

National Workload Action Group – Final Report

**Research and recommendations on
reducing social worker workload**

September 2025

Authors: Research in Practice

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The involvement and engagement of the 22 local authorities taking part in this project ensured that the work was focused on what would make a difference in social work practice, to children and families and to social workers. The feedback they provided on the practice resources developed during this project was essential in checking the resources would be practical and useful for social workers and the social care workforce.

Research in Practice is grateful for the generosity of time and expertise freely given by everyone involved in this project and would like to thank DfE for the opportunity to contribute to this important strand of workforce reform.

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Executive summary

The National Workload Action Group

The Department for Education (DfE) established the National Workload Action Group (NWAG) as part of its [response](#) to the national [Independent review of children's social care](#). The work of NWAG is part of a set of wider workforce reforms being taken forward by the government.

NWAG members came from the social care sector. They included leaders in children's social care; academics; regulatory bodies such as Ofsted and Social Work England; unions, including BASW and Unison and national membership organisations, such as ADCS. NWAG met bi-monthly from January 2023 to January 2025.

The overall aims of the group was to identify and develop recommendations that address unnecessary workload drivers that do not lead to improvement in outcomes for children and families. In particular, there was to be a focus on case recording, administrative/paperwork elements of workload that take social workers away from direct practice, as well as a consideration of evidence gathering in response to regulatory requirements. System drivers being explored by other work strands, such as digital and IT solutions, inspection frameworks, agency workers, social worker pay, terms and conditions and ways to reduce social worker caseload were deemed out of scope.

The Research in Practice partnership

Research in Practice, a national charity, was commissioned in August 2023 to support the work of NWAG, providing secretariat support, leading conversations and developing resources to support workforce development. Research in Practice worked in partnership with Essex County Council and King's College London to engage a group of 22 local authorities, involving 115 people to work with NWAG to explore the issues, provide ideas and solutions and test learning resources produced as part of NWAG activity. This group were called the Review, Testing and Implementation Network (RTIN)

Longstanding challenges and previous reform activities

Successive governments have sought to improve the functioning of children's social care. Despite decades of activity, some long-standing issues continue to exist, reflecting the complexity of the challenge and the interaction between the system drivers. NWAG revisited the 2009 recommendations of the Social Work Reform Board in order to try to understand why some of the most long-standing and troubling issues continue, and to learn from previous attempts to address them, including improvements in social work education, the development of multiple practice frameworks, standards for employers of social workers, supervision programmes and public perception campaigns.

System Drivers

Serious concerns have been raised about the pressures on social workers because of high workloads. High workloads can lead to increased stress, burnout and turnover. Social worker retention impacts on children, young people and families as changes of social worker can make it more difficult for families to develop and sustain positive helping relationships.

The experiences of Black and Global Majority social workers in relation to racism, discrimination, continuing professional development and progression opportunities are highly relevant to workforce functioning. The impact of structural and systemic discrimination and the solutions applied to address discrimination need to be explored more broadly. Within the context of NWAG activity, the group considered issues of equality, equity, diversity and inclusion as part of the discussion of ideas and options and ensured that resource testing included diverse perspectives.

Reducing unnecessary workload needs to be viewed in the context of practice and current drivers for demand, and in recognition of the severe and increasing financial pressures faced by public services. Increased child poverty, lack of suitable housing stock and rising cost of living pressures impact on the workforce as well as the families they work with. Increasing s47 child protection enquiries underline the importance of early help services in mitigating and their vital role in enabling capacity in child protection social work teams.

Continuing resource pressures on universal and targeted services which support children and families contributes to referrals into social care. The exponential rise in child and adolescent mental ill-health, with reduced treatment options and long waiting lists, combined with an increase in parental mental ill-health adds more pressure to a system which is already under-resourced. Social worker retention is impacted by this increase in workload, the static nature of social worker salaries and reduction in early intervention and universal community-based support for families.

A unified profession

Social work is a unified profession with a single regulator. Currently issues impacting on workload are addressed separately by DfE and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) which can result in a lack of coherence in implementation and can reduce career pathway opportunities for social workers to move across children's and adults' social care. Policy decisions impact on social worker workload, and more attention should be paid to the potential unintended consequences of introducing policy changes in one practice area and how they may impact on social worker workload across the unified profession.

NWAG scoping activity

As part of its early activity, NWAG aimed to identify and classify 'necessary' and 'unnecessary' social worker workload, recognising the balance that needs to be held between them, as all social work activities can be either necessary or unnecessary. For

example, writing case notes is 'necessary,' but if the social worker has difficulty in navigating the content management system, or if they are recording too much detail (over-recording), then this activity may be 'unnecessary.'

NWAG recognised the breadth of the social worker role. NWAG described the way that social work integrates knowledge and theory from different perspectives and the range of skills and capabilities social workers need, as being similar to a 'heptathlete.' A description that NWAG members thought was apt in describing the role of the social worker.

NWAG identified a list of the core components of workload and reviewed the range of workload pressures which influence social worker workload, prioritising the factors they wished to focus on to reduce unnecessary workload. In addition to workload pressures NWAG considered the 'people' variables which impact on workload, such as individual social worker knowledge and skills, experience of their managers, the practice area, the culture of the employer organisation and the community context in which the social worker is operating.

NWAG noted that solutions to reduce unnecessary workload needed to take account of the system drivers and their impact, and needed to consider how these system drivers intersect and interact, so as to consider the full implications for practice.

Prioritising NWAG development activity

Following this scoping period, Research in Practice produced an interim report (unpublished) identifying the long list of areas NWAG wanted to address. DfE prioritised this list in terms of the initial activity that might be most realistically delivered within the project timeline, the elements most likely to impact on social worker workload and the themes most relevant to unnecessary workload. The final priority areas were identified as:

- managerialism and administrative support for social workers
- improving the quality of supervision
- social worker workload and caseload management
- hybrid working and digital practice
- use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in case recording

In exploring these areas, each strand of project activity embarked on a rapid evidence scoping of available research, testing out of ideas and thinking with NWAG and RTIN members, then formulating project insights and recommendations. This was followed by Research in Practice producing supporting learning resources which were tested with RTIN.

Supplementary reports containing more details are available for each of the five strands, and are published on gov.uk, with the learning resources published on Support for social workers, an online hub set up by DfE as a repository for resources for social workers and social work employers.

Recommendations

NWAG activity was time-limited, however the group was able to address each of the five priority issues in-depth, eliciting insights and recommendations:

Managerialism and administrative support

Project activity focused on exploring whether administrative support for social workers might reduce unnecessary workload and identified three models for providing administrative support to social workers which had different benefits and challenges.

Recommendation 1

Stakeholders, including the Department for Education (DfE) and the regulators, should work together to produce guidance which clearly differentiates between the desk-based activities essential for social workers to complete and the administrative tasks that can be completed by others or automated.

Recommendation 2

DfE should commission an in-depth evaluation of whether time saved from administrative tasks genuinely translates into more direct work with children, young people, and their families once administrative tasks are delegated or automated. This will help employers understand the true benefits of reducing the administrative burden for social workers.

Recommendation 3

The role of AI in children's social care is already emerging, with existing and new AI tools showing promise in automating administrative tasks with the potential to reduce unnecessary administrative burden on social workers. Evidence should be gathered from local authorities already experimenting with AI to understand best practices and potential impacts on social work efficiency and effectiveness and to explore the ethical complexities of using AI in children's social care.

Improving the quality of supervision

NWAG explored whether implementing a national standard for supervision might increase the quality of supervision for social workers, considered if a 'good error' culture might improve supervision and reviewed a tool to measure the impact of individual and group supervision.

Recommendation 4

The evidence from this project is that national quality standards for supervision are unlikely to lead to improvement of consistency and quality of supervision, without an accompanying emphasis on culture change in organisations and supervision support. Methods which might support culture change are included in recommendations 5 and 6. NWAG recommends that if national quality standards for supervision are considered in the future, careful thought and collaborative debate is undertaken with the sector to interrogate and mitigate any potential unintended consequences.

Recommendation 5

DfE should commission work to revise and test the safety attitudes questionnaire and the safety climate questions to determine their usefulness in supporting culture change in children's social care and improving the quality and consistency of supervision.

Recommendation 6

DfE should test the STAR tool to determine its usefulness in assessing the quality of reflective supervision in organisations.

Workload and caseload management

NWAG explored the impact of workload and caseload on retention and wellbeing, and whether 'safe workload limits' would support more effective workload management, if current

workforce data supported workload management efforts and reviewed the effectiveness of existing caseload management tools.

Recommendation 7

DfE should work with the sector to identify safe workload limits to enable a systematic approach to sufficiency and retention. Urgent activity should be commissioned to determine 'safe workload' levels for social workers. This should be followed by a review of social worker sufficiency to inform national workforce planning and funding arrangements for employers.

Recommendation 8

DfE should review the workforce data fields, in consultation with employers, to explore whether it would be helpful to broaden this out to include the wider social care workforce, and to check that the current fields remain useful for national, regional and local purposes.

Recommendation 9

DfE should commission further research into developing and testing comprehensive workload management models. While existing models have strengths, none are sufficiently complex.

Recommendation 10

DfE should, with the children's social care sector, develop and implement a national workforce strategy for social workers and the wider social care workforce to inform national workforce planning, focusing on retention of the existing workforce and career pathways in non-social worker roles, including career pathways into social work from social care roles.

Hybrid working and digital practice

NWAG wanted to understand more about the impact of hybrid working and digital practice on workload and worker wellbeing, to identify when hybrid working is working well, and how to support social workers with digital practice.

Recommendation 11

DfE, ideally in partnership with Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), should commission further work to understand more about the impact of **hybrid working** on the social worker workforce.

Recommendation 12

DfE should commission further work to understand more about the impact of **flexible working arrangements** so employers understand how to support the workforce effectively.

Recommendation 13

DfE should work with DHSC and with social worker employers to understand more about the 'office space' needs of the child and family workforce, and the impact of 'hot desking' and other non-standard office space arrangements on individuals, teams and the professional identity of the social worker workforce.

Recommendation 14

Organisations producing practice tools for social workers should include information about how they can be used for both face-to-face and digital practice.

Recommendation 15

DfE should, with Social Work England and Ofsted, commission further work to explore the implications of digital practice to determine:

- how digital practice approaches should be taught in qualifying and post-qualifying programmes
- how the employer and professional regulators should interpret the implications of digital practice in relation to Fitness to Practise
- how the service regulator might inspect and evaluate the use of digital practice in social work services

Recommendation 16

DfE should commission a review of the Standards for employers of social workers to ensure they are relevant to the current and future practice context. Existing gaps include:

- recognition of the employer commitment to anti-racist culture, organisational context and how this is addressed in organisational and workforce development
- inclusion of the exponential increase in the use of technology in social work practice and how this impacts on the expectations of employers
- employer responsibilities in relation to hybrid and flexible working arrangements and the long-term impact on worker wellbeing and on children and families
- the Employer Standard focus on the individualised practice of social work, when existing and future policy is moving more towards whole system approaches to integrated, cross-organisational and multi-agency working

The use of AI in case recording

NWAG explored how the use of AI might support the improvement of case recording, and how it might reduce unnecessary workload caused by over-recording, identifying the benefits and challenges of using AI in children's social care.

Recommendation 17

DfE should urgently produce national guidance on the use of AI in children's social care, in partnership with Ofsted, Social Work England, BASW, Unison and the new AI Safety Institute, building on existing frameworks and standards to provide an ethical framework for decision-making to:

- underpin the increased use of automation technology for routine tasks
- guard against improper use of child and family data
- ensure that professional tasks which require social work action continue to be undertaken by social workers

Recommendation 18

DfE should commission an independent consultation of the views of children and families about the risks and ethical challenges of using AI in children's social care and ensure their views are included in any guidance or ethical framework produced from Recommendation 1.

Recommendation 19

The government should prioritise children's social care for investment funding to improve public services through the use of AI.

Establishing the National Workload Action Group (NWAG)

Independent review of the care system

The Conservative government made a commitment in its 2019 Manifesto to commission a review of the care system. In March 2022, the Independent review of children's social care began its work, publishing its [report](#) in May 2022. Around the same time, the government commissioned two further reviews:

- Child Safeguarding Practice Panel's National review into Child Protection in England (following the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson)
- Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) study into children's social care placements.

Stable homes built on love

The government published its response to the Independent review of children's social care, [Stable homes built on love](#) (2022) an implementation strategy, and consulted publicly on this alongside two other consultations:

- the draft Children's Social Care National Framework and Data Dashboard.
- the government's plan to address the high use of agency social workers

The three consultations addressed issues identified in the Independent review of children's social care as part of the government's early response to the Independent review of children's social care.

Social work workforce reform agenda

The National Workload Action Group was established in January 2023 to undertake activity related to recommendations made in the Independent review regarding social worker workload:

- recommendation 7.1: reduce unnecessary bureaucracy to get social workers back to practice.

