

Reducing unnecessary social worker workload through administrative support

Research report

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We would especially like to thank the four local authorities who provided detailed information about how they had introduced admin support for social workers in their local areas. Find out more on [Support for social workers](#)

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Introduction

This short report is published as part of a suite of supplementary reports from the work of the National Workload Action Group (NWAG). NWAG was established by the Department for Education to identify potential solutions to reduce unnecessary social worker workload, so that social workers could focus on necessary activities. The suite of supplementary reports provide additional detail about the activity and findings of each of the workstreams: admin support, workload and caseload management, supervision, hybrid working and digital practice and the use of AI in case recording. The [NWAG Final Report](#) summarises the NWAG activity and recommendations.

This supplementary report describes the development of managerialism, bureaucracy and administrative burden in social work practice, the current challenges and opportunities, and some examples of admin support models used to improve support for social workers. The approach NWAG took to identifying the key drivers and potential solutions is outlined. The key messages section describes the project insights from this strand of work.

As part of this project, practical learning resources containing case studies of the admin support models identified in this supplementary report are available on Support for social workers.

Project approach

The approach to this part of the project activity involved a multi-faceted iterative process to gather, test and review information on the benefits and challenges of enhanced administrative support in children's social care departments.

Context

The development of managerialism and bureaucracy in social work

Rising levels of bureaucracy in children's social care has been a concern for the sector and the wider research community for some time.¹ More than two decades of standardisation and accountability associated with managerialism and New Public Management has resulted in high demands for paperwork and procedural compliance in social work.^{2,3,4} In tandem, the austerity era has led to repeated rounds of reduction in 'back-office function', a term that encompasses the kind of team administrator post that were foregrounded as so central to team functioning in earlier evaluations of social work models of practice.⁵

Managerialism plus reduced administrative capacity has been shown to have negative consequences, including deskilling the workforce, increased bureaucratic demands intensified by technology and IT not designed for social work practice, and a cumulative effect on social workers' well-being, in turn affecting retention recruitment and burnout.⁶

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

¹ Katheryn Margaret Pascoe, Bethany Waterhouse-Bradley, Tony McGinn, *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, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac106> (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

² Munro, E. (2011). *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report a child-centred System*. [online] Gov.uk. Department for Education. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/munro-review-of-child-protection-final-report-a-child-centred-system> (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

³ 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

⁴ MacAlister, J. (2022). *The independent review of children's social care -Final report* Research report, The Independent Review of Children's Social Care 2. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-final-report> (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

⁵ Cross, S., Hubbard, A., & Munro, E. (2010). *Reclaiming social work*. London Borough of Hackney, Children and Young People's Services.

⁶ 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

Increased administrative burden impacts outcomes for children

There are further negative impacts on practice and potentially on outcomes for children and families. The proportion of time spent on unnecessary administrative activities can reduce time spent building relationships and engaging in direct work with children and families,⁷ and the time and space to develop reflective, analytic and critical thinking in group or individual supervision.

Relational practice is constrained by the volume of contacts and referrals, compounded by set assessment timescales and other audit driven demands.^{8,9} 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.^{10,11}

Understanding the administrative tasks that social workers should do

Evidence from discussions with NWAG members, practitioners and managers during the scoping phase of this work reinforced the vital importance of some, appropriate desk-based activities that are integral to professional practice, as evidenced in the literature.

Case recording is a prime example as it is considered a vital element of the work of analysis and critical thinking which is core to decision-making on the direction of practice activity.¹² It may not be helpful to make an arbitrary delineation between the work that goes on in direct work with children and families, and the work of reflecting, analysing, hypothesising and making decisions. Practitioners reflected that the task of thinking about the information to go into the case record and writing the record contributed to their assessment of the child or young person's situation.

While there is definite value in considering the benefit of providing social workers with support for some administrative tasks, social workers should continue to undertake some

⁷ Stevens, M. (2008). *Workload management in social work services: what, why and how?* Practice.Social Work in Action, 20(4), 207-221.

⁸ White et al, (2010). *When policy o'erleaps itself: The 'tragic tale' of the Integrated Children's System.* Critical Social Policy, 30(3), 405-429. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018310367675>

⁹ Munro, E. (2011). *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report a child-centred System.* [online] Gov.uk. Department for Education. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/munro-review-of-child-protection-final-report-a-child-centred-system> (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Munro, E. (2004) *The impact of audit on social work practice*, British Journal of Social Work, 34(8), pp. 1075-95

¹² This theme is explored in more detail in the report on AI and case recording.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-workload-action-group-reports-on-social-worker-workload>

desk-based activities that are appropriate to the social work role and purpose. These are described as ‘desk-based activities’ which include reflection, analysis, critical thinking, decision-making, peer-to-peer exchange, hypothesising and writing up records and reports.

Administrative tasks may include entering data on the CMS, and other tasks which do not require a social worker to complete them. These additional administrative tasks may be defined as ‘bureaucracy’.

