



Department
for Education

Independent review of social work professional regulation in England

July 2026

Independent review of social work professional regulation in England

Presented to Parliament pursuant to Section 64 of the
Children and Social Work Act 2017



© Crown copyright 2026

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3. Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

This publication is available at: www.gov.uk/official-documents.

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at www.gov.uk/contact-dfe.

ISBN 978-1-5286-6730-2
E03644201 07/26

Printed in the UK by the Cabinet Office on behalf of the Controller of His Majesty's Stationery Office.

Contents

Foreword	3
Executive summary	5
Introduction	8
Review approach and context	9
Review findings and conclusions	11
Summary of recommendations	14
Priority recommendations	14
Further recommendations	15
Chapter 1 – Promoting and maintaining professional standards: initial education and training	17
Context and standards landscape	18
Education and training standards	21
Inspection	25
Practice placement and practice education	27
Ensuring adequate provision of social work training	31
Chapter 2 – Promoting and maintaining professional standards in practice	33
Registration	34
Post-qualifying standards, frameworks and annotation	41
Professional standards	41
Post-qualifying frameworks	43
Annotations	46
Chapter 3 – Promoting and maintaining public health, safety and wellbeing	48
Background and context	50
Performance	56
Public experience of fitness to practise	63
What is going well?	65
What needs to improve?	70
Engagement and representation	77
Overall evaluation	77
Chapter 4 – Ensuring public confidence in the profession	84
Organisational scope and purpose	85
Governance and leadership	89
Employer role	93

Data and analytics	95
Status and oversight	98
Sponsorship	99
Financial model and efficiency	100
Chapter 5 – Conclusions	105
Annex A: Review terms of reference	107
Annex B: Methodology and approach	109
Annex C: The context of social work regulation	113
Annex D: Principles of good regulation	116
Annex E: Social Work England key facts	118
Annex F: Social work workforce information	120
Annex G: Summary of lived experience voices: key themes	122
Annex H: Expert Reference Group membership	126
Annex I: Regulator performance against PSA standards 2024 to 2025	127

Foreword

In autumn 2025, I was asked to lead a review into social work regulation stemming from the Children and Social Work Act 2017. This legislation established the current model for the regulation of the social work profession and Social Work England as a bespoke regulator for social workers in England. The requirement for a review was included in the Act in recognition of the considerable changes to the regulation of social workers and, indeed, debate on what was the best model for regulation. My purpose was to explore the extent to which the model is operating as intended, and how far this is supporting social workers and the public with whom they work.

There is no dispute that social work is an intellectually and emotionally demanding role. It is also one that, when properly supported, can be immensely fulfilling, making a real and positive difference to people's lives. That same capacity to shape lives requires strong and effective regulation.

At its heart, regulation is about vouching for a profession: setting and overseeing standards and ensuring that where these are not met, there is fair and proportionate enforcement to protect the public. Done well, it provides assurance that those who practise are fit to do so, that standards are upheld, and that concerns are addressed properly and proportionately.

Social Work England was established in challenging circumstances and has had to develop at pace. It is clear that the organisation is maturing and has already established significant expertise across its core regulatory functions. It has successfully transferred and maintained the social work register, ensuring its accuracy and integrity, and has built out the key components of a modern regulatory framework. It has developed and implemented new education and training standards, and completed its first round of inspections for social work courses. Alongside this, Social Work England has demonstrated a clear commitment to valuing high-quality regulation and the profession it regulates, including through sustained work on equality and inclusion issues as they affect regulation.

It is equally clear that further progress is required to ensure that regulation is operating as effectively as it needs to. Most notably, significant delays within fitness to practise processes undermine the regulator's core function of protecting the public and damage confidence in the regulatory system. The concerns that were repeatedly expressed by stakeholders about the clarity, tone and effectiveness of communication with registrants and stakeholders have impacted strongly on how the regulator's intentions and commitment are understood across the sector. There needs to be a sustained focus on implementing a coherent and comprehensive improvement strategy to address these issues. These are not peripheral matters – they go to the heart of the regulator's purpose and its credibility.

This report sets out a series of recommendations to strengthen the clarity, focus and effectiveness of social worker regulation. Delivering these will require action not only from Social Work England, but also from government and employers, both of whom have a vital role to play in creating a more coherent system within which regulation operates. It is equally important that social workers engage with the regulator, and its requirements, from a position of understanding why it matters, its role, functions and value.

During this review, I have spoken with many people and organisations involved in social work, in regulation and related fields. I have also talked to individuals with direct experience of being supported by a social worker.

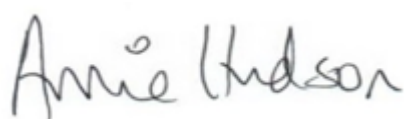
Unsurprisingly perhaps, my conversations with those who have had experience of social work were particularly meaningful and valuable. The immensely articulate children and young people I met understood why they had social workers in their lives and simply wanted good relationships with social workers who got to know them as individuals and showed that they cared. Adults who draw on care and support want to be able to live independent lives and be supported to make their own decisions about their care. Both groups wanted, more than anything else, honesty from their social workers and to feel that they were central to decision-making. None of them wanted to be in a position where they had to complain about their social worker, but all wanted to feel confident that complaints and concerns would be taken seriously. Social Work England's professional standards help ensure that the people I met – and others like them – receive the support they need from social workers. This is the purpose of regulation. I want to see it strengthened so that the public can have confidence in the social work profession and in the crucial public service they provide.

It has been a privilege to lead this review. It has enriched my appreciation of both the vital and skilled work undertaken by Social Work England and of the deep commitment and resolve of social work educators, social workers and employers to improve continuously the quality of practice so that they are better able to support people needing their help.

I came to this review with what I now realise to be a somewhat limited understanding of the complexities and challenges of social worker regulation. Although it can appear, from the outside, to be a very technical, rule-bound and bureaucratic activity, it is vital that we get it right. Social workers do very complicated and difficult work that has a real impact on people's lives. We must therefore work to support an effective, strong and rigorous system of regulation – one that protects the public and, in doing so, helps social workers to do their job well.

I would like to thank the executive and board leadership and staff of Social Work England who have worked openly and constructively with me and with the review team. I want too to express my great appreciation and gratitude to the review team who have provided me with excellent support, advice and guidance at every stage of the review.

Finally, I thank the Expert Reference Group members, those working in the six local authority areas, one NHS trust and four education providers that we visited, together with the very many other stakeholders who we met or from whom we received evidence. While I, of course, take full responsibility for this report, their insights, perspectives and ideas have shaped and moulded my findings and recommendations.



Dame Annie Hudson
Independent Reviewer

July 2026

Executive summary

This report presents the findings of an independent review of social work regulation in England, commissioned under the Children and Social Work Act 2017. The review assesses the effectiveness of Social Work England and government in delivering statutory functions set out in this legislation. It considers the extent to which both government and the regulator support effective social work practice and public confidence in the profession and, indeed, Social Work England itself.

Social Work England was formed in 2019 – the third regulator to oversee the profession since 2012. It inherited significant challenges, including establishing its credibility with the sector against the backdrop of frequent change and criticism of social work regulation. It also started with significant operational challenges, and most particularly inheriting a high starting caseload from the previous regulator and having to navigate its early years during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In its first six years, Social Work England has established itself as a functioning and increasingly mature regulator. It has successfully transferred and maintained the national register, developed and implemented education and professional standards alongside a well-received assurance regime. The regulator is currently consulting on the knowledge, skills and behaviours that all qualifying social workers must demonstrate; this will help enhance work to ensure that ‘tomorrow’s social workers’ are ready for practice. Social Work England has introduced a modern regulatory framework for assessing fitness to practise concerns. Its commitment to equality, inclusion and innovation – particularly in early resolution of complaints – is evident.

Social Work England’s significant progress is commendable. However, overall effectiveness is undermined by serious and persistent weaknesses in key areas. In particular, the fitness to practise system is not operating effectively. Delays are extensive, systemic and unacceptable, weakening public protection and eroding trust. Importantly too, communication about fitness to practise both to participants in the process (including those making referrals) and to wider stakeholders has been poor. Differential outcomes in fitness to practise and across the workforce are a further and significant concern. Both problems are common to many regulators, but this should not undermine organisational ambition or be any reason for complacency.