The [government's response to the consultation](#) on Stable Homes was published in September 2023, noting the work of the National Workload Action Group in addressing the drivers of unnecessary workload.

The activity of NWAG is one element with a range of workforce reform initiatives which include:

- development of the [new Post-Qualifying Standards](#) and training (2025) for child and family social workers
- producing [statutory guidance](#) (2024) setting out the national rules on local authority use of agency child and family social workers
- launch of a virtual hub, [Support for social workers](#) to support local authority recruitment and retention and provide resources to support social worker retention
- refresh of [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#) (2023) guidance

In addition, the government is continuing to work on the implementation of a range of activities designed to contribute to achieving each of the 6 ambitions set out in Stable Homes.

Following a General Election in July 2024, the new Labour Government asserted its continuing commitment to the social worker workforce, supporting the continued activity of NWAG.

NWAG Terms of Reference

In January 2023, the Department for Education (DfE) established the National Workload Action Group.¹ The [NWAG Terms of Reference](#) describes the aim of the group: to identify and develop recommendations that address unnecessary workload drivers, where these drivers do not lead to improvements in outcomes for children and families.

Key areas of focus were initially identified as:

- 'case'² recording
- the administrative and paperwork elements of workload that may take social workers away from direct practice
- these were refined in April 2024, when DfE prioritised NWAG activity (see project insights and learning resources for details)

Core aims for NWAG included:

- considering the unnecessary data being gathered as part of day-to-day social work practice, identifying key drivers, and sharing examples of existing good practice
- considering the wider impact of social care reform on the social worker workforce and workload

¹ Initial meetings of NWAG were chaired by DfE. Research in Practice began providing secretariat support to NWAG in September 2023.

² The term 'caseload' is widely understood, but we do not use it uncritically as children are not 'cases'.

- considering the content of guidance and tools to be produced to share promising practice and promote a positive workforce culture
- NWAG meetings encouraged the sharing of different views and perspectives and engaged in constructive challenge to test assumptions and evidence, one of the Terms of Reference recognises that members bring diverse perspectives and participation in the group did not mean that all members endorsed all decisions or actions taken, the evidence, conclusions and recommendations in this report were discussed with NWAG members throughout this project, but the final recommendations in this report may not reflect the collective views of NWAG members

Out of scope

While NWAG considered cross-cutting activities, the range of workforce reform activities related to the social worker workforce meant that some areas were 'out of scope' for NWAG, as the work was being taken forward by DfE through other strands of activity. This included:

- IT and digital solutions
- review of the inspection framework
- ways to reduce social worker caseload
- agency social workers
- social worker pay, terms and conditions

Although not within scope, NWAG discussions often included aspects of these workforce reform areas. NWAG was able to share learning and find out more about how other workforce reform areas were progressing over the course of the project.

NWAG frequency of meeting and membership

[NWAG meetings](#) took place bi-monthly from January 2023 to January 2025, meeting on 12 occasions. [Membership of NWAG](#) was drawn from the children's social care local authority sector, national agencies and academia.

The Research in Practice partnership

Research in Practice, part of the National Children's Bureau family, was commissioned from August 2023 to March 2025 to:

- provide secretariat services to NWAG, chairing meetings and supporting NWAG discussions with activities to explore NWAG aims

- develop, test and produce learning resources to support the reduction in unnecessary social worker workload
- produce interim and final reports on NWAG activity, to include recommendations for further work arising out of the NWAG insights

Research in Practice led a partnership with Essex County Council and King's College, London on NWAG activity relating to the development of ideas and production of learning resources. Essex County Council supported the Review, Testing and Implementation Network (RTIN) to ensure local authority perspectives were included, while King's College, London contributed academic rigour and challenge to NWAG activity. All contributed specialist knowledge of the social worker workforce.

The Review, Testing and Implementation Network (RTIN)

The RTIN was established as part of the project approach to support the quality assurance of project outputs and review learning resources. [RTIN members](#) contributed to the project from April 2024 to December 2024, focusing on NWAG priorities from September 2024 to December 2024.

This group of representatives from 22 local authorities helped ensure that:

- the work of NWAG was informed by representatives from the children's social care workforce, working at different levels of seniority, representing a range of English local authority contexts
- learning resources produced as outputs from NWAG activity were refined and tested to ensure they were fit-for-purpose

In total, 115 people engaged in 11 activities to discuss workload issues, review learning resources or contribute to the development of materials.

The benefits to RTIN members were:

- contributing to national workforce development activity
- access to a diverse peer network focused on shaping thinking and insight solutions to key workforce challenges
- opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge, contributing to CPD
- supporting innovation and learning
- early access to new learning resources

Long-standing challenges and previous reform activities

The work of the National Workload Action Group does not exist in a vacuum. While the scope of this project does not extend to addressing system drivers, members recognised the impact of these on workload as well as the need to understand the context of change.

Successive governments have sought to improve the functioning of children's social care, and many other actors (professional bodies, for example) have contributed significantly to the ongoing development of social work as a profession. That there remains a need to address unnecessary workload reflects both the system drivers and the complexity of the challenge. Reflecting on some of these key initiatives and policy activities is intended to situate NWAG's activity and recommendations in the context of previous learning.

In 2009, the Social Work Task Force (SWTF)³ proposed a significant programme of reform intended to drive improvements in and for social work practice and education. This resulted in a set of 15 recommendations which provided a framework for the proposed reforms. The Social Work Reform Board was subsequently established and tasked with developing implementation plans for the recommendations, before being disbanded in 2013.⁴ Several of the proposed key changes were implemented, centred around the following themes: social work education, professional frameworks, CPD, and employer standards. Efforts were made to raise the profile of the social work profession.

The 2009 reforms represent a different moment in time. Although they do not reflect new and emerging issues such as equity, equality, diversity and inclusion (EEDI) and developments in digital practice and the use of technology, the following areas of the 2009 workforce reform efforts are relevant to the work of NWAG, and the workload challenges currently experienced by child and family social workers.

³ The Social Work Task Force (2009) 'Building a safe, confident future: The final report of the Social Work Task Force' The Social Work Task Force. [online] Available at <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/10625/>.

⁴ Department for Education (2014). Social Work Reform Board. [online] GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/social-work-reform-board>.

Social Work Education

As proposed in 2009, the practice educator has become a distinct role. Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS) were developed and remain in use. They were refreshed in 2022 to reflect a growing focus on EEDI within social work and expanded to include anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice.⁵ Recent research commissioned by Social Work England highlighted that practice educators can experience workload challenges as individuals and play an important role in wider workforce functioning and system capacity.⁶

Professional Frameworks

In 2009, a more coherent set of standards or framework was called for to bring together the professional expectations and competencies for social workers across all stages of their career.⁷ Development of several frameworks followed:

- the [Professional Capability Framework](#), hosted by the British Association of Social Work (2010, refreshed in 2018)
- the [Knowledge and Skills Statements](#) (2015) for child and family social workers (reframed as post-qualifying standards for practitioners, practice supervisors and practice leaders in 2018)
- Social Work England published [professional standards](#) for all social workers in England (2019)

Stable Homes, Built on Love⁸ posits that further reform is required to strengthen the child and family social work profession. Actions include the introduction of the [Children's Social Care National Framework](#),⁹ and the development of [new Post-Qualifying Standards](#) and training intended to support social workers' practice development within statutory children's services.

⁵ Basw.co.uk. (2022). Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS). [online] Available at: <https://basw.co.uk/policy-practice/standards/practice-educator-professional-standards-peps>.

⁶ Cook, L., Gregory, M., Butt, T. & Shakespeare, J. (2023) 'Practice education in England: a national scoping review'. Available online: Practice education in England - Social Work England

⁷ The Social Work Task Force (2009) 'Building a safe, confident future: The final report of the Social Work Task Force' The Social Work Task Force.

⁸ Department for Education (2023a). Children's Social Care: Stable Homes, Built on Love Government Consultation Response CP 933. [online] Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/650966a322a783001343e844/Children_s_Social_Care_Stable_Homes_Built_on_Love_consultation_response.pdf.

⁹ Department for Education (2023b) 'Children's Social Care National Framework Statutory guidance on the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.' Department for Education.

Employer Standards

Clear [national standards for social work employers](#) (2012, refreshed in 2014 and 2020) and regular 'health checks' were proposed to assess how employers were meeting the standards.¹⁰ These standards were implemented and remain in place alongside the current iteration of the Social Work Health Check, hosted by the Local Government Association on behalf of the sector) which local authorities are encouraged to use to survey the experiences of social workers and other social care professionals.¹¹

Supervision and CPD

Insights from the SWTF¹² noted the need for a clear supervision framework for social work and a good deal of positive progress has been through nationally funded initiatives such as the [Practice Supervisor Development Programme](#) and subsequent government commissions, including [Pathways. Standard 5 of the Employer Standards](#) currently sets out the criteria to be met for social work supervision, including details regarding appropriate frequency and quality.¹³ Given advances in technology and digital practices, any standard for supervision should include digital supervision and how that might be delivered appropriately.

Profile of the profession

The SWTF initially suggested a profile-raising campaign intended to help the public understand the role and value of social work, led by the newly formed national College of Social Work. However, national funding for the College of Social Work was withdrawn after three years. Further initiatives were undertaken to raise the profile of the profession including the appointment of two Chief Social Workers (one for social work with adults, one for child and family social work), and campaigns to improve the perception of social work (though recent research suggests that public perception may not be as negative as has been assumed)¹⁴ and recruitment to social work programmes.

¹⁰ The Social Work Task Force (2009) 'Building a safe, confident future: The final report of the Social Work Task Force' The Social Work Task Force.

¹¹ Local Government Association (2024) 'Employer standards health check.' Available online <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce-and-hr-support/social-workers/employer-standards-health-check>.

¹² The Social Work Task Force (2009) 'Building a safe, confident future: The final report of the Social Work Task Force' The Social Work Task Force.

¹³ Local Government Association (2024) 'Employer standards Standard 5 - Supervision.' Available online <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce-and-hr-support/social-workers/standards-employers-social-workers-england-4>.

¹⁴ Hanley, J. (2024) 'The Social Work Public Perception Myth', The British Journal of Social Work, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcae145>.

System drivers, policy and a unified profession

The system drivers of social work practice

Social worker workload in children and family services has received renewed attention in recent years, with serious concerns raised about pressures on social workers, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic.^{15,16} There have been repeated calls for reduced bureaucracy and increased time for social workers to work directly with children and families (though we are careful not to suggest that only time spent with children and families is 'practice'). The impact of high levels of workload on practice and outcomes has been noted over many years.^{17,18,19} High workload has implications for the workforce in terms of the interaction between high levels of stress, burnout, and turnover.²⁰

The experiences of Black and Global Majority²¹ staff in relation to racism, discrimination, continuing professional development and progression opportunities are highly relevant to the functioning of the workforce.^{22,23,24} Deeper exploration of how structural and systemic discrimination impacts upon social worker workload is needed. Issues of equality, equity, diversity, and inclusion (EEDI) have been explicitly considered and incorporated into the development of NWAG's ideas and options.

Reducing unnecessary workload for child and family social workers, child protection social workers in particular, requires a view of the wider context and drivers for demand. Over the past decade or more, all agencies involved in early help partnership working have been

¹⁵ McFadden, P., Gillen, P. Moriarty, J., Mallett, J., Schroder, H., Ravalier, J., Manthorpe, J Currie, D., Nicholl, P., McGrory, S., Neill, R. (2021) *Health and social care workers' quality of working life and coping while working during the COVID-19 pandemic: Insights from a UK Survey*.

¹⁶ London Innovation Improvement Alliance and South East Sector Led Improvement Programme. (2023). 'Report on The Big Listen Survey 2022-23: A Survey of Social Workers across London and the South East.' London Innovation Improvement Alliance and South East Sector Led Improvement Programme.

¹⁷ Basw.co.uk. (2018). 80-20 Campaign Final Report 2018. [online] Available at: <https://basw.co.uk/policy-and-practice/resources/80-20-campaign-final-report-2018> [Accessed 10 Feb. 2025].

¹⁸ Munro, E. (2011). 'Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report.' London: Department for Education.

¹⁹ webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk. (n.d.). UK Government Web Archive. [online] Available at: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230308122449/https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/final-report/>.

²⁰ Stevens, M. (2008). 'Workload management in social work services: what, why and how? Practice.' *Social Work in Action*, 20(4), 207-221.

²¹ This terminology is used to emphasise inclusivity of all groups who are minoritised (but are not, globally speaking, 'minorities').

²² Skills for Care. (2024). 'Social Care Workforce Race Equality Standard, 2023 report Supporting a diverse workforce; Quality improvement programme March 2024.' Skills for Care.

²³ Research in Practice. (2024). 'Anti-racist systems leadership to address systemic racism 'be who you ought to be so we can be who we ought to be.' Research in Practice.