The impact of bureaucracy on social worker retention

Pressures on the children’s social care system in England, driven by the ongoing after-effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, include a significant rise in the need for support with mental health for children and young people, parents and carers, and those working with them.¹³ This cannot be met from existing system capacity.¹⁴ Massive system pressures are being experienced as a result of the ongoing economic hardships experienced by local authorities as a result of austerity and its aftermath, by social workers and most acutely by the people they work with.¹⁵

Reduction in local authority headcount, which has reduced by 24% since 2013, alongside 94% of councils experiencing recruitment and retention difficulties¹⁶ indicate that these pressures will take time to address and are likely to continue for some years. Measures to improve the retention of experienced social workers as well as the family support practitioners and administrative staff whose work is essential to social workers being able to deliver on the work at the appropriate professional level is going to be crucial in reducing unnecessary social worker workload and meeting increasing demand.

How social workers are impacted by administrative burden

A recent review of social workers’ experiences of bureaucracy¹⁷ identified the negative effects of excessive bureaucracy on both social workers and the people they serve. The review found that the administrative burden can lead to burnout among social workers, reducing their capacity to deliver high-quality services. This, in turn, affects the overall

¹³ ADCS (2024). *Safeguarding Pressures*. [online] Adcs.org.uk. Available at: <https://www.adcs.org.uk/safeguarding-pressures/> (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Local Government Association (August 2024) *Local government workforce summary data*. Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce-and-hr-support/local-government-workforce-data/local-government-workforce#changes-over-time> (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

¹⁷ 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). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac106> (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

quality of care provided to children and families, who may not receive the attention and support they need due to the time social workers spend on bureaucratic tasks.

This review concluded that:

‘Managerialism and bureaucracy devalue relationships by reducing time spent with service users, prioritising outputs, increasing paperwork and diminishing the sense of trust in the profession.’

It recommended that:

‘a system overhaul is required for social work to hold true to the professional values of human rights, social justice, empowerment and respect for diversity.’

Social workers develop coping strategies to manage the demands of paperwork and procedural compliance, which can include desk-based activities such as reflection, analysis, critical thinking, decision-making, peer-to-peer exchange, hypothesising and writing up records and reports. These strategies can include finding ways to streamline their own processes or prioritising direct engagement with children and families over administrative tasks. However, these coping mechanisms are not always sufficient to mitigate the negative impacts of bureaucracy and may well have unintended negative consequences (for instance on the veracity and quality of the information that underpins national data returns and/or inaccurate and incomplete capturing of children’s life stories).

The potential impact on children and families

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.¹⁸

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.

Why dedicated administrative support matters

In the NWAG discussions, members emphasised the importance of dedicated administrative support rather than generic administrative support, because specialist

¹⁸ 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> (Accessed: 7 April 2025)

knowledge is required to engage with person-centred social work and its processes. Generic administrative support may not provide the level of specific knowledge about social work processes and practice necessary to support social workers - and families - in a meaningful way.

NWAG discussions highlighted the potential impact of removing dedicated administrative support on social worker workload, noting that the potential unintended consequences were not always well understood.

Stakeholder engagement

A diverse range of stakeholders were consulted to ensure a comprehensive understanding as well as a challenge and test approach to the assumptions that were being developed. Many of the stakeholders were part of the Review, Testing and Implementation Network (RTIN), established by Research in Practice to support project activities. Twenty-two local authorities were part of the RTIN activity, providing valuable feedback which helped to improve the resources produced from this project.

Methodology

- A survey conducted among RTIN members, yielding ten responses from six different local authorities. This survey provided initial insights into the approaches to dedicated administrative support.
- Focus group discussions held with professionals from six local authorities. These discussions included principal social workers, heads of service, and team leaders, offering a rich qualitative perspective on the challenges, experiences and benefits related to administrative support.
- To gain deeper insights, one-to-one discussions were conducted with senior managers. These conversations focused on strategic challenges and policy gaps, providing a managerial viewpoint on the issues at hand.
- Two focus group discussions were organised with national representatives from Unison and the British Association of Social Work to focus on workload/caseload management. Reflections on administrative support and the impact of managerialism were extracted from the focus group transcripts to further inform this work.
- Administrative support and managerialism were key topics during RTIN meetings, ensuring that these issues were discussed in a collaborative setting, providing opportunity to collate a range of views from a wider group of participants.

The views of the participants involved in these activities are not necessarily representative of the wider social care workforce. As well as there being diverse views across the sector, each organisation has developed its own approach to administrative support, often driven by financial constraints, which may not reflect their aspiration to provide additional capacity.

Learning resources

The learning resource from this project activity is a set of case studies which provide some examples of the different ways in which administrative support and other types of support are being used to reduce unnecessary social worker workload.

The case study examples are provided as exemplars of the ways in which administrative support can be provided. Each local authority, operating within its own structure, context, capacity and challenges will need to work out the approach that best meets their needs. The case studies may be useful for those in organisations considering different workforce planning models, strategic leaders, principal social workers, supervisors and social workers. The case study resources are published on Support for social workers.

Key messages

Local authorities make decisions that are constrained by the radical reductions in resource available over recent years about the level and type of administrative support available to social workers. While administrative support has long been considered a core element in social work team practice the availability has changed over the years. As in all other areas of practice and system delivery there is considerable variability in current application across England.