Registration arrangements are functioning well, but disproportionate and poorly implemented continuing professional development (CPD) requirements are limiting their effectiveness in driving reflection and high standards of practice. Supporting functions – including governance, data, equalities and financial planning – require strengthening if the regulator is to deliver sustained improvement.

Many challenges faced by Social Work England have their source in wider systems rather than residing in the regulator alone. There is widespread confusion and differing expectations about the role of Social Work England, including whether or not this should encompass functions related to professional development or advocacy. It is crucial that all stakeholders recognise and understand that its fundamental and unambiguous role is to protect the public. The regulator is very definitely not there to act as an advocate or to provide leadership of the profession.

A further factor affecting Social Work England's ability to set and enforce well understood regulatory standards is the complex landscape of bodies involved in articulating what social work practice should look like. This has in turn created an equally complex terrain of different standards and frameworks that impinge on Social Work England's work. Government oversight arrangements, divided across departments, and inconsistent employer engagement further complicate the operating environment.

The report sets out a comprehensive programme of reform requiring co-ordinated action by Social Work England, government and the wider sector.

As a priority, the following recommendations should be taken forward by the regulator, government and the wider sector.

Social Work England

- Deliver, within six months, a comprehensive end-to-end strategic improvement plan for fitness to practise, with clear milestones, performance measures and independent scrutiny.
- Develop a refreshed communications strategy to improve clarity, transparency and user experience across all functions.
- Reform CPD requirements by moving to a less frequent cycle (such as three years) with stronger, externally moderated assessment of impact on practice.
- Further strengthen education standards by refining KSB statements which set out what qualifying social workers should know and be able to do, including clarifying how they are used to assess readiness for practice.
- Prioritise improvements in data collection, data governance and data validation.

Government

- Clarify the role of Social Work England as a regulator focused on public protection, not professional improvement or advocacy.
- Legislate to address barriers in fitness to practise processes, including information sharing and powers to secure early resolution to cases.
- Lead the development of a single, coherent framework for social work standards and a clearer post-qualifying career and training architecture.

The wider sector, including employers

- Improve engagement with regulatory processes, particularly in supporting fitness to practise investigations and practice placements.
- Work collectively to ensure sufficient high-quality placements for social work students to have consistently good learning opportunities and, alongside new guidance on training for practice educators and clarity on assessment, improve consistency and moderation of decisions about whether students should pass or fail.

Social Work England has laid important foundations as a specialist regulator and is capable of delivering a high-quality regulatory system. Following a series of changes of regulator over the past 15 years, it is crucial that they are enabled to do so, providing the

credible and stable oversight needed and enabling stakeholders to develop a settled and embedded understanding of the regulator's role and functions. Addressing these challenges requires sustained focus, strong leadership and clearer strategic direction by the regulator so that, alongside decisive action from government, all required changes are secured.

The recommendations in this report will, if fully implemented, support a more coherent, proportionate and effective system of regulation – one that better protects the public, strengthens professional standards and enables social workers to deliver high-quality practice with confidence.

Introduction

This review stems from the Children and Social Work Act 2017: the legislation that created the current model for social worker regulation, including Social Work England itself. Parliament required a one-off review, led by someone who is independent of both Social Work England and government, five years after the legislation came into force.¹

The purpose of the review is to look at how the legal duties in Part 2 of the Act are being carried out and how well they work in practice.

I was asked to lead this review in 2025 by Bridget Phillipson MP, Secretary of State for Education. I was also given an additional remit of looking at the current model of professional regulation for social workers and to make recommendations if changes are needed. This includes changes to how Social Work England works, so regulation can be more effective and help improve standards of social work practice.

The review considers how well regulation works, based on the overarching objective of the regulator – protection of the public – and further core objectives set out in the Act, to:

- promote and maintain proper professional standards for social workers in England
- protect, promote and maintain public health, safety and wellbeing
- ensure public confidence in social workers in England

These objectives are common across health and care professional regulators. They help to make sure that regulation is clear, focused and coherent across these allied sectors.

In this review, I have looked at how well Social Work England is operating. I have also looked at how far its statutory functions – individually and collectively – help achieve the objectives above. The focus has therefore been on the core functions of Social Work England:

- determining and publishing standards of education or training and approving and assuring initial qualifying courses against these standards
- determining and publishing professional standards for social workers
- maintaining a register of social workers and managing the process by which this register is updated
- making arrangements to protect the public from social workers whose fitness to practise is impaired and taking disciplinary action against social workers in England

In this report, I consider Social Work England's performance against each of these functions and then propose recommendations for improvement. I also consider how Social Work England operates to deliver these functions, considering aspects such as its organisational scope, and governance and leadership.

¹ Various factors mean the review started six years after Social Work England went live – the full six years have been covered in this review.

Finally, I consider the wider powers in Part 2 of the Children and Social Work Act owned by the Secretary of State:

- powers necessary for the awarding of grants to Social Work England
- direction powers, should Social Work England default on its role
- powers to ensure adequate provision of social work training
- powers to create improvement standards

Review approach and context

As part of my evidence gathering and analysis, it has been vital to hear from those working across the social work sector. The 2017 Act requires that representatives of social workers are consulted as part of the review, as well as others considered appropriate. This review has heard from representative groups as well as many social workers in child and adult social work, in different roles and at different levels. I met with social workers from different types of organisations including local authorities, charities, the NHS, hospices, family courts and independent practice.

Higher education institution visits were typically half-day agendas, meeting heads of subject, programme leads, professional leads, practice education facilitators, administrators and in some cases pro-vice chancellors. Local authority visits involved full days, meeting all levels of social workers in both children's and adult services, from the directors of children's services and directors of adult social services, through principal social workers and team managers, to practising social workers and newly-qualified social workers. Visits also included meeting practice educators and assessed and supported year in employment leads.

It was equally important to hear from people with direct lived experience of social work, either themselves or through family members. This helped keep the review suitably grounded in the realities of the lives of people who have experience of social workers. The review team met members of the Children in Care Council in each local authority area visited. We convened a separate forum for adults with lived experience and also met experts by experience involved in two initial qualifying programmes.

I also gathered evidence from:

- a number of academics and researchers involved in social work, social care and professional regulation
- other regulators, including those in nursing, medicine and optometry
- those involved in social work and social care regulation across other nations in the UK

I initiated a call for evidence, asking for views about social worker regulation from anyone with an interest. This call for evidence ran for three weeks in late 2025 and received responses from 4,079 people.

Lastly and crucially, members of the review team and I have had considerable and varied engagement with Social Work England. It has also provided us with substantial valuable information, data and insight. There have also been helpful contributions from government officials. All these activities have been crucial in helping me understand how Social Work England and government deliver on their roles and duties in practice.

It has become apparent to me that there are inconsistent and sometimes confused understandings about what Social Work England is there to do and whom it serves. It is striking that many social workers, at different levels, felt frustrated and questioned the value of their registration fee. Many said Social Work England should do more for the profession, acting as its champion, advocate and a strong voice for all those who execute complex and challenging public responsibilities on a daily basis.

The context for the work of Social Work England is undoubtedly complex. First, it is operating in a very overcrowded, fractured and incoherent landscape of social work standards. The complex history of the profession has led to competing and overlapping articulations of both what social work is there to do, and about required practice standards. This, in turn, has resulted in a degree of confusion about the functions, status and application of different standards. The impact on the work of Social Work England of this disjointed landscape of standards and expectations is considered further in Chapter 1.

Second, the fact that social workers have had three different regulators in the last 15 years has made it much harder to embed a clear understanding among social workers, employers and others about what Social Work England is there to do. Third, oversight by two departments of government – the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) – has compounded challenges in embedding sector-wide understanding and engagement with regulatory functions.

Perceptions of the role of regulation have also been impacted by Social Work England's position as the only organisation with a role and remit for the whole profession. There is no independent body that provides a voice for, and on behalf of, the profession. This stands in contrast to many other professions where a regulatory body sits alongside two other types of organisation, namely one that represents members and another that speaks on behalf of the profession, promoting its development and improvement. Social work operates without this architecture, despite it being a profession that is the subject of much scrutiny and attention from the public and the media.