²⁴ Manthorpe, J., & Samsi, K. (2022). 'Implementing the Social Care Workforce Race Equality Standard in England: Early observations.' *The British Journal of Social Work*, 53(2), 866–881.

affected by substantial reductions in public spending.^{25,26} Cuts to expenditure on prevention, early intervention and family support services have been found to be more pronounced in more deprived local authorities.²⁷ Evidence shows that local areas with higher rates of children in care and related interventions are those with significant rates of deprivation.²⁸

Wider resource constraints, beyond children's services funding, are also an important part of the backdrop to social work. Increases in child poverty have been documented, alongside severe pressure on housing, and worsening cost of living pressures.²⁹ This contributes to significant pressures on families and communities and the safeguarding system. A £4bn funding gap is estimated over the next two years.³⁰ The House of Commons Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee (2019)³¹ reported a £3.1bn funding gap for children's services by 2025 in a report published before COVID-19 on the cost-of-living crisis.

As highlighted in the Independent review of children's social care,³² since 2009-10 there have been significant increases in child protection investigative responses, of which only approximately one third (33%) of s47 enquiries in 2023 led to an initial child protection conference. The increases in s47 referrals point to a 'widening of the child protection net' and potential demand for a child protection response. Whilst the data show a decrease in the proportion of s47 referrals resulting in child protection conferences and plans, this trend suggests peaks in workload relating to referrals and thresholds which could potentially be mitigated.

The wider context illustrates how early help services play a vital role in enabling capacity in child protection social work teams (recognising early help is important to families for many reasons and does not exist solely to help 'manage demand' within social care). It also signals that workload within child protection social work is directly impacted by potentially unnecessary referrals, in the absence of earlier help and resources in the wider community.

²⁵ Ofsted (2022). Early help: concepts, policy directions and multi-agency perspectives. [online] GOV.UK. Available at: <http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-help-concepts-policy-directions-and-multi-agency-perspectives>.

²⁶ Williams, M & Franklin, J. (2021). 'Children and young people's services: Spending 2010-11 to 2019-20.' ProBono Economics.

²⁷ Ofsted (2022). Early help: concepts, policy directions and multi-agency perspectives. [online] GOV.UK. Available at: <http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-help-concepts-policy-directions-and-multi-agency-perspectives>.

²⁸ Bywaters P (2020) 'The Child Welfare Inequalities Project: Final Report'. The Child Welfare Inequalities Project: Nuffield Foundation.

²⁹ www.jrf.org.uk. (2024). UK Poverty 2024: The essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK | Joseph Rowntree Foundation. [online] Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-2024-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk#-the-future-remains-deeply-worrying>.

³⁰ adcs.org.uk. (2024). Childhood Matters | ADCS. [online] Available at: https://www.adcs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/ADCS_Childhood-Matters_Executive_Summary_FINAL.pdf.

³¹ House of Commons (2019). House of Commons Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee Funding of local authorities' children's services Fourteenth Report of Session 2017-19 Report, together with formal minutes relating to the report. [online] Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomloc/1638/1638.pdf>.

³² GOV.UK. (n.d.). Independent review of children's social care: final report. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-final-report>.

It is essential to look beyond solutions that singularly focus on workload in child protection social work teams, as a narrow focus will likely not deliver the change required.

While project activities focused on identifying potential solutions to the workload issues identified by NWAG and prioritised by DfE, system issues continue to be barriers to achieving a reduction in unnecessary workload so that social workers are able to work effectively to support children, young people and families to live full and rewarding lives in an equitable society.

NWAG identified system level issues which significantly impact social worker workload including, but not limited to:

- poverty, including digital poverty, affecting the communities and families social workers work with, and experienced by social workers
- universal services across education, health, mental health, youth services and elsewhere are under extreme resource pressure contributing to referrals into social care services because of absence of support at a universal or preventative level, latest data³³ highlights for instance the national housing and homelessness crisis, experienced in different ways in high and lower cost areas of housing
- the exponential rise in child and adolescent mental ill health presentations and the increased prevalence of parental mental health as the primary issue³⁴ identified in child protection referral data
- local government funding, including the impact on social worker salaries
- social worker retention, a long-standing issue which continues to impact on the employer's ability to respond to demand and impacts on workforce conditions
- impact of EEDI-related issues on the social worker workforce, on children, young people and families in their communities and on society – inequity and discrimination need to be urgently addressed across the whole system

The significance of the impact of the system level issues is such that NWAG members believe they require urgent attention so the solutions that *are* in scope for this project can achieve the greatest impact and benefits are sustainable in the longer term.

Policy context

The previous government's response to the Independent review of children's social care, [Stable Homes, Built on Love](#), proposes development of a more effective targeted, multi-agency family help offer and related changes to child protection practices. Changes to

³³ ADCS (2024). *Safeguarding Pressures*. [online] Adcs.org.uk. Available at: <https://www.adcs.org.uk/safeguarding-pressures/>

³⁴ Ibid.

[Working Together](#) introduced the lead practitioner role and option for family support professionals and others to undertake children in need assessments and 'case work' (the direct practice with children and families requiring support under s17).

Learning from the Families First Pathfinders will be vital for understanding the intended (and unintended) impact on the child and family social worker role. Implications include the potential impact on professional identity, the quality of practice (and/or practice oversight, where social workers are overseeing others) and capabilities of non-social work qualified colleagues and potential ramifications for social work workload where this oversight requires a more interventionist approach.

The government's response to its consultation, in *Stable Homes, Built on Love*, highlights respondents' views on the benefits of reducing 'caseloads' and decreasing bureaucracy to build relationships with children, young people, and families. It notes that social workers have told government that they do not always feel supported, valued, or trusted.³⁵

NWAG members have worked together to put forward the ideas, solutions and learning shared here to contribute to the national conversation about social worker workload and the reform agenda.

Towards a unified profession

The international definition of social work makes it clear that social work is a unified profession.³⁶ In England there is a single professional regulator and standards for professional practice and education for all social workers. Currently issues impacting social workers' workload are separately addressed by DfE and issues can arise in implementation around the lack of coherence in the approaches taken to policy and practice – such as agency rules, qualifying programmes, post-qualifying support, and responsibilities relating to transition.

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and DfE are both striving to stabilise and strengthen the social work workforce. NWAG see it as essential that these two departments collaborate and communicate effectively on any social work-related policy activity. For example, both departments might usefully agree to jointly review all social work policy changes prior to them being introduced, to check for alignment and coherence. This would likely make policy implementation less challenging for the sector and provide more coherent support to the social work profession.

Home Office policy may also have implications for social worker workload (for instance, policy relating to asylum and immigration, or domestic abuse). Similarly, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) policy has an impact, notably in relation to welfare reforms and

³⁵ GOV.UK (2023). *Children's social care: Stable Homes, Built on Love*. [online] GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/childrens-social-care-stable-homes-built-on-love>.

³⁶ GOV.UK. (n.d.). *Independent review of children's social care: final report*. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-final-report>

benefits. Without careful coordination, policy changes may increase social worker workload, inadvertently creating unintended outcomes.

Government departments making decisions which impact on social worker workload could helpfully consult with DfE and DHSC in advance of policy being agreed in order that the potential impact on social worker workload is understood and accounted for.

NWAG activity

Components of social work workload

Identifying necessary and unnecessary components of workload

As part of early activity to define NWAG priorities, discussions aimed to identify and classify what might be deemed the 'unnecessary' and 'necessary' components of the social worker role. Members discussed how effective practice is based on a range of interconnected factors, and that the same is true of workload. When considering what is direct and non-direct work, and what is a necessary or unnecessary component of workload, emphasis was placed on the relative balance required between different components.

For example, recording interactions and visits with a child or family was determined to be a necessary and beneficial component of practice. It is a means of:

- evidencing activity and informing analysis and assessment
- ensuring children and families can understand why decisions were made
- providing a tool for reflection and continuous practice improvement

That said, an over-emphasis on recording, driven by compliance requirements, unwieldy recording systems and the absence of administrative support, are all factors that can limit the time available for direct work with young people and families rather than the benefits already noted.

It is also true that time spent face to face with a child or family member that is not purposeful and/or lacks depth of interaction might not be useful to the child, or to the social worker's assessment, and might be deemed 'unnecessary'.

NWAG concluded that it is overly simplistic to suggest that all recording activity is 'bureaucracy' or that only face-to-face time with children and families is valid social work practice. Social work is a multi-faceted role, in which the purpose and quality of each component, and how they interrelate, matter as much as the time spent on one aspect.

NWAG noted the publication of the [Children's social care data and digital strategy](#) in December 2023, and welcomed the policy to improve CSC data, and the potential to reduce unnecessary social worker workload through this work.

The social worker as 'heptathlete'

One NWAG member suggested that social workers are not unlike 'heptathletes', skilled in multiple and linked activities. In discussion, members noted that the relative value of particular workload elements is variable, depending on:

- the needs of children and families
- the approach, experience and skills of individual social workers
- the parameters and context of their operating environment (for example, detailed recording might be a key priority for local authorities striving to demonstrate improvement, whole-family direct work might be a core component depending on local practice models).

Necessary components of workload

NWAG members identified the following non-exhaustive list of components as ‘necessary’ to child and family social work:

- direct practice - working with children, families and carers, building relationships of trust, ‘delivering interventions’ and providing practical and emotional support
- indirect practice - working with others, engaging other services, and often advocating on behalf of children and families
- case recording and reporting, to capture impact, demonstrate accountability, inform decision-making
- analysis and critical thinking – within supervision (both one-to-one management and group supervision) assessment and review activity, as well as beyond
- recognising, assessing and responding to risk
- promoting rights and empowerment
- reflective supervision in which to develop reflexive practice
- learning and knowledge sharing, continuous professional development (CPD), engaging with research evidence
- promoting wellbeing and resilience – their own and the wellbeing and resilience of the children and families they’re working with

Workload pressures for children and family social workers

NWAG members reviewed a range of factors which influence workload, drawing on relevant research and prioritised the factors NWAG would consider focusing on to tackle workload challenges:

- ‘caseloads’ - the number of children and families social workers are working with
- the complex lives of the children and families

- the administrative tasks that form part of a social worker's workload, but might be undertaken by alternatively qualified colleagues
- multi-agency working
- local policies and procedures
- the role of reflective supervision in supporting and developing all of the 'necessary components'
- the skills and expertise of social workers and the learning and development available to them
- the role and influence of inspection and regulation
- high use of agency social workers
- the emotional impact of the work on social workers, including vicarious trauma
- the lasting impact of COVID-19 on families and communities, and on professionals and institutions
- information management systems and technology
- the impact of blame culture, locally and nationally (including societal attitudes)
- reporting and data collection
- "managerialism" (the prioritisation of process over purpose, the transactional over the relational)
- lack of 'cultural competence' and variable commitment to EEDI
- changing working patterns and practices, including service thresholds, changing categories of need, hybrid working and flexible working

Considering the variables which affect social worker workload

Through this exploration of workload components and pressures, NWAG members summarised the many variables which affect workload:

- identities and characteristics of individual professionals
- skills and experience of social workers and their managers
- social worker role type or area of practice

- the employer organisation, its internal culture and practices, its position within the wider local system of public and community services
- the community and its context – demographics, geographical location, levels of poverty and deprivation, and opportunities it offers to children and their families

Members noted that any ideas or options for addressing unnecessary workload need to tackle some of the system drivers which currently impede the effectiveness of social work practice. The NWAG underlined the following key considerations to consider when determining potential solutions:

- the need to identify actions that system leaders can take to effect change
- the importance of enhancing positive professional identity and relational practice
- recognising the emotional impact of the work on social workers and developing supportive solutions
- listening and responding to the voices of children, young people and families to understand their experience of services, to inform system and practice changes
- an intention to share the NWAG work more widely across the sector, and to continue to iterate ideas with a wider set of stakeholders with experience of operational pressures and of direct work with children and families

Selection of priority areas for exploration

The interim project report submitted to the Department for Education (DfE) in April 2024 contained a long list of potential lines of enquiry linked to unnecessary social worker workload identified in earlier NWAG meetings. DfE prioritised this list in terms of what might be most realistically delivered within the project timeline, the elements most likely to impact social worker workload, and those themes most relevant to 'unnecessary workload'.

Following a further discussion with NWAG members in May 2024, DfE finalised the key lines of enquiry to be explored over the next period of project activity. These were:

- managerialism and administrative support
- supervision
- social worker 'workload' and 'caseload' management
- hybrid working and digital practice
- use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in case recording

These thematic areas encompass both long-standing and unresolved issues linked to social worker workload and address some new and emerging challenges for professional practice. The interconnected and cross-cutting nature of these themes reinforces the earlier emphasis on the systemic nature of practice and practitioners, including the need to engage with all parts of the system to identify barriers and enablers so that sustainable change outcomes might be achieved.

