

Submission: HM Treasury Budget 2023 Written Representation

British Association of Social Workers

Introduction

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) represents over 22,000 social workers across the four countries of the UK. This response represents work undertaken by BASW and is drawn from agreed policy documents and public statements.

As the professional voice of social work and social workers BASW seeks to proactively engage with all mainstream political parties, politicians, and elected governments.

Social work is a graduate entry profession, and all practicing social workers need to be registered with the appropriate national regulator. There are approximately 110,000 registered social workers across the UK. The majority of social workers work in local authorities and other public sector organisations. Social work and social workers thus represent a significant professional element of public sector services.

Social workers have specific legal duties (enshrined in a variety of laws both UK-wide and nation specific) which address a range of responsibilities relating to specific groups. In relation to adults, social workers have responsibilities in relation to mental capacity, care assessment planning and delivery, those with severe mental health problems, the safeguarding of adults and those with a disability, including those with a learning disability. In relation to children, social workers have responsibilities in relation to the safeguarding of children, the care of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, children who are 'looked after', and adoption.

Social workers generally undertake work with the economically poor and those who are most vulnerable in society. Our members are therefore well positioned to comment on the impact of broader societal issues (for example, poverty, housing).

The submission represents existing position statements and policy decisions endorsed by BASW's standing committees, special interest groups and working parties. We have referenced the submission to our own source documents.

Social work is a devolved matter. We therefore have flagged the material in this submission to those issues which are UK wide (human rights legislation, welfare benefits) and those which are England specific.

Economic context

We understand that due to factors such as COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine along with Government fiscal policy, there is not a large fiscal reserve that funds can be drawn down from to spend. Any Government would have to make tough decisions on what the spending priorities should be. We believe that tackling the root causes of disadvantage and poverty should be a key priority for the Government.

If the Government does not invest in the issues that we discuss in this submission, the Government will spend more in the long term. The policy suggestions we make are focused on prevention which would reduce demand on statutory services. If the Government does not invest in prevention and

early intervention to reduce the demand for statutory support, the demand for crisis services will grow, costing more money in the long term.

There is also a human cost to not investing in early intervention, such as increased family breakdown, more people experiencing severe mental illness, and living shorter lives impacted and impoverished by poor health. Poor health can also impact a person's economic prospects, as it could limit their ability to work.

In the course of our work, we have identified a number of priorities for the Government to consider which are addressed here.

Poverty

BASW as the professional body for social work aims to support the practice of social workers when working with people living in poverty. Poverty is an everyday reality for those needing and using social work services, and yet models and debates about anti-poverty social work practice and policies are underdeveloped. Austerity policies have made the lives of many families and communities harsher and harder and social workers routinely observe the detrimental impact of reduced income, welfare, and state support on people needing services.

In response to the increasing cost-of-living and the growth in the numbers of people living in poverty, BASW has launched a campaignⁱ calling on the Government to take action by adopting the following three policies;

1. Extend the debt breathing space scheme to 180 days

As poverty worsens, debt increases. The breathing space scheme is a 'pause' on action and contact from creditors that also prevents interest, fees, penalties, or charges being added for a 60-day period. There is also a mental health breathing space that can last as long as the crisis treatment lasts plus 30 days. There were 6,342 Breathing Space registrations in October 2022,ⁱⁱ which is 31% higher than the number registered in October 2021. 6,230 were Standard breathing space registrations, which is 31% higher than in October 2021, and 112 were Mental Health breathing space registrations, which is 38% higher than the number in October 2021. Extending the breathing scheme can give people more time to address their circumstances and get their finances under control.

2. Freeze evictions during the cost-of-living crisis to prevent further homelessness

Reduced income and higher rent demands from landlords will translate into more evictions and more families becoming homeless. This cannot be allowed to happen as it would cause untold damage to adults and children, placing many at safeguarding risk and leading to even more demand on social care and other services.

3. Scrap the two-child cap on benefits

At present, relevant benefits are only paid for the first two children. This impacts on many families but disproportionately impacts on those ethnic groups who have larger families. It also results in inhumane means testing, for example, the so-called "rape clause". This forces women to reveal delicate, personal and traumatic information.

Adult social care

The forthcoming budget must contain a long-term funding settlement for local authorities. Councillors and officers need to be able to plan ahead, establish priorities, and address the needs of

their communities. Right now, local authorities are struggling from year to year faced with seemingly unending uncertainty about their financial future and an inability to provide sufficient levels of services with the levels of funding made available to them.

We are calling for a greater focus on, and funding for, preventive services, which can reduce costly interventions that only occur when a crisis point has been reached. This is not just true for health services, but also true for social work support. Reductions to local authority budgets have forced councils into prioritising statutory services, with preventative and early intervention services being cut. We are also aware that in some cases, even statutory services are being deprioritised, leading to soaring demand for later stage crisis services. This approach is expensive, creates misery for those affected and compounds and aggravates their needs over the longer term. Prevention services can both save money in the longer-term and deliver better outcomes for individuals and families.

As early intervention services are cut, the burden on statutory services increases. We know that social worker caseloads are growing, with the cases they are handling becoming more complex, and we need to ensure that there are enough social workers available to provide the legally required services to all those who require them. There are currently 6,422 full-time equivalent children and family social worker vacancies in Englandⁱⁱⁱ, according to latest statistics from the Department for Education.

Demand has also been impacted by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and combined with an ageing population with increasingly complex needs, government can no longer ignore these growing pressures. Government must provide immediate relief and resources to ensure that people can get the support they need, and the workforce can handle the rising level of demand.