These issues are discussed in detail in Annex C. Together they have meant that many social workers do not have a good understanding and familiarity with what it means to be a regulated profession or what to expect from their regulator. There is a legitimate question to ask about why social workers, unlike many other professions, do not have strong organisations to articulate their professional voice and to support the profession's development. However, that question is outside the scope of this review. It nonetheless remains an important issue for the profession, employers and government to consider.

A regulator is not there to act as a voice for the profession it regulates. It also cannot provide professional leadership and support, for its fundamental role is to protect the public. In doing so, it also protects good, competent and dedicated social workers who are fit to practise their profession. Professional regulation is there to make sure that those working under its name operate according to clear standards and that, where they do not or cannot meet those standards, then necessary and independent action is swiftly taken. It

also – *de facto* – should protect social workers by making sure that if concerns are expressed about their practice, they are handled properly and fairly.

My intention from the outset was to be scrupulously evidence-based, to secure good engagement from diverse groups across the sector and to produce recommendations that will make a material and positive impact on the quality of regulation in the future. The calibre and depth of feedback and discussions with different stakeholders across England testifies to the fact that regulation does matter to social workers, though many feel that regulation should improve and change.

Review findings and conclusions

Social Work England inherited significant challenges, including a substantial number of legacy fitness to practise cases from the previous regulator and being established just a few weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, it has made great strides in establishing regulatory processes and is now maturing and seeking to strengthen these. Its leaders and staff are clearly committed to achieving excellence and improvement. I commend and recognise the many steps they have taken. Their constructive engagement with this review demonstrates their collective commitment to learn and change. However, clear action is needed in six key areas to ensure momentum and improvement.

First, government has a duty to steady the ship. While I have identified significant challenges in terms of some aspects of the work of Social Work England, I am in no doubt that these must be resolved by that organisation and not moved on to a new body. Government must articulate what the regulator does – and does not do – and communicate this widely. To paraphrase what one senior social worker said, Social Work England must “stay in its lane”, focusing on its core functions and roles.

Second, fitness to practise processes must be faster and more effective. Current delays are serious and unacceptable. They undermine the objective of protecting the public and weaken trust in the system. This issue was raised, with consternation, in virtually every discussion I had. Social Work England must do more to grip the timeliness problems, putting in place strong plans to address them. The fact that fitness to practise is a challenge for other professional regulators should not lead to any complacency about, or acceptance of, the current problems.

Third, aspects of registration need to change. Annual recording of CPD is not proportionate. Current requirements were seen as tokenistic by a large number of practising social workers. The regulator’s decision to stop auditing CPD while it develops a new approach has been harmful for its relationship with the sector. CPD evidence should be recorded less often but be more meaningful.

Fourth, more must be done to ensure that ‘tomorrow’s social workers’ are ready for the job. Education and training standards (ETS), and the inspection of providers against these, are generally strong. Important work has been initiated by Social Work England to clarify expectations of graduating social workers, but this could benefit from further strengthening. The regulator also needs to work with government, employers and education and training providers to improve the quality of practice placements and practice education so that every newly-qualified social worker has had the right opportunities to learn and – very importantly – has been robustly assessed in practice to support their readiness for what will always be a challenging career.

Fifth, more work is needed to address unequal outcomes social workers who are male, over 40 or Black, African, Caribbean and Black British. Like fitness to practise, the wider evidence of these disparities across regulation and society are no cause for complacency. Social Work England has made progress on equalities, but more must be done. Their work should be better communicated to a sector that must also play a clear role in tackling these issues. More and better data will be central to this, as it will to many other areas of the regulator's own improvement journey.

Finally, Social Work England's communication approaches must improve. Complainants and witnesses in fitness to practise must receive regular and useful updates and information. Social workers often said direct messages from Social Work England lacked empathy. Some felt judged or criticised. While the regulator does not need to be liked, it must show understanding and improve the tone of its communications. It also needs to explain its work better through a strong organisational narrative – especially in terms of changes to fitness to practise. Much frustration comes from not knowing what is happening or why.

Government and employers also have important roles in improving how regulation operates. As well as clarifying the scope and role of the regulator, government must simplify the confusing system of standards. It should set out a clear pathway from training through to senior roles. Government must also provide strong support and oversight to ensure Social Work England has the leadership and resources it needs.

Employers can and should be doing more. This includes supporting fitness to practise investigations, improving practice placements and helping staff with professional development. I have therefore recommended that key sector leadership organisations, with government and the regulator, reinvigorate the employer standards and ensure that employers actively commit to them.

Below I set out my findings and broad conclusions about the effectiveness of Social Work England in delivering its core and supporting functions. The report then sets out my recommendations for Social Work England, for government and for the sector more widely to enable the improvement of the regulation of the social work profession. Each of the following chapters sets out in more detail what is going well, what needs to improve and recommendations for action in each of these areas.

Core function	Conclusion
Determining and publishing standards of education or training and approving and assuring initial qualifying courses against these standards	Effective. Social Work England's intention to improve the standards in relation to what qualifying social workers need to know and be able to do – and for this to be integral to the inspection regime – is welcome.
Determining and publishing professional standards for social workers	Effective. The standards are supported but not yet having the impact on practice that they need to have. This is largely due to the crowded and confusing standards landscape, which is beyond Social Work England's remit.

Maintaining a register of social workers and managing the process by which this register is updated	Partly effective. Registration is functioning effectively, but the annual cycle for CPD is not proportionate and the recent history has been problematic.
Making arrangements to protect the public from social workers whose fitness to practise is impaired and making arrangements for taking disciplinary action against social workers in England	Not effective. While no significant concerns have been raised about the quality of decisions, delays in the process are unacceptable. Greater strategic direction and oversight are needed to resolve this key weakness in the process, which has had major repercussions for the credibility of the regulator.
Supporting function	Conclusion
Equalities	Social Work England is committed to equality and fairness and is taking action to reduce disparities for certain groups in regulation. Nonetheless, more needs to be done to increase parity and public understanding of actions to achieve this.
Governance and leadership	The quality of governance has improved but stronger strategic direction and oversight are needed to support the improvements required, most particularly as this relates to delays in fitness-to-practise decision-making.
Data and analytics	Data collection and processes are not yet of good enough quality for a professional regulator. Social Work England recognises these issues and plans to address them. This needs to be prioritised.
Financial management	Social Work England has demonstrated value for money and provided efficiencies through effective reviews of their systems, resulting in cost savings. However, stronger strategic assessments would support more effective resource discussions.

Summary of recommendations

Recommendations correspond to their numbering within the review and are therefore not sequential.

Priority recommendations

Social Work England

- Deliver, within six months, a comprehensive, end-to-end strategic improvement plan for fitness to practise. This should include revised forecasts and key performance indicators on timeliness and methods to track progress and recalibrate at pace where needed. Social Work England should work with a relevant independent expert to provide effective challenge and scrutiny to this process and assurance of delivery improvements.
- Develop a refreshed communications strategy focused on:
 - all registrants – ensuring effective and clear communication with registrants and applicants
 - fitness to practise – ensuring those under investigation, those who have made referrals and witnesses receive regular updates on their cases, employers are clear what is required of them, and evidence-gathering with them is streamlined
 - the wider system – improving transparency about performance, processes and the organisation’s improvement strategy
- Reform the current approach and processes for CPD requirements to:
 - move from annual CPD requirements to a three-year cycle
 - include external moderation and meaningful assessment of CPD on the impact on professional practice
- Further strengthen the ETS by refining KSB statements before publishing the revised ETS, including clarifying how they should be used for assessing practice placements.
- Prioritise improvements in data collection, data governance and data validation.

Government

- Create, working with Social Work England and with other relevant organisations, a single, clear framework that maps existing standards, explains their respective functions, their status, and how they relate to one another.
- Take the next available opportunity to legislate to improve fitness to practise, including:

- prioritising amending the Family Procedure Rules 2010 and/or the associated Practice Directions, to enable information relating to private family court proceedings to be lawfully shared with Social Work England in a manner which enables its lawful use in fitness to practise proceedings
- updating Social Work England's powers on accepted disposals to enable them to impose an accepted disposal where a social worker has not engaged at all with the process
- enabling the Professional Standards Authority (PSA) to request that a case examiner decision be revised
- limiting the upper time a social worker can be suspended to two years

This should also include any further legislative change identified by the improvement strategy produced as a result of the end-to-end strategic improvement plan.