The project scope was focused on 'reducing unnecessary drivers of social worker workload', but NWAG noted that social worker workload does not take place in isolation. Through exploration of each thematic area, consideration was given to the impact of the system drivers. Many of these drivers are influential and embedded in the system but are out of scope for this project. They are included in this report to provide context to understand more fully how meaningful change in each of these areas might be achieved if these system drivers are activated.

NWAG members highlighted the importance of recognising existing activity in these priority areas, both local and national, including Social Work England's mapping activity,³⁷ ADCS analysis activities,³⁸ BASW³⁹ and UNISON's⁴⁰ activities related to workload and wellbeing.

³⁷ Social Work England (n.d) Evidence mapping forms. Available at

<https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/education-training/resources/mapping-forms/>

³⁸ ADCS (2024) Safeguarding Pressures Phase 9. Available at <https://www.adcs.org.uk/safeguarding-pressures/>.

³⁹ Basw.co.uk. (2025) Professional working conditions and wellbeing. Available at <https://basw.co.uk/about-basw/campaigning-and-influencing/professional-working-conditions-wellbeing> [Accessed 10 April 2025]

⁴⁰ Unison.org.uk (n.d) Stress and resources to help manage stress [online] Available at <https://www.unison.org.uk/get-help/knowledge/health-and-safety/stress/> [Accessed 10 Feb 2025].

Each strand of project activity followed a similar process:

- rapid evidence scoping of available research and policy
- testing out ideas and thinking with NWAG and RTIN members
- formulating project insights and recommendations
- developing supporting learning resources and testing them with RTIN
- producing a supplementary report, containing more detail, published alongside this summary report

The supplementary reports are available on [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) and the learning resources are on [Support for social workers](#).

Administrative support for social workers

Read the supplementary report on project activity exploring [the impact of administrative support on social workers](#) for more detail. Key findings are summarised in this chapter. View illustrative case studies developed as part of this project on [Support for social workers](#).

Exploring the context

The development of managerialism and bureaucracy in social work

Bureaucracy in children's social care has been a longstanding concern.⁴¹ Over two decades of standardisation and accountability associated with managerialism and New Public Management have increased bureaucratic demands and procedural compliance in social work^{42,43,44} and further reduced administrative support, often referred to as the 'back-office function'. This describes the type of team administrator post viewed as central to team functioning in earlier evaluations of social work models of practice.⁴⁵

Managerialism combined with reduced administrative capacity is reported to have had negative consequences which have affected recruitment and retention, including:

- deskilling the workforce
- increased bureaucratic demands intensified by technology and IT not designed for social work practice
- a cumulative effect on social workers' wellbeing, resulting in burnout

Addressing managerialism is a significant system-wide culture change endeavour, outside the scope of this project. Pragmatically, NWAG focused project activity on exploring the impact of administrative support for social workers.

Increased administrative burden impact outcomes for children

Evidence suggests that the proportion of time spent on unnecessary administrative activities can reduce time spent building relationships and engaging in direct work with children and

⁴¹ Pascoe, K.M, Bradley, B., & McGinn, T. (2022) 'Social Workers' Experiences of Bureaucracy: A Systematic Synthesis of Qualitative Studies', The British Journal of Social Work, Volume 53, Issue 1, January 2023, Pages 513–533.

⁴² Munro, E. (2011). 'Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report.' London: Department for Education.

⁴³ Pascoe, K.M, Bradley, B., & McGinn, T. (2022) 'Social Workers' Experiences of Bureaucracy: A Systematic Synthesis of Qualitative Studies', The British Journal of Social Work, Volume 53, Issue 1, January 2023, Pages 513–533.

⁴⁴ GOV.UK. (n.d.). Independent review of children's social care: final report. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-final-report>.

⁴⁵ Cross, S., Hubbard, A., & Munro, E. (2010). Reclaiming social work. London Borough of Hackney, Children and Young People's Services.

families, and the time and space to develop reflective, analytic and critical thinking in group or individual supervision.⁴⁶

Relational practice is constrained by the volume of contacts and referrals, compounded by set assessment timescales and other audit driven demands^{47,48} Analysis and complex judgements require time and sufficient knowledge of a child and family's circumstances, and too much focus on outputs does not allow for the exercising of interpersonal skills and research engagement necessary for effective social work practice.^{49,50}

Understanding the evidence

Identifying the administrative tasks social workers should do

Discussions with NWAG members, practitioners, and managers highlighted the importance of desk-based activities in professional practice. Case recording is a practice which supports the development of skills in analysis, critical thinking, and decision-making which are key to assessing a child or young person's situation.⁵¹

While delegating some administrative tasks may be beneficial, social workers should continue to engage in desk-based activities such as reflection, analysis, critical thinking, peer learning, decision-making and writing assessments. Administrative tasks that don't require a social worker's expertise, such as entering data on the CMS, without further analysis being required can be classified as bureaucracy.

The impact of bureaucracy on social worker retention

The children's social care system in England is under significant pressure from the after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, including a rise in mental health support needs. These demands exceed the system's capacity. Economic hardships from austerity have further strained local authorities, social workers, and the communities they serve. Since 2013, local authority headcount has dropped by 24%, and 94% of councils face recruitment and retention difficulties.⁵² Addressing these pressures will take time, and improving retention of experienced social workers, family support practitioners, and administrative staff is crucial to reduce workloads and meet increasing demand.

⁴⁶ Stevens, M. (2008). 'Workload management in social work services: what, why and how? Practice.' *Social Work in Action*, 20(4), 207-221.

⁴⁷ White, S.C. (2010). 'Analysing Wellbeing: A Framework for Development Policy and Practice.' *Development in practice* 20(2), pp158-172

⁴⁸ Munro, E. (2011). 'Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report.' London: Department for Education.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Munro, E. (2004) 'The impact of audit on social work practice', *British Journal of Social Work*, 34(8), pp. 1075-95.

⁵¹ This theme is explored in more detail in the section on AI and case recording.

⁵² Local Government Association (August 2024), Local government workforce summary data <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce-and-hr-support/local-government-workforce-data/local-government-workforce#changes-over-time> (Accessed December 2024)

How social workers are impacted by administrative burden

A review of social workers' experiences⁵³ highlighted the negative effects of excessive bureaucracy, leading to burnout and reduced capacity to deliver high-quality services. This impacts the care provided to children and families. The review concluded that managerialism and bureaucracy devalue relationships, increase paperwork, and reduce trust in the profession. It recommended a system overhaul to uphold social work values.

Social workers develop coping strategies, such as finding ways to streamline their own processes, or prioritising direct engagement over administrative tasks. However, these strategies may not fully mitigate the negative impacts of bureaucracy and can lead to unintended consequences.

Why dedicated administrative support matters

The final evaluation report of the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme (CSCIP) showed that sufficient time to work directly with children and families enables practitioners' capacity to deliver good practice and so support better outcomes.⁵⁴

NWAG discussions highlighted the significant role that business support and alternatively qualified staff play in providing the first point of contact and often maintaining relationships with families over time.

NWAG members stressed the importance of dedicated administrative support over generic support, highlighting the need for specialist knowledge in person-centred social work. Generic support may lack the specific knowledge required to effectively assist social workers and families. The discussions also noted that the potential unintended consequences of removing dedicated support on social worker workload were not always well understood.

Models of administrative support for social workers

Local authorities face resource constraints impacting administrative support for social workers. As in all other areas of practice and system delivery there is considerable variability in how this is applied across England.

One option explored during this project was the production of a business case template for local authorities to support decision-making about increased administrative capacity. However, subsequent discussion with NWAG and RTIN identified that a 'template' was not a priority. Rather, local authorities were interested in understanding more about the benefits and challenges of different models of providing administrative support to social workers.

⁵³ Pascoe, K.M., Waterhouse-Bradley, B. and McGinn, T. (2022). Social Workers' Experiences of Bureaucracy: A Systematic Synthesis of Qualitative Studies. *The British Journal of Social Work*, [online] 53(1). doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac106>.

⁵⁴ GOV.UK. (n.d.). Children's Social Care Innovation Programme: final evaluation report. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-innovation-programme-final-evaluation-report>.

Project activity focused on identifying three possible models of administrative support for social workers, and the benefits and challenges experienced by the local authorities using them. Case studies illustrating how each of these models is being used in practice are on [Support for social workers](#).

Hub and Spoke Model

Centralises some administrative tasks, such as meeting support, in business centres (hubs), and integrates tailored on-the-ground administrative support within social work teams (spokes). Benefits include improved consistency and quality of specialist administrative support, improved resource allocation and having a responsive model which can be scaled up or down. Challenges include the potential for resistance to change, possible blurring of role boundaries between the social worker and support worker without clear guidance being in place. This model relies on the quality of the relationships across the team more than other models

Collaborative Support Model

Provides varying levels of support and specialist roles like family support workers in addition to administrative support. It is focused on supporting social workers with tasks of varying complexity, including admin tasks. Benefits of this model are the potential for social workers to have more time for assessment and direct work, the opportunity to develop career pathways for administrative and family support staff and the impact of effective team working on service provision for children and families. Challenges include the geographical context if implemented in a rural or semi-rural area, the potential risk to family support and administrative roles if financial pressures increase, and the risk of chronic recruitment issues among support staff potentially undermining the impact of this model.

Leveraging Technology Model

Uses technology, including AI, to automate routine administrative tasks and support remote work. Benefits include the potential to improve data entry and data retrieval accuracy and efficiency, the option to complete many tasks remotely without going into the office and the potential to achieve more efficient use of administrative and social worker capacity. Challenges include navigating the ethical considerations of the use of AI in social work practice, the cost of software and training and maintaining quality assurance and adherence to policy relating to the use of AI at work.

Project insights

Administrative support should complement, not replace, essential administrative tasks that social workers should undertake. Clear role definitions are crucial to prevent blurring of roles and responsibilities.

Dedicated administrative support is more effective than generic support. Achieving flexibility and consistency in administrative support requires proper supervision, learning and development, and policy development.

Reducing the administrative burden for social workers won't necessarily lead to more direct work with children and families. Time may be redirected to addressing increasing demand. While not a complete solution, administrative support can help reduce unnecessary social worker workload.

Reducing administrative tasks can help reduce social worker burnout, increase job satisfaction and improve retention. Skilled administrative support staff can enhance data accuracy and allow social workers to focus on providing high quality support to families.

Adequate administrative support is vital, especially for new social workers, ensuring they are able to find information and understand how to access resources. Administrative support workers can act as a centralised communications hub for the whole team, and support improved and accurate record-keeping.

Leveraging technology by using AI to automate routine tasks, such as data entry and document management can enhance efficiency. Investing in technology which supports mobile and remote working can make it easier for administrative tasks to be undertaken by social workers and administrative support workers.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Stakeholders, including the Department for Education (DfE) and the regulators, should work together to produce guidance which clearly differentiates between the desk-based activities essential for social workers to complete and the administrative tasks that can be completed by others or automated.

Recommendation 2

DfE should commission an in-depth evaluation of whether time saved from administrative tasks genuinely translates into more direct work with children, young people, and their families once administrative tasks are delegated or automated. This will help employers understand the true benefits of reducing the administrative burden for social workers.

Recommendation 3

The role of AI in children's social care is already emerging, with existing and new AI tools showing promise in automating administrative tasks with the potential to reduce unnecessary administrative burden on social workers. Evidence should be gathered from local authorities already experimenting with AI to understand best practices and potential impacts on social work efficiency and effectiveness and to explore the ethical complexities of using AI in children's social care.

Improving the quality of supervision

Exploring the context

NWAG members noted that high-quality supervision affects how social workers manage their work, focus assessment activities, and work directly with children and families. Despite ongoing emphasis on supervision, questions remain about what 'optimal' supervision looks like in the practice context and how we can better understand its impact on daily practice.

NWAG members made a distinction between supervision focused on the day-day processes and workload, and reflective supervision which provides a space and context for learning, containment for workers' emotional responses to the work, and to develop awareness of how individuals' experiences affect their practice.⁵⁵ NWAG members noted that, unlike in therapeutic or clinical professions, supervision is not an entitlement within social work - despite the level of vicarious trauma associated with some fields of social work. Several group members felt there would be benefits to a national framework and standards for supervision, alongside clearer guidance on what constitutes high quality reflective supervision.

Members had mixed views about whether setting national quality standards would improve the consistency and quality of supervision; some thought national quality standards would encourage coherence and consistency, while others feared national standards could be too prescriptive, limiting local adaptation of supervision models co-produced with social workers. Increased prescription might cause unintended consequences.

Statutory guidance, inspection, and professional development frameworks highlight the importance of supervision. There are existing practice guidelines and standards, like the Standards for Employers of Social Workers, which includes a supervision standard, but are not mandatory. NWAG debated the need for another conversation on supervision, given available guidance and research. They considered revisiting the SWTF recommendation to develop mandatory national standards for supervision, to consider whether this might reduce unnecessary social worker workload.