In addition, investment in local services is integral to supporting people to remain living in their own homes and local communities. Sustainable long-term investment is critical and although additional funds are welcome, the legacy and ongoing impact of the pandemic, winter pressures, lack of investment in social care and staff vacancies across the social care and health sector continues to bring pressure to an incredibly fragile system.

Additional funds must be used to support people in their own homes where at all possible, to support re-enablement safely and promote the rights and choice of citizens.

We also await further details of the emergency care recovery plans addressing the three main areas of work:

1. Steps to support the system now.
2. Work to improve resilience over summer.
3. Focusing on prevention and treating more people in the community.

Social work workforce

A future government must invest in the social work recruitment, education, professional development and retention initiatives we need for the next decade and beyond.

According to research conducted by BASW and the Social Workers Union with Bath Spa University, in 2018, 60% of social workers were looking to leave their current job within the next 15 months^{iv}. Of those respondents nearly 40% are looking to leave the profession entirely.

Compared to the UK average, working conditions for social workers were worse than 90%-95% of other employees in both public and private sector occupations, according to research by the Social Workers Union and Bath Spa University. Social workers worked an average of 64 days per year more than they are contracted to, an average of 11 hours a week. High case and administrative loads are a major source of stress and the quality of support to children and adults depends on providing social workers with the right working conditions.^v

BASW's 80/20 campaign research showed that one of the main stressors for frontline social workers is the lack of resources available to support services users and the limited time they are able to spend working with them face to face^{vi}. Relationship-based practice is fundamental to social work but too often administrative work that is easier to quantify takes precedence to the detriment of children and families. Social workers also play a key role in helping people with mental health needs or learning disabilities live independent lives outside of institutional care. Empowering community social work, focusing on people's strengths and assets, is crucial in supporting families to access the support they need at the time when they need it.

The cost of living is also impacting social workers themselves, and BASW England has launched a campaign^{vii} to:

1. Increase the mileage allowance to 60p so that the allowance reflects the increased cost of travelling for work.
2. Restore remote working allowances back to levels seen during the start of the pandemic.
3. Increase and make more accessible bursaries for students, ensuring social work remains a viable prospect for all.

Mental health funding

Social workers have key legal responsibilities in relation to those who suffer from the severest mental health challenges. In England and Wales, 95% of Approved Mental Health Practitioners^{viii} (AMHPs) under the mental health legislation are social workers. However, many social workers, whether specialising in mental health or not, frequently encounter people experiencing mental health issues in their work supporting society's most vulnerable.

A draft Mental Health Bill has just gone through pre-legislative scrutiny in Parliament. BASW welcomed the move towards a more person-centred strengths-based approach to mental health care and support outlined in the White Paper that preceded the Bill. We also acknowledge the need to drive down rates of detention under the Mental Health Act (1983) to ensure that this restriction of liberty is used as a last resort for people who are most in need. However, there are significant gaps and omissions.

Current reform proposals are heavily focused upon the NHS and a medical model of mental distress largely ignoring the many core issues relating to mental health that are rooted in social issues such as poverty, racism and inequality. One area where this is evident is among the disproportionate use of the powers in the Mental Health Act 1983 for people who are Black or identify as from an Ethnic Minority as evidenced in detention rates, rates of Community Treatment Orders or the use of section 136.

The importance of this social dimension is evident in the roles played by social work AMHPs and mental health social workers in particular, in providing support to the most vulnerable as quickly and effectively as possible with the aim of preventing hospital admission. This is a role that has become

markedly more difficult due to the lack of real alternatives to admission, the erosion of funding for services, workforce recruitment and retention issues and the focus on a biological approach to mental healthcare focused on diagnosis and treatment, which overlooks broader social drivers that can impact on a person's mental health and wellbeing.

The full training and accreditation of an AMHP can take up to two years. Up to one-third of AMHPs will be approaching retirement age during the next few years. Central government investment and support in succession planning is essential to manage this transition of losing longstanding AMHPs, recruiting new AMHPs in greater number and in good time and retaining AMHPs long term through good working terms and conditions, and on-going professional development and recognition.

Conclusion

In our view, it is more cost-effective to spend now on early intervention, prevention, and tackling workforce recruitment and retention issues than to end up spending more on crisis interventions and seeking to redress an emerging workforce predicament that could be avoided. The Government will not address the issues in social care unless they are prepared to provide it with the long-term funding that it needs, as opposed to short bursts of small funding that do not allow local authorities or services to plan ahead.

We recognise that there is a certain level of fiscal uncertainty, but the human cost of not acting is one that we cannot afford.

For further information, please contact us at Kerri.Prince@basw.co.uk

ⁱ <https://www.basw.co.uk/what-we-do/campaigns/social-work-stands-against-poverty>

ⁱⁱ [There were 6,342 Breathing Space registrations in October 2022](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-s-social-work-workforce>

^{iv} <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2018/10/30/majority-social-workers-looking-leave-job-within-next-16-months-says-new-research/v>

^v <https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/181009%20Working%20Conditions%20flyer.pdf>

^{vi} <https://www.basw.co.uk/what-we-do/campaigns/relationship-based-practice>

^{vii} <https://www.basw.co.uk/media/news/2022/dec/basw-england-launch-campaign-%E2%80%98better-supported-workforce-more-equal-society%E2%80%99>

^{viii} <https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/adult-social-care-workforce-data/Workforce-intelligence/publications/Topics/Social-work/Approved-Mental-Health-Professional-workforce.aspx#:~:text=95%25%20of%20AMHPs%20were%20employed,employed%20by%20agencies%20of%20freelance>