, the principles of purpose, practice and impact can also be seen as cutting across all domains, so there is no hard, visual demarcation between the super-domains. For instance, 'impact' can be directly related to interventions and skills, and 'professionalism' may be considered directly related to 'purpose' and the ethics behind how you approach your work.

All 9 domains can be directly related to 'Practice', an example being the integration of 'rights and justice' is fundamental to how social workers make interventions and apply their skills in practice. The super-domains do not undermine the concept that there are interrelationships between all the domains of the PCF.

► Foundational Principle: [Social Justice](#)

Social justice refers to a shared commitment by all social workers to recognise and challenge inequality, discrimination, racism and oppression in all forms. It involves promoting equity, inclusion and fair access to resources and opportunities, while respecting diversity and valuing peoples lived experiences. Social workers need to critically consider the wider political, social, economic and structural factors that impact individuals and communities to support defensible and well-informed decisions and interventions. Social workers are expected to take a holistic approach, acting in ways that promote empathy and collective responsibility; support empowerment; uphold human rights and contribute to equitable outcomes.

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► What is a domain descriptor?

The domain descriptors describe key areas of social work practice. These were refreshed in 2018 following wide consultation. Grouped within the corresponding super-domains, the descriptors are:

PURPOSE Super-domain:

(1) Values and Ethics

Apply social work ethical principles and values to guide professional practices.

(2) Diversity and Equality

Recognise diversity and apply anti-discriminatory, anti-racist and anti-oppressive principles in practice.

(3) Rights, Justice and Economic Well Being

Advance human rights and promote social justice and economic wellbeing.

PRACTICE Super-domain:

(4) 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.

(5) Critical Reflection and Analysis

Apply critical reflection and analysis to inform and provide a rationale for professional decision-making.

(6) Intervention and Skills

Use judgement, knowledge and authority to intervene with individuals, families and communities to promote independence, provide support, prevent harm and enable progress.

IMPACT Super-domain:

(7) 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 interprofessional settings.

(8) 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.

(9) Professionalism

Identify and behave as a professional social worker, committed to professional development.

► What is a level descriptor?

A level descriptor describes the roles and titles that align to these levels. As shown on the PCF fan graphic, the four pre-qualifying levels are:

- Point of entry to training
- Readiness for practice
- End of first placement
- End of last placement

with another five levels beyond:

- Newly qualified social worker
- Social worker
- Experienced social worker
- Advanced social worker
- Strategic social worker

The Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) is a comprehensive framework that applies to all social work roles and practice settings, regardless of the area of work, organisation or stage of a social worker's career.

Social work can take place in a variety of settings, including: statutory settings such as: central government services and local authorities, the criminal and youth justice system and in the Private, Voluntary and Independent sector (private for-profit organisations, charities, social enterprises and independent agencies). There is a lot of variation across the country, with the same service provided by different types of organisation depending on the geographical area. Social work is extremely diverse; examples of the type of work that might be undertaken include:

- Childrens' social care (local authority). Teams might focus on work such as: safeguarding; fostering and adoption; youth justice; preparing for adulthood or disabled children
- Adults social care (local authority). Practitioners might undertake work within learning disability teams; adults teams; mental health or hospital social work teams
- National Health Service (NHS) (central government). Work may include: hospital social work; child and adolescent mental health services and community mental health teams
- HM Prison and Probation Service and the Youth Custody Service (central government) including work within prisons and in probation. With younger people, this would include work in youth offender institutions; secure training centres; children's homes and schools
- Private, Voluntary and Independent organisations such as: fostering and adoption; residential care providers; advocacy services; mental health and forensic organisations; community-based support services; substance misuse services and other specialist settings.

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► The refreshed PCF fan graphic (2026)



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The PCF is not prescriptive about how job roles and titles correlate with the different level descriptors. It is likely that roles and titles will become more diverse at more senior and/or advanced levels of practice. The PCF fan graphic is accompanied by overarching descriptions of the types of role and a summary of the level of capability at each level. Whilst primarily designed for social workers, individuals in related roles or those with associated qualifications may find the capability statements up to the end of final placement level useful to describe and support the purpose, practice and impact of their own work.

By providing a shared framework across diverse sectors and settings, the PCF promotes consistency, professionalism, and high-quality practice while allowing practitioners to apply its principles in ways that reflect their specific responsibilities and the needs of the people they support.

Each super-domain sits over three domains that particularly relate in a common-sense way with the super-domain above. However, the principles of purpose, practice and impact can also be seen as cutting across all domains, so there is no hard, visual demarcation between the super-domains. Underneath the fan, 'Social Justice' is now highlighted as the foundation of social work practice.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PROFESSIONAL CAPABILITIES FRAMEWORK (PCF) AND OTHER GUIDANCE AND STANDARDS

Since the creation of the PCF in 2012, other national social work guidance for England has been developed. This includes:

- The Social Work Post Qualifying Standards: Knowledge and Skills Statements (known as PQS or KSS) were created in 2014-15 and updated in 2018 by expert working groups under the direction of England's Chief Social Workers. In March 2027, the KSS for child and family practitioners will be replaced by the Early Career Standards (ECS). The Knowledge and Skills Statements for Social Workers in Adult Services will remain in place.
- Social Work England's professional standards, created when Social Work England became the professional regulator in 2019.