Research in Practice commissioned Professor Eileen Munro to explore whether national supervision quality standards would improve current practices. This chapter summarises her [detailed report](#).

Understanding the evidence

Introducing a national quality standard for supervision is challenging due to various factors. Monitoring managerial oversight and data returns is straightforward, but understanding and reporting on reflective supervision quality is complex and may increase managers' workload. Supervision occurs in diverse spaces beyond formal one-to-one sessions, such as team

⁵⁵ Earle, F., Fox, J., Webb, C., Bowyer, S (2017) 'Reflective supervision: Resource Pack.' Research In Practice

interactions or multi-agency meetings, so measuring only formal supervision overlooks much of a social worker's experience.

Organisational use of quality measures varies; some see weaknesses as learning opportunities, while others may view performance judgments as punitive. Quality measures within specific practice frameworks would need to be adapted for general application.

Implementing practice models evidences that there is no universal method for achieving change in social work organisations due to significant differences in practice context. While examples of strong practices offer useful indicators, organisations often take different pathways with varying success. Thus, if change requires creativity and continual learning, government prescription may be of limited value.

Purposes of supervision

The literature summarised by Professor Munro for this project sets out three main purposes of supervision:

- managerial oversight, the most easily measured aspect of supervision, which often takes priority
- reflective supervision which is crucial in improving practice in specific cases and in contributing to the development of practitioner expertise
- support for emotional wellbeing in an emotionally demanding profession in which their own safety and wellbeing and that of those they serve are clear and present factors

Supervision is not restricted to individual 'supervision sessions' but happens in different places. Examples might be a reflective case discussion in a multi-agency meeting about justification for decision-making, group supervision or peer support from more experienced colleagues.

Organisational culture and practices

The Social Work Task Force and the Independent review of children's social care emphasised that supervision quality depends on organisational systems, cultures, and practices. Supervision cannot achieve its full potential if the work environment is unsupportive. Therefore, it's essential to cultivate a culture that prioritises supervision and provides the work conditions conducive to retaining social workers and enhancing their expertise.

A workplace that fosters honest discussions requires a culture where staff can seek help, admit mistakes, accept challenges, and raise concerns. Safety management literature indicates that organisational culture significantly influences adverse outcomes. Elements such as a 'good error culture', the 'Safety Attitude Questionnaire', teamwork climate, safety

climate, perceptions of management, job satisfaction, and stress recognition are all influential.

A 'good error culture' supports staff to proactively discuss mistakes or weak practice, expecting a constructive response, so they can use these as learning opportunities for the individual and the organisation. The Safety Attitudes Questionnaire has been widely used in health care and adapted for use in child protection in Norway and parts of England.

Safety climate questions can provide a useful framework to understand staff perceptions of the organisational commitment to safety. Adapted safety climate questions for social care could measure critical reflection quality on a five-point Likert scale.

When using any of these tools, senior managers must act on findings and communicate progress to show staff what they are doing and why. Relevant questions might include exploration of how social workers learn from practice difficulties; how supported and safe they feel in their practice and how able they feel to discuss poor practice (their own or other's).

Organisational culture change

Understanding organisational culture's role in solutions requires a cultural shift. Social research methods on causal process might help. This involves more than demonstrating the correlation between A and B but understanding how A causes B. Logic models can then be used to articulate how resources and activities lead to change.

Learning from organisations that have undergone radical reform helps. They have often developed and sustained clear practice frameworks and prioritised intellectual and emotional support. Learning how such employers have been able to achieve radical shifts in organisational culture despite financial constraints and growing demand can provide high level principles and stories to guide others.

Measuring the impact of supervision in an organisation

To support improved understanding of the impact of supervision, Lisa Bostock and Louise Grant developed a supervision tool for Research in Practice to assess the quality of individual and group supervision through direct observations of supervision in action. It can also be used for peer learning and development. It is designed to be applicable across social work practice models and contexts. This [Supervision Tool for Assessing Reflexivity](#) (STAR) is available on Support for social workers, and the background to STAR is in this [short article](#).

Project insights and recommendations

Project insights

There is consensus about what good supervision should cover – managerial oversight, critical reflection on cases and psychological support. The first purpose is usually prioritised,

and the gap often lies in the second and third purposes, which are highly valued by social workers.

Managerial oversight can partly be done outside of formal supervision sessions by using online case management systems to check progress or the quality of records. New technology could enhance this, allowing supervision sessions to focus more on reflective supervision and support for emotional wellbeing.

To support emotional wellbeing, supervisors must be skilled, experienced, and have enough time and emotional resources to offer effective support.

Supervisors need professional development, sufficient practice experience to offer authentic perspectives on real world situations and receive high-quality supervision themselves to provide effective reflective supervision to others. Workforce churn and retention issues hinder these goals, and some supervisors may never have received high quality supervision, making it less likely that they will be able to provide this to others.

Supervisors and social workers should think about the different places where supervision occurs and how each contributes to their own and others' professional development.

Hybrid working, hot desking, and flexible working arrangements can affect the functioning of social work teams. Teams should plan face-to-face interactions to maintain and promote 'expert team' functioning and professional development.

Context matters in system change. Organisations differ significantly in internal factors, wider community context and multi-agency working arrangements. Social work employers should understand their context in order to support improvement in supervision support – there is no 'blueprint' for success.

Social work could learn from other professions where 'Safety Attitude Questionnaires' and a 'good' error culture' support staff to seek help, admit mistakes, accept challenges and raise concerns appropriately.

Introducing a national supervision quality standard might focus too much on easily measured aspects rather than the desired quality relevant to the organisation's practice framework, and the [post-qualifying standards knowledge and skills statements](#) already provide standards for supervision. Overall, the evidence does not show that setting quality standards to support the assessment and monitoring of supervision would sufficiently increase the impact of supervision.

Recommendations

Recommendation 4

The evidence from this project is that national standards for assessing and monitoring the quality of supervision are unlikely to lead to significant improvement of consistency and quality of supervision, without an accompanying emphasis on culture change in organisations and supervision support. Methods which might support culture change are

included in recommendations 5 and 6. NWAG recommends that if national standards for assessing and measuring the quality of supervision are considered in the future, careful thought and collaborative debate is undertaken with the sector to interrogate and mitigate any potential unintended consequences.

Recommendation 5

DfE should commission work to revise and test the Safety Attitudes Questionnaire and the safety climate questions to determine their usefulness in supporting culture change in children's social care and improving the quality and consistency of supervision.

Recommendation 6

DfE should test the STAR tool to determine its usefulness in assessing the quality of reflective supervision in organisations.

Workload and caseload management

Read the supplementary report on project activity exploring [workload and caseload management for social workers](#) in more detail. Key findings are summarised in this chapter. View illustrative case studies developed as part of this project on Support for social workers.

Definitions of ‘workload’ and ‘caseload’

‘Workload’ management and ‘caseload’ management or measurement are separate and distinct. The following definitions describe how workload and caseload were defined during this project activity.

‘Caseload’ is a common term, used to identify the group of children and families social workers are working with. Referring to children and families as ‘cases’ does not align with relationship and strengths-based practice approaches. However, it is in common usage, so we use it here to make this section easily understood. When referring to ‘cases’ or ‘caseloads’ we always keep the child in mind.

Workload varies according to what is happening in children’s lives, and the level of activity needed from the social worker. This will vary over time as family circumstances change and situations escalate or remain stable. It includes the other work social workers do which is not directly about children on their caseload.

A **caseload** is the number of children and families assigned to individual social workers at a given time.

‘**Caseloads**’ reflects a ratio of cases to workers, measured by individual worker and assigned to specific types of case. Unmanageable ‘caseloads’ are a significant feature of high workloads and have a direct impact on worker ability to practice effectively. The importance of how different levels of social worker expertise interacts with managing complexity, as well as volume of work, is highlighted in the literature,⁵⁶ emphasising the need to consider proposed solutions collectively. When referring to ‘case’, it is not meant to refer to an individual child, but the term is used here because it is a commonly understood term.

Exploring the context

The case for strategies to reduce workload

Over the past 20 years, there have been repeated calls for greater use of workload management systems (WMS) in social care. While more common in the US, workload management schemes are also being used in English settings. WMS can be manager-led,

⁵⁶ Miller, E and Barrie, K. (2022) ‘Setting the Bar for Social Work in Scotland’. Social Work Scotland.

using managers' knowledge of team strengths and case types, or tool-based, using measures and formulas based on case complexity and risk.

Surveys examining the challenges faced by the social work profession highlight that social workers have high caseloads, work excessive hours, experience reduced wellbeing, and have intentions to leave the profession.⁵⁷ The Social Work Task Force (SWTF)⁵⁸ emphasised the importance of social work organisations undertaking health check audits and applying transparent systems to manage workload and case allocations.

Evidence from practitioners indicates that reducing the number of cases per social worker can help lower workplace pressures, provide opportunities for practitioners to establish higher quality relationships with families, and enable practitioners to anticipate problems rather than only react to crises.⁵⁹

Understanding the evidence

What recent studies tell us about 'caseload'

In 2024, a survey by the Social Workers' Union (SWU) and the Independent newspaper found that 58% of social workers reported unmanageable caseloads, with 92% saying lighter caseloads would better protect vulnerable people (N=716).⁶⁰

The DfE annual statistics release average caseload numbers for children and family social workers on 30 September each year.⁶¹ Data from the most recent reporting year, 2024, shows that the average caseload was 16.1 in 2016 reducing to 15.4 in 2024, after peaking at 17.8 in 2017. Data prior to 2016 is not comparable due to different measurement criteria.

Limitations of DfE workforce data include:

- the inclusion of all registered practitioners in the data, this means that case holding social workers holding very few cases (such as those in supervisory or specialist positions) are included, depressing the overall average caseload numbers

⁵⁷ Annual surveys by Community Care, the British Association of Social Workers, UNISON, and the Department for Education's longitudinal study of children and family social workers.

⁵⁸ The Social Work Task Force (2009) 'Building a safe, confident future: The final report of the Social Work Task Force' The Social Work Task Force.

⁵⁹ National Children's Bureau. (2017). No Good Options: Report of the Inquiry into Children's Social Care in England. [online] Available at: <https://www.ncb.org.uk/resources/all-resources/filter/social-care/no-good-options-report-inquiry-childrens-social-care> [Accessed 7 Mar. 2025].

⁶⁰ Comms, S.W.U. (2024). SWU and Independent survey highlights how the cost-of-living crisis is affecting social workers and the people they support. [online] SWU Social Workers Union. Available at: <https://swu-union.org.uk/2024/04/swu-and-independent-survey-cost-of-living-crisis/>.

⁶¹ explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk. (n.d.). Children's social work workforce, Reporting Year 2024. [online] Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childrens-social-work-workforce>.

- newly qualified social workers have a capped number of cases allocated to them, which impacts the overall average
- case complexity is not taken into consideration

Using the median number of cases alongside the average would provide a more reliable picture. Further investigation into the usefulness of the current data sets to measure caseload, workload and sufficiency, in partnership with the sector would be beneficial.

What recent studies tell us about ‘workload’

Factors impacting workload include case complexity, location, levels of poverty, availability of community services, social workers’ experience, administrative support, supervision quality, organisational leadership and culture, working environment, and policy directives.

Survey data usually include self-selected samples rather than representative samples, so need to be cautiously interpreted for bias. However, the messages from recent surveys are consistent, with social workers reporting high workload levels:

- a survey of social workers in London and the South East in 2023⁶² found 36% of social workers described their workload as unmanageable (N=1000)
- the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) annual survey found that 50% of social workers were unable to cope with their workload, and 65% reported not completing all their work during contracted hours (N=1215)⁶³
- a longitudinal study (2018-2022) by DfE on recruitment, retention, and career progression⁶⁴ found that 63% of respondents reported high overall workloads, with high caseloads being a common reason for considering leaving the profession, this was an increase on the previous year’s figures

Evidence and efficacy

Current evidence is unclear on whether a systematic approach to workload management can effectively inform work allocation. There is limited evidence that workload and caseload management tools are effective. Research suggests there is scope to evidence the effectiveness of case allocation tools and explore their use to support social workers and

⁶² The Big Listen project was carried out by the London Innovation and Improvement Alliance (LIIA) in collaboration with the South East Sector Led Improvement Programme (SESLIP) (SESLIP and LIIA, 2023).

⁶³ British Association of Social Workers (2024). BASW Annual Survey of Social Workers and Social Work 2023. [online] Basw.co.uk. Available at: <https://basw.co.uk/policy-and-practice/resources/basw-annual-survey-social-workers-and-social-work-2023>.

⁶⁴ Department for Education (2019). Longitudinal study of local authority social workers. [online] GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/longitudinal-study-of-local-authority-social-workers>.

employers⁶⁵. Little is known about the impact of current social work practice models used in England on workload and caseload.