- Clarify that the role of Social Work England as focussed on core regulatory functions. This does not preclude Social Work England using its unique position to support improvement through the provision of data and intelligence, but it should not carry out improvement or advocacy activities.

Further recommendations

Social Work England

- Consult on a standardised route to qualification as a practice educator (Chapter 1).
- Set clear, consistent oversight processes and standards for student behaviour and explore how to strengthen processes, in partnership with course providers, to ensure a consistent approach when fitness to practise concerns are raised during a student's academic journey (Chapter 2).
- Increase visibility of the action it is already taking on equalities, including by publishing more substantive and detailed data on equalities aspects of regulation and encouraging employers to take action based on the data (Chapter 3).
- Commission research or evaluation on fitness to practise to explore and address concerns about differential impacts on groups with particular characteristics (Chapter 3).
- Extend data collection and analysis relating to fitness to practise proceedings. This should include collecting additional consistent data on those referred, including:
 - whether individuals have legal or professional representation
 - educational and training background
 - the relationship of the complainant to the registrant (Chapter 4)

Government

- Consider, with key partners including Social Work England, how best to support the development of a coherent, profession-wide architecture that clarifies progression pathways, associated learning and development, and the standards that underpin practice. In the longer term, the quality of post-qualifying education and training should be strengthened by extending Social Work England's role to include the setting and assuring of post-qualifying ETS (Chapter 2).
- Update regulations to require that social workers, whose registration includes an annotation, inform Social Work England of their appointment to an annotated role and notify the regulator of any changes to that status (Chapter 2).
- Work with the PSA, Social Work England and health and care professional regulators to consider what changes are needed to support appropriate referrals, particularly when other avenues have not been exhausted (Chapter 3).
- Work with Social Work England to support effective and strong succession planning and recruitment to the board. This should include early consideration about required expertise, including in change management, particularly in regulation, as well as codifying the requirement to have appropriate social work expertise within its membership in the framework document (Chapter 4).
- Introduce a new power for the PSA to require information to support their oversight and scrutiny functions (Chapter 4).
- Work with the Local Government Association and wider sector to strengthen and embed the employer standards, with a focus on employers' role in regulation (Chapter 4).
- Strengthen sponsorship arrangements through better joint working across DfE and DHSC, with clearer strategic direction set through joint ministerial oversight. This should be complemented by greater senior official involvement to reinforce accountability, to support consistent strategic alignment, and to ensure Social Work England has clear expectations from government (Chapter 4).
- Consider ways of providing Social Work England earlier and clearer indications of its funding. This could include letters of comfort for its ongoing budget into the next financial year and multi-year grants for specific programmes where appropriate. Government should also include providing Social Work England with an explicit risk-tolerance framework setting out expectations around financial prudence, reserves and forward commitments (Chapter 4).

Chapter 1 – Promoting and maintaining professional standards: initial education and training

Key points

- The crowded standards landscape undermines clarity for social workers on what is expected of them. I recommend that government lead work to resolve these issues through the creation of a clear map about different standards, explaining their status and their relationship to one another.
- Social Work England has established a generally effective system for defining and overseeing standards for initial training across England, and provider experience of inspection is good. However, ETS should be clearer, both for providers in how and what they should deliver, and for students in what they should know and be able to do.
- Practice placements offer a vital learning opportunity, but availability of good, particularly statutory, placements is too inconsistent and more should be done to standardise the training for practice educators, making sure that processes for assessment decision-making about practice placements are clear and appropriate.
- The range of entry routes into social work is positive. They offer different benefits that cater for a range of needs. Work is underway on reviewing the bursary scheme to which university students can apply. DHSC should consider feedback on financial hardship for students as they finalise future plans.

The title ‘social worker’ should signal quality, professionalism and competence. Regulation supports this by setting and upholding expectations for initial education, professional practice and ongoing professional development.

This chapter explores the role of Social Work England in setting standards for education and training when social workers start their careers, including how these are quality assured through inspection. It also looks at the wider landscape of standards and guidance that seek to support this aim.

Context and standards landscape

It is important, when looking at Social Work England's role in setting and assuring standards, to understand the broader social work standards landscape in which the regulator operates. A strong theme in feedback from the sector, from practising social workers and managers, as well as from education and training institutions, was that the existence of multiple standards, frameworks and guidance created considerable complexity and confusion.

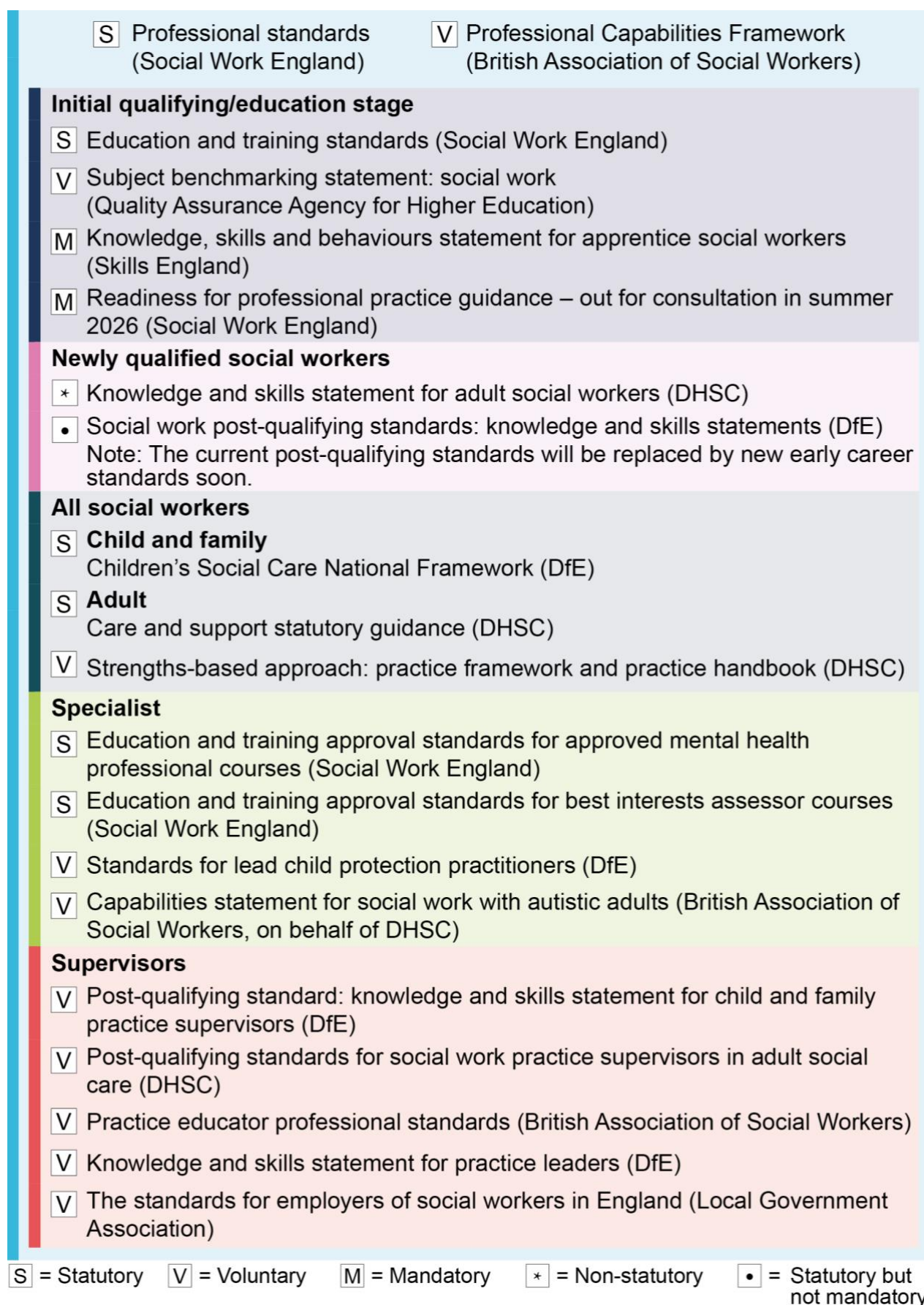
A range of organisations, from Social Work England to government and many others, have sought to define the functions and standards of social workers over time, leading to the coexistence of multiple standards with different status and authority. Many of these are helpful, particularly in specialist areas. They give useful detail to social workers, educators and employers. However, sometimes different frameworks address similar themes, describing skills, knowledge and behaviours in slightly different ways. These differences reflect authorship, authority and prominence. Figure 1 seeks to collate the standards landscape as it was articulated to the review. The exercise of producing a single overview exposed the complexity and fragmentation of the current system, including uncertainty about the status and authority of individual standards, overlap between different frameworks, and a lack of clear or consistent categorisation. Those illustrated here sit alongside additional CQC and Ofsted inspection standards for children's and adult's social care.