The list is not exhaustive; other social work-specific guidance is emerging, such as the 'Knowledge, Skills and Behaviour' (KSBs), intended as new social work curriculum guidance from Social Work England (SWE, 2024). Alongside this guidance, social workers must maintain an understanding of a wide range of other national and organisational guidance including: law, policy and good practice guides.

The PCF, professional standards and KSS demonstrate significant overlap in their shared emphasis on core social work principles, despite serving different professional functions. The PCF provides a holistic, developmental framework across a social worker's career. Social Work England's professional standards define the threshold requirements for safe and effective practice. The KSS are the post-qualifying standards setting out what social workers should know and be able to do when working with adults. The child and family social worker early career standards describe the professional outcomes that child and family social workers should demonstrate in their first 2 years in practice.

Frameworks align in key areas such as: values and ethics; anti-oppressive, anti-racist and anti-discriminatory principles; professional accountability and the application of knowledge, law and theory. They also emphasise essential skills including: communication, assessment, risk management and evidence-informed decision-making - alongside the importance of critical reflection and multi-agency working. However, while the PCF is broader and capability focused, supporting progression across levels, Social Work England's professional standards, the KSS and the ECS are more explicit and practice specific, translating these shared capabilities into measurable expectations for practice.

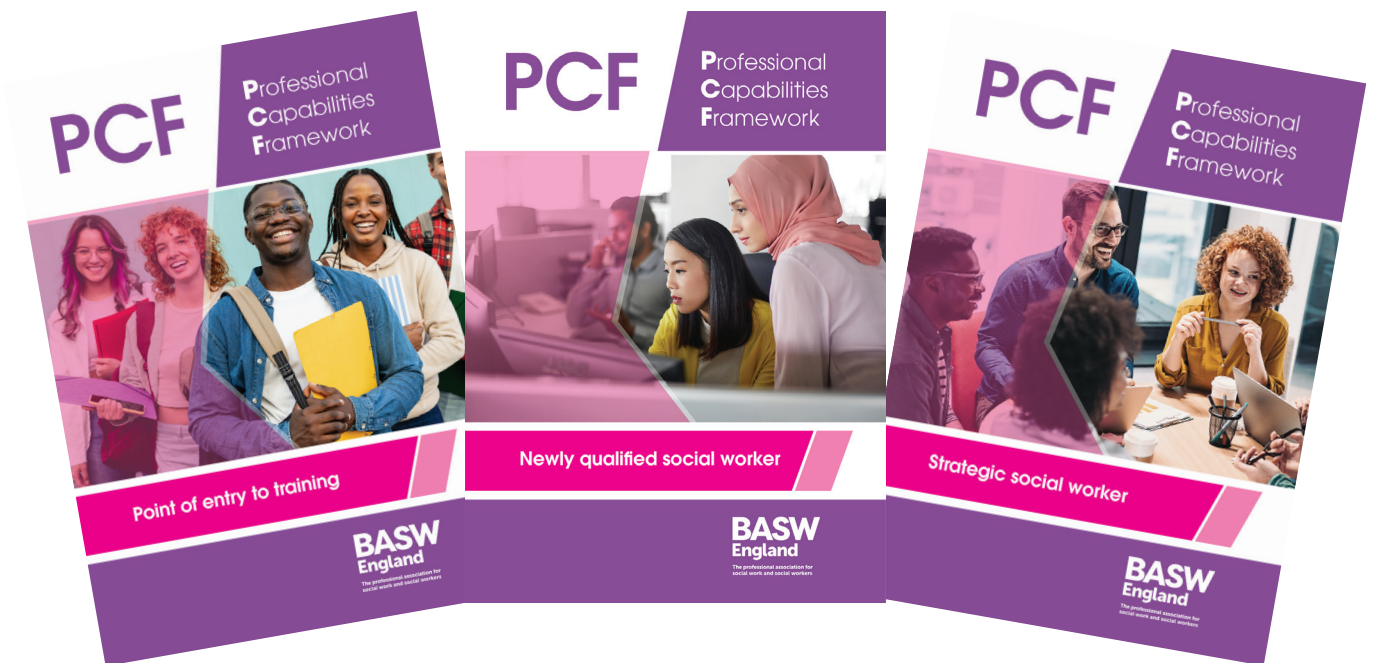
Further information which may be useful includes:

- A joint statement from BASW, the Department for Health and Social Care and the Chief Social Worker for Adults, and the Department for Education and Chief Social Worker for Children, outlines how the PCF, KSS and SWE Standards map onto each other, and can be found [here](#).
- BASW has produced a document to help social workers to understand how the PCF, the KSS and the regulatory standards relate to each other, and how they have different, complementary roles to play in promoting excellent social work and supporting you in your practice development. Please see our document: [Mapping the PCF, KSS and Regulatory Standards in England](#)
- For more detailed point-by-point mapping, please see links for the '[KSB to PCF Mapping](#)' and '[KSS \(post-qualifying standards\) to PCF Mapping](#)'.