Approaches to caseload management

Historically, several approaches have been used to determine caseload size:⁶⁶

- professional judgment
- workload studies assessing time spent on activities or the time spent working with different families
- standards based on the number of allocated children achieving agency goals
- case-weighting formulas to determine maximum caseload size for mixed caseloads

Examples of caseload management tools in England include Swindon and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.⁶⁷ An ADCS survey attempted to identify an appropriate and manageable caseload for social workers at different career points and different service areas.⁶⁸ Ireland and Scotland have developed national policy approaches, with Tusla using the Signs of Safety practice model⁶⁹ and Scotland having an indicative caseload limit.⁷⁰

Approaches to workload management

Local authorities use various approaches to measure and manage workload, including:

- tailored approaches using manager discretion
- caseload targets or ranges
- caseload policies which say there should be no unallocated children

⁶⁵ Rodwell, C. (2024) 'Measuring caseloads, building resilience, and preventing burnout.' Research in Practice. <https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/all/news-views/2024/march/measuring-caseloads-building-resilience-and-preventing-burnout/>

⁶⁶ STEIN, T.J., CALLAGHAN, J., McGEE, L. and DOUGLAS, S. (1990). A Caseload Weighting Formula for Child Welfare Services. Child Welfare, [online] 69(1), pp.33–42. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45394063>

⁶⁷ Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) (2016) Children's Services Social Work Caseloads. Manchester: ADCS.

⁶⁸ ADCS (2016). Safeguarding Pressures 5. [online] Adcs.org.uk. Available at: <https://www.adcs.org.uk/safeguarding-pressures/>

⁶⁹ Tusla.ie. (2018). Publications Tusla - Child and Family Agency. [online] Available at: <https://www.tusla.ie/publications/>.

⁷⁰ Miller, E. and Barrie, K. (2022). Setting the Bar for Social Work in Scotland report commissioned by Social Work Scotland. [online] doi:<https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.17286.38722>.

- retaining oversight through flexible approaches, continuous monitoring, triage, and supervision
- reviewing team structures and deploying specialist workers for critical times, balancing specialist and generic teams for added support
- systematic use of data and business intelligence

There is a strong interest in using AI to better analyse and manage data, providing clearer snapshots of social workers' workloads, identifying trends, and streamlining administrative tasks like case records.

Read the supplementary report for more detail on approaches to workload management, and review case studies exploring how some local authorities have applied workload and caseload management systems in their area.

Project insights and recommendations

Project insights

Effective workload management strategies are needed to support workforce planning and sustainability. High workload and caseload levels can lead to worker burnout and retention challenges. Without a systematic approach with set limits for statutory social work, leaders have limited options, making the use of common tools and strategies counterproductive.

National safe workload limits could help address increases in workload and improve retention. A shift in approach is required, as currently local authorities determine safe workloads. Lack of safe workload guidance results in social workers working unpaid extra hours, experiencing reduced time for direct work with families, and feeling unsafe in their practice at times. National safe workload limits would provide a consistent approach and help to improve retention. Calculating this accurately is complex and complicated - developing an algorithm to calculate safe workload ranges would be critical.

Without a national workforce strategy, social worker retention issues are unlikely to be resolved. High caseloads and pressured workloads are primary reasons for social workers leaving the profession. Some move to agency work for more control over workloads. Safe workload limits have not been set, and local authorities are under pressure to allocate work to social workers without guidance or a national strategy designed to support the ebb and flow of social workers into and out of statutory social work.

Caseload measurement tools and weighting systems can be overly simplistic and perceived as ineffective, leading to underuse. The effectiveness of these tools depends on proper data collection and application. Caseload measurement tools have limitations as relying on caseload numbers can mask workload complexity and the 'manageability' of a caseload, often affected by other factors like working patterns and vacancy rates.

Different workload strategies have varied benefits and challenges. No single model is shown to be impactful on workload levels or retention. A combination of strategies, including caseload data analysis and manager knowledge, is common.

High-quality workforce statistical data is needed to accurately monitor and measure workload and caseload, including workforce numbers, caseloads, vacancies, and sickness levels. Regional data collection and analysis are inconsistent. National workforce data terms may not provide meaningful information for policy decisions. Relevant areas include:

- accurate caseload data excluding non-case holding social workers
- recognising the impact of the non-social worker workforce who make a substantial contribution to improving outcomes for children

Recommendations

Recommendation 7

DfE should work with the sector to identify safe workload limits to enable a systematic approach to sufficiency and retention. Urgent activity should be commissioned to determine 'safe workload' levels for social workers. This should be followed by a review of social worker sufficiency to inform national workforce planning and funding arrangements for employers.

Recommendation 8

DfE should review the workforce data fields, in consultation with employers, to explore whether it would be helpful to broaden this out to include the wider social care workforce, and to check that the current fields remain useful for national, regional and local purposes.

Recommendation 9

DfE should commission further research into developing and testing comprehensive workload management models. While existing models have strengths, none are sufficiently complex.

Recommendation 10

DfE should, with the children's social care sector, develop and implement a national workforce strategy for social workers and the wider social care workforce to inform national workforce planning, focusing on retention of the existing workforce and career pathways in non-social worker roles, including career pathways into social work from social care roles.

Hybrid working and digital practice

Definitions of ‘hybrid working’ and ‘digital practice’

In this report, ‘hybrid’ refers to the location where social workers work, including the office, at home or in their car. Hybrid working is inextricably linked with the term ‘flexible working’, which refers to working hours. This chapter explores the impact of hybrid working on unnecessary social worker workload and includes reference to flexible working where relevant.

The term ‘digital practice’ refers to the application of digital skills - how social work is practised using digital methods. Examples are using video calls to explore life story work with a young person, or to provide arms-length support to a family to develop morning routines, using video and messaging apps to provide oversight and reminders. Digital practice is a new area of social work practice which emerged during the pandemic. In some local authority areas this has continued, but in others it has fallen away.

Exploring the context

Understanding the context of hybrid working in social work

NWAG and RTIN members discussed their experiences of hybrid working, identifying benefits and challenges, which are summarised in this section.

Social work has always been hybrid, involving various locations like offices, family homes, schools and cars. Traditionally, the practice of social work has been mostly in-person. COVID-19 shifted many activities online, highlighting benefits and challenges. Technology enabled remote work but also exposed inequities like lack of home office setups and reliable internet.

Post-pandemic, hybrid working continues, influenced by cost-saving measures such as hot-desking. The Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023 allows flexible working requests from day one of employment, meaning flexible working arrangements are likely to increase.

The long-term impact of hybrid working on the workforce and on children and families remains uncertain, although benefits to worker wellbeing for much of the workforce are already evident. Early career social workers, in particular, have struggled with remote work, missing out on discussions with experienced colleagues, a necessary part of the development of professional practice and professional identity.

Supervisors need new skills to support remote staff effectively, particularly in relation to considering reasonable adjustments for hybrid working to ensure inclusivity and understanding how to assess worker wellbeing remotely. Policies like shorter meetings and meeting-free times can help balance interactions.

Digital poverty and poor infrastructure affect hybrid working's effectiveness reducing access to digital systems and highlighting inequities.

Understanding digital practice in the context of social work

NWAG and RTIN members discussed their experiences of digital practice, identifying benefits and challenges, which are summarised in this section.

Online practices have evolved as skills improved and technology advanced. BASW produced a Digital capability framework⁷¹ and digital skills are now mentioned in Social Work England's professional standards for social workers.⁷² The Standards for employers of social workers provide a good foundation, but do not cover some of the emerging challenges facing employers.

Discussions about digital practice often focus on saving time, but the real benefits of digital practice in reducing unnecessary workload may be more closely linked to improving effective practice by working with young people in a space where they feel most comfortable.

Although social work employers issued guidance on digital practice during the COVID-19 pandemic, this guidance has often not always been revised to take account of ongoing digital practices. This would likely include guidance on how to make decisions about when to use digital methods, and when face to face methods would be more appropriate or required. The view of the professional and service regulators about digital practice in social work is not clear, resulting in employers being uncertain about the extent to which digital practice can/should be used. This reduces the potential for practice innovation.

The Employer Standards do not cover emerging areas of practice. Some NWAG members believed that they should be mandatory. BASW has produced resources to support the employers to meet the [Employer Standards](#) and more resources are available on [Support for social workers](#)

Understanding the evidence

There is limited research on the impact of hybrid working and digital practice on social workers, or on children and families. This is a summary of the key points from the available research material, which is explored further in the supplementary report:

Importance of digital skills: social workers need structured training to enhance their confidence and competence in digital tools. Developing digital skills is foundation for effective digital practice.

⁷¹ BASW (2021). Digital capabilities for social workers. [online] Basw.co.uk. Available at: <https://basw.co.uk/policy-and-practice/resources/digital-capabilities-social-workers>.

⁷² Social Work England (2019). Professional Standards. [online] Social Work England. Available at: <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/professional-standards/>.

Impact on relational working: social workers may feel that digital practice presents challenges in how they can maintain relational working practices without physical presence and lack confidence in using it. While digital practice offers opportunities to enhance relationships, social workers may miss the nuances of face-to-face interactions.

Empowerment and inclusion: digital tools can enhance inclusive practices but can also increase inequity for those lacking digital skills and resources. Digital methods can empower children, young people, and families by offering choices in how they connect with services.

Social worker wellbeing: the literature highlights negative impacts of hybrid working on wellbeing, such as digital overload and the emotional toll of digital working during the lockdown. Little is known about the long-term effects on health, wellbeing, and professional development at present.

Productivity and collaboration: digital tools can improve productivity but also present challenges like digital fatigue and unreliable broadband infrastructure which impact on productivity. Digital tools like video conferencing can improve collaboration between professionals, including schools and police.

Experience and career stage: younger practitioners may embrace digital methods more readily than experienced social workers, who might find it less relational (although we shouldn't make assumptions about age).

Supervisors and managers: there is little research about the additional challenges for supervisors and managers navigating new digital practice and tools while supporting others to understand and use them. This needs further exploration to understand how employers can provide necessary support.

Project insights and recommendations

Project insights

Hybrid working

Hybrid working arrangements can positively support better work-life balance and improved wellbeing, allowing social workers to plan for flexible working hours (including 9-day fortnights) and encouraging work-life balance.

To support hybrid working, team communication, team days, and time in the office should be structured to work well for everyone, understanding that staff capacity, out-of-area placement visits and court dates may take priority at times.

Formal hybrid and flexible working arrangements help ensure equitable access. These arrangements should be monitored to ensure they are working well for the team, and for the service.

Time management skills are crucial, and social workers may need additional support to understand what works best for them in managing time in a hybrid world to reduce unnecessary workload.

Employer support for hybrid working practices can increase social worker trust and develop autonomy, improving social worker wellbeing and retention.

Early career social workers may benefit less from hybrid working. Time spent with experienced colleagues is essential for understanding expectations, navigating the complex practice landscape, and developing professional identity.

Hybrid working arrangements can result in some social workers becoming 'invisible' when they are not in the office. They may be less confident in using technology, may be experiencing a 'critical career episode' and disengaging from work, or they may be unwell. Structured communications can help identify when this is happening.

Leaders may need to be more intentional in structuring time to get feedback from the workforce, as hybrid and flexible working arrangements may mean that fewer people are in the office, and some views may be missed.

Hybrid working is an opportunity to redefine the physical spaces social workers need when they meet as a team or service. There is an opportunity to redesign office spaces to effectively support structured team time, promoting effective hybrid working and reducing unnecessary workload.

Digital practice

Leadership in the digital world is challenging because it is emergent: leaders need to be adaptive and curious about how the increasing use of digital methods for communication and working will impact on social work practice.

Digital exclusion and inequity affect both the workforce and the families' social workers interact with. Understanding and addressing digital poverty and infrastructure gaps is crucial to prevent further exclusion and support effective digital practice development.

Social workers and leaders need to understand young people's digital realities to adapt social work practice approaches for the future. The workforce must be able to integrate digital and face-to-face practice to provide meaningful guidance and support to a generation of young people and young workers who are more comfortable in digital spaces.

Employers should distinguish between hybrid and flexible working, digital capabilities, and digital practice, recognising how each impact on the workforce and workload and how they intersect.

The Standards for Employers of Social Workers do not adequately reflect the changing nature of social work practice and would benefit from revision. While they have been 'refreshed' on several occasions, there are gaps in relation to significant changes to ways of working which should be addressed so that they remain current and useful to employers.

Learning resources

Research in Practice worked with RTIN to develop learning resources to support understanding of [hybrid working](#) and [digital practice](#). These are available on [Support for social workers](#).

Recommendations

Recommendation 11

DfE, ideally in partnership with Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), should commission further work to understand more about the impact of **hybrid working** on the social worker workforce.

Recommendation 12

DfE should commission further work to understand more about the impact of **flexible working arrangements**, so employers understand how to support the workforce effectively.