This somewhat untidy and at times muddled landscape creates two, interconnected issues for the sector. First, it confuses sources of accountability and arguably weakens the primacy of regulatory standards. Second, it creates confusion and, at times, frustration in the workforce seeking to navigate multiple documents. Social workers, their employers, and education and training institutions must often work across multiple frameworks and understand their complex relationship to one another. Many respondents to this review described this as very challenging and sometimes quite burdensome.

A core and critical function of a professional regulator is to oversee clear and enforceable professional standards. It executes this most obviously through fitness to practise processes. However, the complicated and wider social work standards landscape has rendered it harder for the regulator to secure good and clear appreciation and understanding about the role and importance of regulatory standards.

Social Work England recognises this issue and has emphasised the importance of making a clear distinction between formal standards as enforceable requirements that define the minimum acceptable level of knowledge, skill, behaviour or performance required for lawful practice, and guidance from other organisations and bodies about practice expectations.

Figure 1: Diagram demonstrating the range and type of standards and guidance on social work roles



Notwithstanding such a conceptual difference in the definition of standards, feedback to the review from different parts of the social work sector suggests a lack of clarity about the relative status and role of different frameworks. As a key organisation representing social work in the public sector commented:

“There is a good level of awareness of Social Work England’s Professional Standards amongst social workers, as well as the consequences of not meeting these. However, Social Work England’s Knowledge, Skills & Behaviours, the DfE’s Knowledge & Skills Statements and the National Practice Framework, BASW’s [the British Association of Social Workers] Professional Capabilities Framework, plus local policies and procedures also occupy the same space, which can feel confusing and muddled, particularly for student and newly qualified as well as overseas social workers.”

Similarly, one principal social worker described feeling “embarrassed” when explaining to students and newly-qualified social workers the landscape of overlapping standards they are expected to navigate. Another said social workers are “swamped” by standards that do not align clearly with one another. Employers and education providers also spoke about the burden caused by working across different frameworks and the difficulty this creates in explaining clearly what is expected to those entering the profession.

There is an undoubted need to simplify the landscape to enable shared understanding of the role different standards play. This would improve clarity, reduce duplication and increase impact. I therefore recommend that government leads work to create one clear ‘standards map’ showing the purpose and status of different standards and guidance, how and where they operate and connect with one another, and whether they are mandatory or advisory.

In making this recommendation, I am mindful of the particular tensions arising from the coexistence of the regulator’s professional standards and the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF). The PCF, developed by The College of Social Work and now held by the British Association of Social Workers, is widely used in education, practice learning and appraisal. Despite being a voluntary standard which has no enforceable status, it influences expectations of knowledge, skills, values and progression.

There is value in the PCF. It was developed with the sector (like Social Work England’s standards) and is widely known and applied. Although its use and application vary, in certain areas – including, crucially, initial social work education – it is widely used. Across the education and training providers and local authorities visited by the review, the PCF was commonly used to assess practice placements, with the effect that it retains prominence for new entrants to the profession. Indeed, Social Work England’s own current guidance on assessing practice placements refers to the PCF a number of times as a tool which describes the capabilities that a student should demonstrate at the end of placements and to show readiness for direct practice.² However, updated guidance under consultation in summer 2026 removes these references.³ There is also evidence that its

² Social Work England, ‘Guidance on practice placements’ (last updated 27 April 2023), www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/practice-placements-guidance.

³ Social Work England, ‘Consultation on amendments to our education and training standards and guidance’, www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/consultations/social-work-education-and-training-consultations/consultation-on-amendments-to-our-education-and-training-standards-and-guidance.

continued use reflects perceived gaps in the regulator's standards, particularly in terms of articulating professional values, development and progression.

The PCF is not without its critics. Concerns were raised about its length, its high-level nature and its age: it was first produced 14 years ago in a very different professional and regulatory context. Limited updates were made eight years ago. The British Association of Social Workers has recently published a refreshed evaluation and are considering what updates are necessary in light of its findings.⁴ The findings of this review raise questions about the value and timing of such an update given this review's recommendations about the need for wider work on standards to create greater coherence and consistency.

Ultimately, while many value the PCF, its continued prominence alongside the regulator's standards does not support necessary consistency in approach to standards and expectations. The challenge is not whether the PCF has value, but how its strengths might be retained within a clearer and more coherent standards framework. Although the PCF is held outside of government and Social Work England, the British Association of Social Workers should be an important contributor to the work to rationalise and bring coherence to the standards landscape, alongside other key stakeholders including employers, educators, representative organisations and – very crucially – Social Work England. This will ensure that any overarching framework is coherent, credible and commands sector-wide confidence.

Recommendation

1. Government, working with Social Work England and other relevant organisations, should create a single, clear framework that maps existing standards, explains their respective functions, their status and how they relate to one another.

Education and training standards

Social Work England is required to determine and publish standards for education or training for people who wish to become social workers in England. Social Work England's ETS set out the requirements for approved courses in England. The ETS apply to all routes into the profession, including fast-track programmes, and are supported by detailed guidance on course delivery, placements and assessment. Social Work England first published the ETS and associated guidance in 2021 and updated them in 2023.

Additionally, Social Work England is responsible for supporting social workers to specialise as approved mental health professionals (AMHPs) or best interests assessors (BIAs).

The regulator inspects and approves both initial qualifying courses and qualification as an AMHP and BIA, inspecting against the ETS for the former and specialist guidance for the latter.

⁴ British Association of Social Workers, 'Professional Capabilities Framework independent evaluation' (2024), <https://basw.co.uk/policy-and-practice/resources/professional-capabilities-framework-independent-evaluation>.

It is important to note that, as this review report was being finalised, Social Work England launched three related consultations on 6 June 2026 on:

- revised ETS and guidance
- new readiness for professional practice guidance (which includes updates to their previously published KSB statements)
- amendments to education and training rules which relate to the regulator's quality assurance responsibilities for social work education and training⁵

We make references to these consultation documents within this report, however, most feedback and analysis was concluded before Social Work England published them in June.

What is going well?

Social Work England has established a generally effective system for defining and overseeing standards for initial training across England. A high proportion of education providers who responded to the call for evidence were positive about the ETS. 71% agreed the ETS support providers to prepare students and trainees for the job as a social worker. One education provider responding to the call for evidence commented:

“They cover key areas of social work values, ethics, required knowledge base and practice placements. Involvement of Experts with Lived Experience and stakeholders in all areas of the course ensures a holistic curriculum from diverse perspectives.”

Recently qualified social workers also reported largely positive views of their training and how well it prepared them for practice. 78% of students and recently qualified social workers responding to the call for evidence felt their education gave them the skills needed for direct work with children, families and/or adults.

Following its first round of inspections, Social Work England has been taking stock and learning from these inspections and sector feedback to develop and improve processes. This is reflected in the consultation documents referenced above.

In July 2022, Social Work England consulted on a new approach to readiness for professional practice to be applied by all course providers to improve consistency in how training is delivered. This included new KSB statements setting out what students should show before applying to join the register.⁶ These had been created with their Education and Training Advisory Forum, following engagement with the sector. In October 2024 Social Work England published the new KSB framework as part of a plan to strengthen and standardise outcomes from qualifying social work education. Consultations launched

⁵ Social Work England, 'Social work education and training consultations', www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/consultations/social-work-education-and-training-consultations.