The original intention for the project output from this strand of project activity was to develop a business case template for local authorities to use to support internal application for financial support for increased administrative capacity. However, subsequent discussion with NWAG members and RTIN identified that a 'template' was not a priority need as many local authorities were already doing this.

Rather, people were more interested in understanding different ways in which administrative support models were being applied in local areas. As a result, this strand of project activity explores some examples of promising practice where the use of administrative support has been helpful in reducing unnecessary workload for social workers.

Models of administrative support

Through considering the elements of each approach, potential 'models' for providing support to reduce unnecessary workload were identified. The case study examples illustrate how these models are being operationalised and form the basis of the practice resource for this strand which can be found on Support for social workers. The elements of each model are summarised:

Hub and Spoke Model

The hub and spoke model centralises some administrative tasks in business centres (the hubs) and creates integrated administrative support within social work teams. The hub managed centralised tasks, such as meetings support, and the spokes work directly with social work teams to provide tailored on-the-ground support. This model can be used to improve integration and effectiveness of administrative support to social work teams.

The potential benefits of the hub and spoke model include:

- improved consistency and quality of administrative tasks that require specific skills or attention to detail, like child protection meeting minutes

- better allocation and utilisation of resources by maximising the use of skilled administrative staff so that social workers receive timely and effective support
- the model is responsive and able to be scaled up or scaled down rapidly, depending on need
- supports the professional development of administrative staff through working in specialist teams where they can develop specialist skills and can help establish a continuous learning culture

Challenges of this model include:

- resistance to change, particularly when implemented as an alternative to administrative support staff being embedded in social work teams as this model may be viewed as 'losing' a resource
- without effective training and support, boundaries between administrative and social work roles can become blurred, with the risk that administrative workers carry out tasks that should be part of the social worker role (this may also be the case with other models)
- ongoing effort and engagement between social work and administrative staff is essential to ensure the model continues to be effective

Collaborative Support Model

The collaborative support model expands beyond the typical list of 'administrative tasks' and considers the range of knowledge and complexity of tasks that might support social workers. This might include administrative support at different levels, helping with tasks of varying complexity, family support workers or social work assistant roles who can assist with tasks which required more specialist knowledge, and often provide a bridge between administrative tasks and support to the family. These support workers might support families with establishing and maintaining family routines, undertake life story work, take children to school or nursery or apply for passports for the children.

Benefits of the collaborative support model include:

- social workers have more time to focus on assessments and direct work with the family because there is a bigger pool of support to draw from
- staff are able to develop specialist knowledge and expertise, which can lead to there being a more distinct 'career pathway' for non-social work qualified staff, which may or may not include a pathway into social work

- effective working relationships between support workers and social workers can have a positive impact on families, and on staff wellbeing

Challenges include:

- geographical context will have an impact. This model is easier to operationalise in an urban or semi-urban context. Large rural areas where travel takes longer will impact on staff capacity
- family support worker and social work assistant roles may be at greater risk of being reduced/removed as a result of financial pressures on the local authority
- time efficiencies for social workers come at additional cost for the other posts. Ongoing recruitment and retention issues in support posts across local authorities may result in persistent vacancies resulting in an overall increase in service delivery pressures

Leveraging Technology Model

The leveraging technology model supports the introduction of new technology to automate routine tasks and support remote working. This can reduce the need to use administrative worker capacity for non-specialist tasks, increasing capacity to undertake more complex activities. Providing social workers with access to technology such as transcription software, can reduce time spent inputting details of visits to children into the CMS.

Benefits of the leveraging technology model include:

- automation of routine tasks, such as data entry and data retrieval can improve accuracy and speed
- an increased number of tasks can be undertaken remotely, so do not require a visit to the office/delay in entering them on the case management system
- more efficient use of administrative and social worker capacity

Challenges include:

- decision-making about the use of AI in social work practice, including consideration of ethical issues (read more about this in the section on the use of AI in case recording).
- cost of new software and staff training as technology is changing rapidly

- quality assurance of, and adherence levels to, the use of AI across the organisation

Project insights

The exploration of practice, informed by a brief review of the literature, highlighted a number of areas worthy of further consideration by local authorities considering methods of using administrative support to reduce unnecessary social worker workload:

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 admin support is more effective than generic admin 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.

Conclusion

This short supplementary report highlights how admin support can reduce unnecessary social worker workload and sets out ways in which this might be achieved. There are challenges, however, and NWAG believe that further work is needed to provide clear guidance for employers of social workers and those working in social work roles. This should focus on understanding and identifying the 'admin' tasks necessary to the professional role and which parts of the admin task can be done by alternatively qualified staff.

NWAG noted that most employers assumed that a reduction in time spent on administrative work would translate into increased time spent with children and families. This assumption needs to be tested further, so there is better understanding of the real benefits of admin support for social workers.

The development of new technology has the potential to reduce unnecessary admin tasks for social workers through automation and the use of artificial intelligence (AI). Understanding more about how AI could support social workers and admin workers in their roles is essential so that informed decisions are made about the use of AI in children's social care.

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