Recommendation 13

DfE should work with DHSC and with social worker employers to understand more about the 'office space' needs of the social worker workforce, and the impact of 'hot desking' and other non-standard office space arrangements on individuals, teams and the professional identity of the social worker workforce.

Recommendation 14

Organisations producing practice tools for social workers should include information about how they can be used for both face-to-face and digital practice.

Recommendation 15

DfE should, with Social Work England and Ofsted, commission further work to explore the implications of digital practice to determine:

- how digital practice approaches should be taught in qualifying and post-qualifying programmes
- how the employer and professional regulators should interpret the implications of digital practice in relation to Fitness to Practise
- how the service regulator might inspect and evaluate the use of digital practice in social work services

Recommendation 16

DfE should commission a review of the Standards for employers of social workers to ensure they are relevant to the current and future practice context. Existing gaps include:

- recognition of the employer commitment to anti-racist culture, organisational context and how this is addressed in organisational and workforce development
- inclusion of the exponential increase in the use of technology in social work practice and how this impacts on the expectations of employers
- employer responsibilities in relation to hybrid and flexible working arrangements and the long-term impact on worker wellbeing and on children and families
- the Employer Standard focus on the individualised practice of social work, when existing and future policy is moving more towards whole system approaches to integrated, cross-organisational and multi-agency working

The use of AI in case recording

Definition of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

AI lacks a single, universally agreed definition. Marvin Minsky, a cognitive scientist, described AI as:

- the science of making computers do things that require intelligence when done by humans.⁷³

AI broadly encompasses technologies enabling computers to simulate human intelligence, including reasoning, problem-solving, learning, understanding natural language, and adapting to new situations. It ranges from rule-based systems to advanced machine learning and generative models. AI is rapidly evolving and is expected to transform how we live and work.

Exploring the context

Earlier chapters, addressing administrative tasks and digital practice, refer to the emerging use of AI in children's social care. This chapter explores the potential of AI use in case recording in more detail.

Case recording was a priority DfE set for NWAG from the outset, recognising that over-recording leads to social workers spending more time than necessary on recording. The use of AI in case recording emerged from NWAG discussions which surfaced the growing use of AI in children's social care. Because this topic is new and emergent, we have explored it in more depth. This chapter summarises the detailed supplementary report exploring [the use of AI in case recording](#) published alongside this report.

Project activity aimed to:

- describe the opportunities for adopting AI for case recording in children's social care
- illustrate potential AI applications and use cases already tested by local authorities in England and elsewhere
- examine the potential risks and ethical issues of adopting AI for case recording in children's social care

⁷³ Leslie, D. (2019). Understanding artificial intelligence ethics and safety A guide for the responsible design and implementation of AI systems in the public sector Dr David Leslie Public Policy Programme. Understanding artificial intelligence ethics and safety. [online] doi:<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3240529>.

- recommend ways that AI could reduce unnecessary social worker workload and improve efficiency, identifying ways to mitigate risks and ethical dilemmas while involving children and families in the decision-making process

Understanding the evidence

Responsible AI in children's social care

AI is transforming various sectors, including children's social care. The UK government promotes AI adoption to enhance public services and drive economic growth. The [National AI Strategy](#) aims to improve efficiency, decision-making, and service delivery.

Local authorities are experimenting with AI in case recording, with the Department for Education (DfE) funding pilots to test AI products. While AI offers opportunities to reduce workload and enhance practice, it also presents risks and ethical challenges, which should be managed, to ensure equitable benefits for vulnerable children and families.

Primary concerns about the use of AI in children's social care relate to:

- **bias:** algorithmic bias can result in discriminatory practices, negatively affecting marginalised communities and leading to inappropriate care decisions
- **privacy and data protection:** significant concerns about AI handling personal information of children and families, especially with third-party applications potentially not complying with GDPR, lack of AI model transparency raises data use concerns
- **consent:** issues around obtaining explicit consent from children and families for AI use, and ethical concerns if there's no opt-out option
- **deskilling and over-reliance:** AI use may reduce social work skills and critical thinking, leading to over-reliance on technology, particularly among new practitioners
- **environmental impact:** training and operating large AI models consume substantial energy, contributing to carbon emissions and climate change, training one large AI model can emit as much carbon as five cars in their lifetimes⁷⁴

Implementation challenges in adopting AI in children's social care

Digital poverty is an equalities issue linked to poorer educational, employment, and economic outcomes. It affects participation and access to information, impacting health

⁷⁴ Strubell, E., Ganesh, A., & McCallum, A. (2019). Energy and Policy Considerations for Deep Learning in NLP. *ACL 2019*

literacy and health outcomes. Social workers and local authorities also experience digital poverty, which is a barrier to practice and adoption of AI.

Reliable internet access and technical proficiency are required for AI, making it challenging for economically disadvantaged regions. High costs of digital devices and internet services can limit AI benefits, potentially increasing inequalities and hindering digital progress in these communities.

Other issues impacting successful implementation of AI in children's social care include:

- complex AI models require high computational power, advanced hardware, and robust internet connectivity
- simpler models like Copilot are more accessible, operating within existing infrastructure with lower computational demands
- integrating AI with legacy case management systems is challenging due to resistance from providers related to allowing integration of AI systems with the CMS

Feedback from project activity indicated that existing case management systems, where social workers record case notes, contribute to unnecessary social worker workload and require significant redevelopment to become fit for purpose.⁷⁵ Some stakeholders suggested that AI could reimagine the case management system successfully. However, the quality of data in existing CMS systems may act as a barrier to AI adoption as inaccurate data limits opportunities to develop reliable predictive models.

To equitably realise the benefits of AI through bespoke applications and to keep pace with other sectors and wider society further action is needed to address:

- digital poverty of children, families, social workers and local authorities
- data quality, consistent definitions and standards
- improvement of case management systems and interoperability
- agreeing data governance and technical standards for AI integration

Understanding 'unnecessary workload' as 'overheads'

An 'overhead' can be defined as an indirect cost, or resource, necessary for the general operation and maintenance of a system or organisation, not directly tied to specific tasks, activities, or projects. In the context of social care, 'unnecessary workload' and high

⁷⁵ DfE is currently supporting activity to develop CMS standards and test a model operating system with local authorities

administrative burden can be helpfully understood in terms of communication, process and retrieval overheads:

- **communication overhead:** the proportion of time and resources spent on communication efforts with diverse and distributed networks relative to meaningful work, this includes the time spent on emails, meetings, and coordination among various stakeholders
- **process overhead:** the amount of system capacity spent on organisational and statutory processes instead of impactful social work activities, this covers the time taken to adhere to bureaucratic procedures, regulatory compliance, and administrative protocols
- **retrieval overhead:** the effort and time required to locate, access, and retrieve information from various sources within an organisation or system, this includes the time spent searching for and gathering necessary documents, records, and data

High overheads represent different aspects of inefficiencies and administrative burdens that can detract from more impactful social work. They are common in complex systems with diverse and distributed stakeholders.

Fieldwork

Project fieldwork included 18 in-depth interviews with diverse stakeholders from practice, academia and industry, discussions with two groups of RTIN members and 2 focus groups with social workers and supervisors currently using AI in case recording. The aim was to gather insights into current practices, challenges and the potential future direction of AI, with a focus on the use of AI in case recording.

Two significant stakeholder groups were absent from the conversation and need to be included in further work:

- **children and families:** engaging them in meaningful dialogue about the use of AI in case recording is essential to ensure understanding of their views on privacy, consent, bias, transparency and digital poverty
- **technology companies:** additional expertise is necessary to better understand the potential roadmap for using AI in children's social care and to identify innovation partnerships

During fieldwork activity the following themes emerged:

- an assumption that reducing communication, process and retrieval overheads would release time for more impactful direct work with children and families

- AI is already in use in many local authorities with varying degrees of understanding of the ethical issues and risks and inconsistent approaches to the decision-making about the use of AI in case recording
- the potential for AI to reimagine how children and families contribute to and access their records and important information
- there is a great deal of interest across the sector in exploring how AI and automation could help reduce unnecessary workload across the system, case recording being one aspect of this

Project insights and recommendations

Project insights

Project insights were generated from the fieldwork discussions with self-selected stakeholders. The supplementary report provides more information about the project insights and how they might be applied. The insights are summarised here:

There is a wide range of potential use cases for using AI in case recording in children's social care.

AI can support improved use of information in case records through enhanced search and retrieval and enhanced analysis and insights.

AI can be used in case recording in children's social care to reduce unnecessary social worker workload in a range of ways, including:

- transcription software for recording conversations and meetings
- automation to reduce administrative burden, improve accuracy and compliance
- virtual assistants for tasks like scheduling appointments
- bespoke AI applications tailored to specific needs⁷⁶

There is potential for AI to radically transform case recording, providing opportunities for children and families to directly upload content to their case record, and access information there.

There are risks and challenges associated with the development and adoption of AI in children's social care.

Digital poverty is a barrier to the adoption of AI and risks exacerbating existing inequalities.

⁷⁶ Examples are life story work, mapping, quality assurance tools.

Joined up leadership and smart investment is needed to drive responsible development and adoption of AI in children's social care.

Recommendations

Recommendation 17

DfE should urgently produce national guidance on the use of AI in children's social care, in partnership with Ofsted, Social Work England, BASW, Unison and the new AI Safety Institute, building on existing frameworks and standards to provide an ethical framework for decision-making to:

- underpin the increased use of automation technology for routine tasks
- guard against improper use of child and family data
- ensure that professional tasks which require social work action continue to be undertaken by social workers

Recommendation 18

DfE should commission an independent consultation of the views of children and families about the risks and ethical challenges of using AI in children's social care and ensure their views are included in any guidance or ethical framework produced from Recommendation 1.

Recommendation 19

The government should prioritise children's social care for investment funding to improve public services through the use of AI.

Conclusion

Readers will note that some of the themes mentioned in this report are not dissimilar to the recommendations from the work of the Social Work Reform Board,⁷⁷ highlighting that although the ‘problems’ were identified some time ago, the applied solutions have not been successfully implemented. Issues of supervision, sufficiency and workload continue to impact on retention.

One reason for this may be that issues impacting social worker workload have historically been addressed individually. This may have resulted in a focus on solving the immediate problem, rather than exploring how the individual ‘problems’ interact and influence each other, within a changing practice context. Closer attention should be paid to the practice ‘system’ by using causal learning loops and other systems’ approaches to identify solutions which work in today’s practice context and are also ‘fit for the future’ of social work practice.

As well as addressing familiar issues such as supervision and workload, NWAG has taken a forward look at new and emerging issues, including hybrid and digital working, and the use of AI in case recording. These ‘new’ and emerging issues for social work employers are indicators of how social work practice is changing through the advancement of technology, leading to the need to review the extent to which professional practice is changing. Policy and practice frameworks should be adapted to reflect our changing world, and the voices of children, young people, parents and carers should be strengthened so that the balance of power is shifted and those who access services have more say in how they are designed and delivered so that existing inequities are addressed.

Reducing unnecessary social worker workload is a meaningful ambition, and the solutions identified through NWAG activity are a contribution to the national efforts underway to reduce unnecessary social worker workload. The work of this project was necessarily limited by time and scope and is a small contribution to the work being done, day in and day out, by social work employers to creatively explore and implement methods and approaches to reduce unnecessary workload, improve practice and positively impact on children, young people and their families. NWAG members encourage this creativity and innovation, as it models the adaptive responses necessary for social work to survive and thrive.

NWAG emphasised the importance of taking a systems approach to developing solutions to the issues of unnecessary social worker workload, and to see social worker workload in the context of the wider reforms needed to address the significant issue of social worker retention.

⁷⁷ Department for Education (2014). Social Work Reform Board. [online] GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/social-work-reform-board>.

Appendices

Appendix 1: NWAG Terms of Reference

National Workload Action Group Terms of Reference

Scope and aims

The overall aim of this group is to identify and develop recommendations that address unnecessary workload drivers that do not lead to improvements in outcomes for children and families.

There will be a focus on the case recording, administrative/paperwork elements of workload that take social workers away from direct practice, as well as a consideration of evidence gathering in response to regulatory requirements.