⁶ Social Work England, 'Consultation response on readiness for professional practice' (2023), www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/publications/consultation-response-on-readiness-for-professional-practice.

in June 2026 seek to update and streamline ETS and guidance and would, with the proposed new guidance on readiness to practice, make the KSBs mandatory.

What needs to improve?

It is vital that there is specificity both for providers in how and what they should deliver, and for students in what they should know and be able to do following their training. The review sought views on the ETS before the publication of proposed revisions to the ETS and related guidance in June 2026. At that point, the dominant view was that the ETS were too broad and high level to give clear and consistent guidance. Although some social work practitioners, managers and education and training providers felt this provided flexibility to suit the wide range of social work roles, many felt it hampered clarity and consistency.

Despite largely positive views about the ETS in the review's call for evidence, more in-depth discussions with education providers suggested the ETS could be strengthened. There was a consistent view among education providers that, while they value the ETS, as one university lecturer put it, they are "too broad to have teeth". Education providers felt the lack of detail can also lead to confusion about what is expected.

They suggested that this meant course leaders do not have a sufficiently strong mandate to make necessary and sometimes difficult decisions to support high-quality social work education. For example, the standards expect people with lived experience to be involved in admissions, course design and monitoring. However, there are many ways to do this, and doing it well takes time and resources. Social Work England feels this flexibility is necessary and reflects the desire in the sector to amend their approach based, for example, on the size of the institution or the availability of lived experience input. However, some providers told us that the limited guidance on how this should be done can make it harder for universities, especially those experiencing significant financial pressures, to invest in meaningful involvement and leads to superficial compliance. This concern was also raised by people with lived experience, who reported on variable involvement with education providers.

Education providers talked about gaps not only in the detail of *how* things should be done but an absence of content on *what* students should learn and therefore what the criteria for assessment should be. This issue is not new and echoes earlier calls by those who have reviewed social work education.⁷ In the absence of this detail, education providers often compare the ETS with other frameworks, including the PCF. As outlined earlier, Social Work England's guidance prior to the June 2026 consultation on the ETS refers to the PCF as a tool for assessing students on practice placements but revised guidance under consultation removes such references.⁸

⁷ Sir Martin Narey, 'Making the education of social workers consistently effective' (Department for Education, January 2014), identified the absence of a single clear statement of what newly-qualified social workers should know and called for a "concise, single document...a GMC-style summary" of required knowledge and skills; David Croisdale-Appleby, 'Re-visioning social work education: an independent review' (Department of Health, February 2014), similarly highlighted fragmentation and lack of coherence in expectations for social work education and training.

⁸ Social Work England, 'Consultation on amendments to our education and training standards and guidance', www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/consultations/social-work-education-and-training-consultations/consultation-on-amendments-to-our-education-and-training-standards-and-guidance/.

The revised KSBs, subject to consultation at the time of publication, seek to address these issues through a clear articulation of student outcomes. However, feedback to this review about the previously published KSBs, alongside related guidance for providers, had been somewhat mixed. The previous iteration of the KSBs were seen to represent a step in the right direction, but they were not seen as sufficiently detailed. It would be inappropriate to pre-empt the outcome of a live consultation as key stakeholders will want to provide detailed feedback and comment on the revised approach.

Important too are the concerns that we heard from both universities and practice educators that the KSBs will be introduced into already very crowded terrain. This reinforces the imperative of work to declutter, ‘tidy up’ and make coherent the currently complicated landscape of standards for social workers and social work.

Recommendations for action

Social Work England is very aware that the pre-June 2026 ETS required a clearer articulation of what social work students should know and be able to do. Their summer 2026 consultation therefore seeks, among other things, to set these expectations out in detail. Clearer mandatory expectations for qualifying social workers, as expressed in the current consultation proposals, will help ensure that, to borrow phraseology from the medical world, ‘tomorrow’s social workers’ demonstrate they are able to “practise anywhere in the profession safely, effectively and confidently”.^{9, 10} This is a positive step and important for building public trust.

I welcome many of the changes proposed in the updated suite of documents published by Social Work England for consultation in June 2026. Making the KSBs mandatory is a particularly important and significant step in providing greater specificity to what courses must offer, addressing a key concern highlighted during this review. I also welcome the stronger focus on outcomes within the KSBs which enhance their clarity and impact.

This current consultation provides an important opportunity for Social Work England to gather further views on how these key documents can be strengthened. In finalising these documents, I suggest that Social Work England takes further action in three areas.

Firstly, more work is needed to set out how the KSBs relate to other standards in operation. While there is some alignment of language and terminology with, for example, the new early career standards, points of difference in language remain. Social Work England could go further in supporting consistency of language and approach which would, in turn, support a clearer and more coherent career pathway for newly qualified social workers.

Secondly, further refinements need to be made to the content of the KSBs. The knowledge and skills sections contain much valuable material and, as I have noted, the improved focus on outcomes is welcome, as is the enhanced detail on recognising and responding to need, risk and harm. However, I think that core tasks of assessment, analysis and

⁹ General Medical Council, ‘Outcomes for graduates’, www.gmc-uk.org/education/standards-guidance-and-curricula/standards-and-outcomes/outcomes-for-graduates.

¹⁰ Social Work England, ‘Knowledge, skills and behaviours’ (2026), www.socialworkengland.org.uk/education-training/knowledge-skills-and-behaviours.

planning should be more clearly positioned within these given their pivotal importance for all social workers.

Finally, there should be more explicit detail within the readiness for practice guidance on how students are assessed during placements, and specifically about how 'pass or fail' decisions are made and moderated. This is discussed further below.

Inspection

Social Work England is required to approve education and training courses for those wishing to become social workers and those choosing to specialise as AMHPs and BIAs. Social Work England assesses courses by first reviewing detailed evidence submitted by providers (such as curriculum documents, policies and quality assurance processes). They then carry out on-site inspections, where a team meets staff, students and placement partners, and observes teaching and learning in practice. The outcome of inspections states whether courses are meeting or not meeting the ETS, along with conditions required to remain registered where necessary. Social Work England may also make recommendations where these will support quality, but do not amount to a failure to meet the standards.

Once approved, Social Work England is also required to inspect these courses regularly on a six-yearly cycle to ensure they continue to meet the ETS.

What is going well?

The inspection regime is relatively new, and Social Work England is actively seeking to learn from the first inspection round to improve future inspections. Their recently published consultation on amendments to the education and training rules sets out a number of proposed changes to their approach to inspection.

A review of its first five years overseeing training providers – 'Preparing for practice: social work in England' – provides valuable data and insights on inspections, courses and students.¹¹ It reported that of the 257 courses inspected between September 2021 and March 2025, 48 (19%) were approved with no conditions, 207 (81%) with conditions, and two (less than 1%) had approval withdrawn. Over 600 conditions were applied across the 207 courses.

The review received substantial positive feedback from education and training providers on the first round of inspections. 24 providers responded to the call for evidence, with the majority agreeing that the inspection process supported the delivery of high-quality social work education and training. Several education and training providers spoke of how Social Work England balanced rigour with being fair and respectful. This is encouraging for a first round of inspection.

¹¹ Social Work England, 'Preparing for practice: social work education in England: reflections from our first 5 years of regulation' (2025), www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/publications/preparing-for-practice-social-work-education-in-england.

One large university provider of a range of social work courses provided the following summary of their experience:

“Our experience of the Education Quality Assurance process has been consistently positive in terms of supporting us to deliver high quality social work education and training ... The two [Social Work England] appointed inspectors were exceptionally knowledgeable about both social work and social work education. They were highly professional, thorough and appropriately positive in their work. We were commended highly by both inspectors but also learnt from them and our programme was improved via our inspection process.”

Social Work England is also considering how to make inspection less burdensome by exploring efficiencies in the delivery of inspections to reduce the burden both on itself and, crucially, on providers. I commend this and suggest that it continues at pace.

What needs to improve?