The PCF is not a curriculum content guide for all social work development and was not created as such. Rather, it is a framework for generic capabilities and professional development onto which specific areas of practice knowledge and skill can be built (e.g. capabilities for social work with older people, [The Capabilities for Social Work with Adults who have Learning Disability](#)) and [The Capabilities Statement for Social Work with Autistic Adults](#).

THE PROFESSIONAL CAPABILITIES FRAMEWORK DOMAIN STATEMENTS

- Point of entry to training PCF
- Readiness for direct practice PCF
- End of first placement PCF
- End of last placement/completion PCF
- Newly qualified social worker PCF
- Social worker PCF
- Experienced social worker PCF
- Advanced social worker PCF
- Strategic social worker PCF



SUPPORTING SOCIAL WORKERS TO USE THE PCF

Following the PCF Refresh, BASW England will focus on developing a comprehensive hub of resources to support the PCF, ensuring it is relevant across roles, sectors and career stages. This will include resources linking to a range of practice examples, tools, exercises and videos to enable people's understanding of how the PCF can be put into practice.

At this stage, the aim is that the work will include a focus on reflective supervision, personal development, the application of theory to real world contexts. There will also be examples around how the PCF can be used to strengthen progression pathways. There will be links to other frameworks to promote engagement and practical use.

APPENDIX 1: RESOURCES & INFORMATION

► Terminology

Some of the key terms used in this document are outlined below. Terminology evolves over time and language changes to reflect new understandings, cultural shifts and societal developments. These terms may be updated as needed.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Ongoing learning activities to ensure social workers are professionally up to date. There is a requirement to register this activity with the social work regulator Social Work England.

Post-Qualifying Standards: Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS) for Social Workers in Adults Services and Children & Family Worker Early Career Standards (ECS)

Sets out what social workers, supervisors and practice leaders should know and be able to do within the context of their role in different settings.

People with Lived Experience (PLE)

People who will have had direct or indirect experience of social work services. The PCF also uses 'individuals, families and carers' as terms for people who receive services or are potentially eligible. For the purposes of this refresh PLE have contributed to the development of the PCF.

Practice Placements

Students gain experience in a practice setting as part of a pre-qualifying programme (200 days across the duration of the programme), often broken down into 30 skills days, 70 days (first placement) and 100 days (final placement).

Students

In line with Social Work England's 'Education and Training Standards' we are using the term 'social work student' ('student') in the PCF to refer to anyone undertaking a qualifying social work course. Other guidance and discussions may use terms such as: learner, practitioner in training, and/or apprentice.

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APPENDIX 2: CONTRIBUTORS TO THE REVIEW

We would like to express our sincere thanks to all individuals, partners, organisations and stakeholders who contributed to this consultation and review process. The importance of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) was clearly reflected in the high level of engagement and we are grateful for the time, insights, expertise and feedback shared.

BASW England received 399 responses to the 2025 PCF survey and a total of 592 participants registered across the three consultation workshop events. Both the survey and the workshops were open to BASW England members and non-members alike, to encourage broad participation and ensure a diverse range of perspectives. The review drew directly on the original independent research from Ravalier et. al. (2024), which involved 278 participants alongside 16 semi-structured interviews that provided deeper qualitative insights.

Contributions were received from people representing a wide range of roles, sectors, organisations and perspectives across the social work profession, including individuals with lived experience.

This breadth of engagement has strengthened the refresh and helped ensure that the revised PCF reflects the diverse contexts in which social work is practiced.

Particular thanks go to members of the BASW England Professional Capabilities and Development Group, whose expertise and commitment were invaluable in supporting the finalisation of the changes.

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- Jenni Wallen - Social Worker
- Julie Henry – Curriculum Lead for Consultant Social Workers at Frontline
- Kerrie Wood – Commissioning Manager at Staffordshire County Council
- Lynda McDonald – Senior Lecturer Social Work at Manchester Metropolitan University & NOPT Committee Member
- Mark Nicolas (Deputy Director for Digital Operations, Platforms and Data, Chief Social Worker and Head of Profession for Social Care Informatics, Digital Clinical Informatics Team | NHS Transformation Directorate, NHS England
- Melissa Crowland - Person with lived experience
- Omosigho Eborei - Social Worker
- Patricia Turner - Person with lived experience
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- Polly Sykes (lead editor)– Head of Social Work at the University of York / Co-Lead for the PCF Refresh Project
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- Professor Jermaine M Ravalier – Pro Vice Chancellor & Academic at Buckinghamshire New University
- Rheana Yacoob – Independent Social Worker
- Soyeb Aswat – Professional Lead for Social Work
- Wayne Reid – Professional Officer at BASW England