The group's core aims can be identified through the following themes (these are subject to change):

Table 1: NWAG core aims and solution themes

Core Aims of Workload Action Group	Solution theme 1: Identifying and understanding drivers	Solution theme 2: Streamlining data and evidence collection	Solution theme 3: Developing solutions that reduce workload
Consider all data and evidence which are being unnecessarily gathered, as part of day-to-day social work practice and processes, and diagnose the specific issues and behaviours driving them	X	X	X
Identify and spread existing good practice that reduces these drivers and behaviours, including practice that supports positive cultural change	X		X
Consider what outputs and further content is required as solutions to the issues identified by the group, such as a workload toolkit or the sharing of best practice.			X
Explore the best use of expertise to support the development of tools and guidance.			X
Consider how LAs can be supported to purposefully case report on children and families with minimal workload burdens.		X	X
Learn from experts by experience to consider effective and efficient ways to record children and young people's life stories.		X	X
Identify practice that reduces workload for managers and leaders so they have more capacity to support/supervise staff and improve practice to the benefit of children and families	X		X
Consider the wider impact of care review reforms on the social worker workforce and workload.	X		X
Consider the voice and direct experience of social workers	X		X
Consider the qualitative and quantitative nature of a record.	X	X	X

Out of scope

In order to focus discussions within the NWAG on identifying and develop solutions to workload drivers, we have outlined the below areas that are either being considered separately in response to the care review or sit explicitly outside the scope of what the group will consider, these include:

- IT and digital solutions
- review of the inspection framework
- ways to reduce social worker caseload
- agency
- social worker pay terms and conditions

Frequency and location of meeting

Participation will be conducted via Microsoft teams. All correspondence for meetings will be sent via email.

The frequency of core meetings will be bi-monthly, with a duration of 1 hour 30 minutes. Additional meetings may take place if the group deems it appropriate.

Meetings will explore potential specific regional conversations if found to be necessary.

Secretariat

Dartington Trust trading as Research in Practice (RiP) will act as secretariat for this meeting. The secretariat will circulate an agenda and relevant papers before each meeting. Decisions and key actions will be produced by the secretariat and shared with attendees.

Agenda items may be submitted by any member of the action group to the secretariat no less than five working days before each meeting and will be accepted at the discretion of the secretariat.

Role of chair

The meeting will be chaired by Dez Holmes

The Chair will:

- conduct the meeting in an open and fair way, promoting professionalism amongst all participants, while encouraging bold, constructively critical and creative ideas; and
- gather views and reach representative decisions from all group members

Membership

If members of the group are unable to attend, where possible to do so, they should try to send a suitable representative and inform the secretariat in advance of the meeting. Other attendees may be invited to attend for discussion of items relevant to their responsibilities.

All members are expected to conduct themselves in a respectful manner and be understanding of other members' opinions and views.

The Department will have the final decision on appointments and attendees of the group.

Members of the group are advising and sharing their expertise for the purpose of the group on a free of charge basis.

A list of members is included in Table 2 below.

Confidentiality and use of official information

Members of the working group acknowledge that their name and any relevant details may be published on the Department's website or on any other relevant government website. Confidential information and data associated with emerging policy may be shared with members appointed to the group. Confidentiality is vital and members of the panel must treat confidential information appropriately.

Table 2: Organisation membership of the action group (original members)

Member Name	Job title
Andy Smith	Strategic Director of Peoples Services, Derby
Linzi Blain	Social Work Team Manager, Wirral
Chris Ring	Strategic Manager and Principal Child and Family Social Worker, Durham
Clare Poyner	Principal Social Worker and Designated Social Care Officer, Co-chair of Children's Principal Social Worker Network, Portsmouth
Dr Janet Melville-Wiseman	Principal lecturer, Canterbury Christ Church University
Gill Archer/Kerie Anne	Unison
Jansy Kelly	Deputy Director, Social Care and Regulatory Practice, Ofsted
Maris Stratulis/Denise Monks	British Association of Social Workers
Chloe McSweeney	Head of Operational Systems and Development, Essex
Paul McGee	Principal Social Worker and Co-chair of Children's Principal Social Worker Network, Essex
Robert Tyrrell	Principal Social Worker and Co-chair of Children's Principal Social Worker Network, Gloucestershire
Roisin Madden	Director, Children's Social Care, Croydon
Shelley Leo	Service Manager, Sutton
Simone White	Director Children's Services, Wirral
Suzanne Joyner	Strategic Director Children and Young People, Liverpool
Teresa Hills	Head of Family Support/Safeguarding, Children with Disabilities, SWIS and Workforce Development, Merton

Appendix 2: NWAG meeting dates

Table 3: NWAG meeting dates

Meeting	Date of meeting
1	23 January 2023
2	29 March 2023
3	22 June 2023
4	18 September 2023
5	20 November 2023
6	15 January 2024
7	18 March 2024
8	20 May 2024
9	15 July 2024
10	16 September 2024
11	18 November 2024
12	20 January 2025

Appendix 3: NWAG membership

This table includes the NWAG member changes over the course of the project timeline.

Table 4: NWAG membership

Name	Role	Organisation	Start Date	End Date
Anne, Kerie	Chair of UNISON national Social Care Forum	Unison	Jan-23	Mar-25
Archer, Gill	National officer for local government	Unison	Jan-23	Mar-25
Blackmore, Sarah	Executive Director of Professional Practice and External Engagement, Social Work England	Social Work England	May-24	Mar-25
Chigocha, Shungu	Principal Social Worker and Co-chair of Children's Principal Social Worker Network	Achieving for Children/Windsor and Maidenhead Borough Council	Sep-24	Mar-25
Hills, Teresa	Head of Family Support/Safeguarding, Children with Disabilities, SWIS and Workforce Development	Luton Borough Council	Jan-23	Mar-25
Joyner, Suzy	Y and H SLI Lead and interim DCS	Suffolk County Council	Jan-23	May-24
Julius, Tapiwa	Principal Social Worker and Co-chair of Children's Principal Social Worker Network	Cambridgeshire County Council	Sep-24	Mar-25
Kelly, Jansy	Deputy Director, Social Care and Regulatory Practice	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted)	Jan-23	Mar-25
Leo, Shelley	Service Manager	London Borough of Sutton Council	Jan-23	Mar-25
Madden, Roisin	Director of Children's Social Care	Croydon Council	Jan-23	Mar-25
McGee, Paul	Principal Social Worker and Co-chair of Children's Principal Social Worker Network	Essex County Council	Jan-23	Mar-25
McSweeney Chloe	Head of Operational Systems and Development	Essex County Council	Jan-23	Mar-25
Melville-Wiseman, Janet	Principal Lecturer and Chair of Joint University Council	Canterbury Christ Church University	Jan-23	Mar-25

Name	Role	Organisation	Start Date	End Date
Poyner, Clare	Principal Social Worker and Designated Social Care Officer and Co-chair of Children's Principal Social Worker Network	Portsmouth City Council	Jan-23	Sep-24
Ring, Chris	Head of Children and Children and Families Social Care	South Tyneside Council	Jan-23	Mar-25
Shiringo, Florah	Vice Chair of ADCS Workforce Policy Committee	Achieving for Children/Windsor and Maidenhead Borough Council	Jun-24	Mar-25
Soar, Amy	Head of Policy	Social Work England	Jan-23	May-24
Spragg, Louise	Principal Social Worker and Co-chair of Children's Principal Social Worker Network	Telford & Wrekin Council	Sep-24	Mar-25
Smith, Andy	President	Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS)	Jan-23	Jun-24
Stratulis, Maris	National Director, England	British Association of Social Workers (BASW)	Jan-23	Mar-25
Tyrell, Rob	Principal Social Worker and Co-chair of Children's Principal Social Worker Network	Gloucestershire City Council	Jan-23	Mar-25
Walker, Amy	Service Delivery Manager for Capacity and Change	Leeds City Council	Jan-23	Mar-25
White, Simone	Director Children's Services	Wirral Council	Jan-23	Aug-24

Appendix 4: RTIN members

Table 5: RTIN members

Name	Role	Organisation
Birmingham Children's Trust	West Midlands	Good
Blackpool Council Children's Services	North West	Requires Improvement
Bristol City Council Children and Families' Services	South West	Requires Improvement
Cambridgeshire County Council	East of England	Requires Improvement
Cornwall Council C and F Services	South West	Outstanding
Derby City Council	East Midlands	Outstanding
Doncaster City Council	Yorkshire and Humber	Requires Improvement
East Riding of Yorkshire Council	Yorkshire and Humber	Good
Kent County Council	South East	Outstanding
Lancashire County Council	North West	Good
Lincolnshire County Council	East Midlands	Outstanding
London Borough of Croydon	Greater London	Good
London Borough of Newham	Greater London	Good
London Borough of Sutton	Greater London	Good
London Borough of Wandsworth	Greater London	Good
Luton Council	East of England	Requires Improvement
Newcastle City Council	North East	Good
North Tyneside Council	North East	Outstanding
North Yorkshire Council	Yorkshire and Humber	Outstanding

Name	Role	Organisation
Oldham Council	North West	Requires Improvement
Salford City Council	North West	Good
Wiltshire Council	South West	Outstanding

Appendix 5: RTIN Terms of Reference

Terms of Engagement: Review, Testing, and Implementation Network (RTIN)

Purpose of the group

This ambitious project, commissioned by DfE, aims to influence social work workload and practice conditions, enabling high-quality direct practice to effect positive change in children's lives. It will help to enhance safe and effective practice and promote the value and diversity of the social work role.

The Department for Education has commissioned the National Workload Action Group and other partners to develop resources to support recruitment, retention and workforce development, and to provide recommendations about reducing social worker workload.

Who is involved

Research in Practice, in partnership with Essex County Council and King's College, London, are delivering this project.

- Essex County Council will run the RTIN. They will be the main point of contact for all opportunities and provide information about what's involved
- Research in Practice will facilitate focus groups and workshops as they will be developing resources and liaising with the Department for Education
- King's College London are providing expert advice and input relating to workforce development, retention and recruitment of social workers

The 22 local authority areas to be directly involved in this project by contributing to the Review, Testing and Implementation Network (RTIN) are:

- Birmingham Children's Trust
- Blackpool Council
- Bristol City Council
- Cambridgeshire County Council
- Cornwall Council
- Derby City Council
- Doncaster City Council
- East Riding of Yorkshire Council
- Kent County Council

- Lancashire County Council
- Lincolnshire County Council
- London Borough of Croydon
- London Borough of Newham
- London Borough of Sutton
- London Borough of Wandsworth
- Luton Council
- Newcastle City Council
- North Tyneside Council
- North Yorkshire Council
- Oldham Council
- Salford City Council
- Wiltshire Council

To make sure that the resources and ideas we develop are relevant and necessary, the RTIN will involve and include social workers, managers of social workers, workforce development leads and other professionals working in social care.

The views of people with lived experience of children's social care will also be sought.

See below 'roles and responsibilities' for **contact details**.

How the RTIN will work

1. The RTIN will be where resources are tested, and sometimes developed, and where ideas and recommendations can be scrutinised by the people most impacted by them.
2. All activities will be arranged several weeks in advance, and participation will be voluntary.
3. All activities will take place online to minimise the impact on professional practice.
4. Participant time commitment will range from one 2-hour focus group to a series of online meetings over several months to develop tools and resources.
5. The time commitment will be specified in any request, and participants will be asked to ensure that they have line management agreement to participate.
6. Depending on the resource type being developed, colleagues from your organisation might be asked to:

- provide feedback in a single structured online focus group session
 - provide online feedback after reviewing tools and resources online
 - participate in a series of sessions to co-produce guidance or a practice tool
7. Participants will be given the opportunity to co-develop and test draft resources: We will come to you with resources in development to seek review and feedback from members of your organisation with relevant expertise. For example, on social worker recruitment and engagement with agency providers or colleagues tasked with responding to your organisation's Health Check results.
 8. Participants will be given the opportunity to share promising initiatives: we may follow up on approaches flagged in your application and seek to draw out ideas and solutions which are making a difference in workforce and workload issues.
 9. Colleagues will share openly and honestly in meetings. Participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed. Participants will honour confidentiality where colleagues ask for any information to be restricted or remain private.
 10. If the occasion arises that we would wish to identify specific local areas or individuals for reporting purposes or to highlight promising practice and case examples, informed consent will be sought.

Form of the resources and how they will be accessed

1. At this stage, we envisage resource outputs as likely to take various forms including:
 - standalone written briefings and practice guides in draft
 - pre-existing written content sourced appropriately
 - frameworks containing connected sets of (mainly) written content in draft
 - quantitative data tools, dashboards and methods of application
 - materials developed iteratively during the project
2. Final learning outputs and NWAG project recommendations will be disseminated nationally and published on the gov.uk website.

Benefits of taking part

Participants will have opportunities to:

- Access a diverse peer network focused on shaping thinking and solutions to key workforce challenges.
- Enhance capabilities and skills as part of continuing professional development (e.g. through critically appraising resources).
- Connect with and support innovation and learning amongst other local authorities and partners.
- Receive early sight of finalised resources.

Roles and responsibilities

Essex County Council will work with Research in Practice on the NWAG project to drive innovation through collaboration and understand the unnecessary workloads driving social workers away from direct practice.

Essex County Council

Essex will be represented at NWAG meetings and will be leading local authority engagement in the Review, Testing, and Implementation Network (RTIN).

Research in Practice

Research in Practice is the overall project lead and will lead and host the RTIN meetings and focus groups to test and review resources in development.

Contact: nwag@researchinpractice.org.uk

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