Social Work England will soon be moving into a new round of inspections. It can build on a positive inspection process through increased clarity of expectations to support consistency and high standards. A third of education and training providers responding to the call for evidence (33%) disagreed that inspections supported the delivery of high-quality social work education and training, seeing the process as necessary, but not sufficiently adaptable or focused on measurable outcomes.

“There is value in a wider central quality assurance function, but there is little evidence that a more targeted approach leads to better learning outcomes or improved workforce readiness. The current approach feels broad and bureaucratic rather than driven by outcomes.”

One important element of feedback about inspections was that the relative lack of detail in the ETS had led to variation in how inspectors interpret the standards. This feedback was, again, gathered prior to the current Social Work England consultation which makes updates to the ETS. Education providers we spoke to thought that the lack of detail had led to variation in how inspectors interpret the standards. This limits benchmarking between courses and contributes to inconsistency in what qualifying students know, what they can do and how they practise. Feedback from Social Work England’s three-year inspection cycle similarly called for clearer guidance and more consistent expectations. Social Work England recognises these concerns, and the proposals that are the focus of the June 2026 consultations should promote greater consistency through establishing the more detailed KSB statements as a clear and common set of outcomes that courses should support students to achieve.

The way results are reported could also be improved, as it makes it hard to compare courses. Outcomes from inspections state only whether standards are ‘met’ or ‘not met’, with the vast majority ‘met with conditions’. Social Work England explained that this approach avoids the pressure of ranked judgement bands. It will want to consider further how best to communicate the finer details of whether providers are comfortably exceeding, just meeting or barely meeting standards.

Finally, the inspection process could be streamlined in response to concerns that inspections take too much time and effort. A number of providers at review roundtables, in

wider network engagement and during visits to education providers felt, in particular, that the preparatory work needed before inspections could be reduced. This was especially difficult for AMHP and BIA courses which are relatively small and have few staff. The inspection workload was especially great for institutions with several courses, as each course is inspected separately. Social Work England has said that alongside its review of the ETS, it plans to develop the annual monitoring process which will support and enhance inspections through improved information gathering.

Recommendations for action

Revisions to the ETS – recommended above and already underway through Social Work England’s June 2026 consultations – should help promote greater consistency, through introducing more clarity on the regulator’s expectations of courses and how inspectors will assess against them. It is an unfortunate necessity that work to update these must come ahead of the wider review of standards that I have recommended in Chapter 1, because of the need to ensure that the updated ETS are available to providers in good time and ahead of the next phase of inspections, due to begin in 2027. Therefore, there is some risk that changes are implemented prematurely or lack coherence. It is my view that, while this risk is finely balanced, Social Work England is right to act now to update the ETS as soon as possible to support robust and strong inspection.

Practice placement and practice education

Social Work England requires, via the ETS, that all social work students and trainees undertake practice placements. These are periods of supervised, real-world learning where students use their practice skills and knowledge. They are a key part of assessment for all programmes in England. The ETS set out the number and nature of the placements students must undertake. They also set out expectations for education and training providers on how placements should be managed and run, including the support students should receive on placements.

During placements, students and apprentices are supported by practice educators – qualified social workers who supervise, support and assess them. At present, Social Work England has no direct role in relation to practice education.¹² Responsibility for the provision of placements and practice educators sits outside of Social Work England, with individual employers sharing responsibility with education and training providers to ensure sufficient quality and supply.

¹² They do, however, publish guidance on this issue. Social Work England, 'Practice placements guidance', <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/practice-placements-guidance/>. This guidance is expected to be incorporated into revised education and training standards guidance following consultation in June 2026.

What is going well?

Social Work England has devoted considerable energy to understanding the challenges in practice education and deploying levers available to them to improve this, including commissioning research.¹³ This work is ongoing. That said, their levers and powers for enhancing practice education are limited.

Where practice placements operate well, they were very widely viewed as the most useful part of social work training for preparing individuals for the realities of practice. There was strong agreement among educators, newly-qualified social workers and their managers that the ETS requirement for a minimum of one statutory practice placement was right and important. Limited practice in a statutory setting reduces readiness for practice. Several employers stated categorically that they would not hire a newly-qualified social worker without statutory placement experience. One employer, via the call for evidence, told the review:

“The quality of training and impact this has on an individual preparedness to practice as a Social Worker is almost entirely dependent on the quality of the placements offered. Social Workers who have only limited access to statutory placements find it harder to practice in these settings.”

What needs to improve?

There is an inadequate supply of high-quality practice placements and practice educators across the country. This has been an area of concern for some years. It has meant, among other things, that some students qualify without statutory placements (despite this being a course requirement, under Standard 2.1ii). A small number of students are doing partially or wholly online placements. One provider said:

“There are occasions when courses struggle to secure placements within statutory social work settings. In such cases, students may be placed in environments that are adjacent to social work ... While these placements can offer valuable experience, they may not fully prepare students for the realities of statutory social work, potentially impacting their readiness upon qualification.”

This is a complex issue, over which Social Work England has limited levers. The ETS already requires education and training providers to consider the wider context of placement availability when setting student course numbers. During evidence-gathering, the review was advised by education providers and employers about a range of factors which have contributed to these practice placement challenges:

- the ETS can be interpreted as placing the responsibility of securing placements with education and training providers, even though they need to go ‘cap in hand’ in many cases for placements
- local authorities are prioritising fast-track students and apprentices for their placements, as part of a ‘grow-your-own’ strategy, to the detriment in some cases of students on traditional university courses

¹³ Social Work England, ‘Practice education in England: a national scoping review’ (2024), www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/publications/practice-education-in-england.

- some education and training providers are setting student numbers without considering how many placements are available in their area
- the definition of a statutory placement is being interpreted in many cases as not covering NHS settings where statutory work is being carried out, and so those settings are not commissioned for statutory placements
- practice educators are hard to secure and retain in employer organisations as they are generally not recognised (financially or with reduced caseloads) or sufficiently valued, resulting in reduced placement capacity and/or practice education being taken up by inexperienced social workers, which impacts on the quality of learning and assessment
- practice educator training itself is varied and inconsistent across employers – ranging from in-house limited training to full university courses – impacting quality and recruitment to the role
- practice educator support is just as varied, ranging from dedicated local authority teams to standalone off-site practice educators

These findings mirror Social Work England’s research, which identified inconsistencies in training, support and recognition, alongside an absence of national oversight or consistent data. Practice educators reported heavy workloads, limited support, emotional strain, and barriers for educators who are disabled, neurodivergent or from ethnic minority backgrounds.

More should also be done to improve practice learning and assessment. A core element of the practice educator role is assessing students. Some education and training providers felt that there is a gap in the oversight of practice placement assessment, as while Social Work England has guidance on this, they do not set standards or monitor it in any great depth via inspection.

A strong, mandatory KSB framework, alongside new guidance on the design of curriculum and practice placements, has the potential to improve consistency and rigour in practice learning and assessment. For this to have impact, Social Work England must be clear about how it expects the framework to be used for placements, including arrangements for moderation and assurance of decision-making.

The proposed guidance on ‘readiness for professional practice’ in the June 2026 consultation provides further detail on the KSBs that students will need to demonstrate that they meet the professional standards.¹⁴ However, there is an important gap, which I believe remains in the version out for consultation, in terms of the need to articulate clearly Social Work England’s expectations about how practice placement assessment decisions are moderated and quality assured. Practice educators are important ‘gatekeepers’ to the profession and their judgement must be applied consistently and fairly. There have been longstanding concerns about the quality and robustness of practice assessment, including in terms of the consistency of pass or fail decisions.

¹⁴ Social Work England, 'Consultation on the introduction of readiness for professional practice guidance', <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/consultations/social-work-education-and-training-consultations/consultation-on-the-introduction-of-readiness-for-professional-practice-guidance/>.

A range of factors will influence these decisions. This includes lack of transparency and clarity about what should be expected of a student's practice at different stages, the relative isolation of practice educators when making pass or fail decisions, and the consequences for all those involved when a decision may be made that an individual's practice is not good enough.¹⁵

Evidence that students who are Black, male or disabled may be more likely to fail placements is relevant in this context, highlighting further the importance of clear minimum standards for passing or failing and effective oversight and moderation of decision-making. Such patterns are evidenced in other professional training routes, such as nursing and teacher training.^{16, 17}

Finally, it is vital that there is greater clarity about employers' responsibilities for placements, with the regulator having powers to comment on whether these are being met. Education and training providers agree that improved oversight would strengthen placement quality and student experience.

Recommendations for action

Education and training institutions must ensure that all qualifying social workers have undertaken at least one statutory placement. It is right that Social Work England has strengthened and clarified the definition of a statutory placement. The guidance issued for consultation in June 2026 makes clear that that this should include "sufficient exposure to statutory social work tasks, involving high-risk decision making and legal interventions, which prepare them for the realities of high-volume, high-risk work".¹⁸ Social Work England is also conducting further work with the NHS to ensure that genuine statutory placements are not excluded by restrictive interpretations of the standards.

Social Work England should take on a stronger role in regulating placement quality and practice education. This has two components:

- setting clearer requirements about how students are assessed on placement, which should be closely linked to strengthened KSBs
- setting clearer expectations for training practice educators, in order to both create consistency as well as placing visible value on the role

Social Work England should use the 2026 revisions to guidance to provide more detail on how practice placement assessment decision-making should work and how decisions are

¹⁵ Finch, J. and Tadam, P., 'Failure to fail or fast tracking to failure: a critical exploration of social work placements, *Social Work Education*' (2023), www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/02615479.2023.2236153.

¹⁶ Tadam, P., 'When failing doesn't matter: a narrative inquiry into the social work practice learning experiences of Black African students in England', *International Journal of Higher Education* (2014), 3(1), pages 136 to 145, www.sciedu.ca/journal/index.php/ijhe/article/view/4228/2452.

¹⁷ Sangha, J., 'What are the experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic students in relation to their progression on an undergraduate social work course in one university in England?', *Social Work Education* (2021), 41(8), pages 1748 to 1767, www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02615479.2021.1960305.

¹⁸ Social Work England, 'Education and training standards consultation proposals' (2026), www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/consultations/social-work-education-and-training-consultations/consultation-on-amendments-to-our-education-and-training-standards-and-guidance/education-and-training-standards-consultation-proposals.

moderated. This should, at a minimum, state that course providers are required to develop, with local placement educators and employers, robust and transparent systems for assessing practice placements and for moderating decisions which can then be reviewed at inspection. This should include enabling and ensuring that practice educators recognise and respond to the learning needs of students with protected characteristics.

Improvements must be accompanied by a stronger expectation that employers and education providers work in partnership to ensure the availability of high-quality placements, with appropriate supervision, learning and robust assessment. The role of employers is further considered in Chapter 4, where I propose a strengthening of expectations, including in relation to placement quality and supply.

There is a risk that stricter requirements for practice educators could reduce placement numbers. This is a legitimate concern, particularly given that there are often few incentives or rewards for taking on this role. Social Work England and government should be mindful of this issue when considering the response to this review. Nonetheless, it is my view that the priority should be to deliver high-quality practice placements where all students access good quality learning and are robustly assessed, equipping them for the rigours and demands of a social work career.

Finally, I support Social Work England's strengthened guidance on hybrid and simulated placements. While some remote working may be needed, it should be limited. Placements are learning environments, not just workplaces, and being physically present – observing, taking part and learning from others – is essential.

Recommendations

2. Social Work England should further strengthen the ETS by refining KSB statements before publishing the revised ETS, including clarifying how they should be used for assessing practice placements.
3. Social Work England should consult on a standardised route to qualification as a practice educator.

Ensuring adequate provision of social work training

Under Part 2 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017, the Secretary of State has powers to take such steps as appropriate:

- (a) to ensure that adequate provision is made for social work training
- (b) to encourage individuals resident in England to undertake social work training

Under this power, DHSC provides the social work bursary and the education support grant. The social work bursary supports students on undergraduate and postgraduate social work courses. The education support grant provides funding to universities to support placements and involve people with lived experience in teaching and assessment.

What is going well?

The review heard much about social work education and training, but no significant concerns were articulated about the overall availability of training places. Efforts are underway across the sector to increase the number of social workers and improve retention, but training routes do not appear to be a barrier.

Call for evidence responses and site visits highlighted that employers have a range of views about routes into social work. Employers spoke positively about so-called 'grow your own' routes, such as apprenticeships, Step Up and Approach Social Work programmes, where social workers are embedded within a local authority while training and are therefore well prepared for practice in that organisation when they qualify. I heard strong support too for traditional academic routes, particularly for the contribution they make to research and the wider development of the social work knowledge base.

I met many capable and committed newly-qualified social workers trained via all routes, now practising successfully in vital roles. This suggests that the current mixed model is a real strength for social work education and training.

What needs to improve?

I noted earlier the view among some stakeholders that placement capacity for traditional routes is being squeezed by apprenticeships and fast-track programmes. Pressure on statutory placements is not new but employers' prioritisation of fast-track trainees appears to be exacerbating this. It is clear that, under the power described above, the Secretary of State has an interest in ensuring this issue is mitigated.

The review has heard of disappointment at the ending of Think Ahead, the fast-track route into adult mental health social work. For example, in our call for evidence respondents expressed strong regret it was ending, with one NHS trust expressing their view that this decision "does not support the NHS or our organisation to recruit and train appropriate numbers of skilled mental health social workers". However, others queried how well Think Ahead prepared trainees for the realities of a social work role and DHSC has noted higher unit costs compared to other routes. DHSC will need to monitor the impact of this decision on the future pipeline of these important professionals.

The review has heard very little about the education support grant. In contrast, I heard clear concerns about the social work bursary and most particularly about its current funding level. Universities and newly-qualified social workers reported that student poverty is a significant and growing concern. The social work bursary has remained static since 2011, averaging around £4,900 for undergraduates and £11,200 for postgraduates. Many contributors felt it was not enough to meet basic living costs. As a result, some providers and practitioners report that trainees choose fast-track routes for financial reasons, rather than because of their learning needs. Others said that many university-based students take on paid work, although the social work bursary is meant to reflect that continuing paid work when undertaking social work training detracts from the quality of learning.

DHSC recently closed a consultation on the future of the social work bursary and education support grant. I urge the government, with responses to that consultation in mind, to consider whether it can do more to ensure that all routes into social work remain genuinely accessible to prospective students, regardless of background.

Chapter 2 – Promoting and maintaining professional standards in practice

Key points

- Registration is valued by social workers and renewal is broadly effective, although there are concerns about the user experience for some.
- International registration has improved in recent years and is now effective.
- Annual CPD requirements are too frequent and do not offer sufficient value. They should move to a three-year cycle with external moderation.
- The restoration process is viewed as too complex.
- More should be done during initial qualifying education and training to support student understanding of standards and consistency of fitness to practise processes.
- While overall views on the professional standards are positive, more can be done to embed them in practice.
- The post-qualifying landscape needs urgent simplification and greater consistency. This work should be undertaken by government, with future consideration given to Social Work England's role in assuring the quality of training routes.
- Annotation is positive but could be improved by bolstering legal requirements for social workers to notify the regulator of changes to their annotated status.

Once students and trainees qualify, they are required to register with Social Work England if they wish to practise as a social worker in England. Registration means they must meet the professional standards about conduct, competence and integrity. These standards also provide the framework used to assess their ongoing fitness to practise.

Social workers are expected to continue learning and must undertake CPD throughout their career as one of the requirements of joining the register. This section considers registration, professional standards, early career expectations and ongoing professional development.

Registration

'Social worker' is a legally protected title. Only individuals with an approved qualification, who are deemed competent and fit to practise, and demonstrate that they meet the appropriate level of competency in English language, can be registered. Social Work England is required to hold a register of all social workers in England who meet these requirements.

Social Work England requires all social workers to complete an annual renewal process. This involves a requirement to:

- update their personal and employment information
- confirm that they remain capable of safe and effective practice through a series of declarations
- pay a registration fee
- submit at least two examples of CPD (one of these must be peer reviewed) demonstrating how they are continuing to meet professional standards and remain fit to practise

Social Work England also assesses international applicants seeking entry to the register. The principles for international registration are similar, but there are additional requirements such as assessment of whether the training and practice models in the country of qualification are of the same standard as a UK qualification, and whether the applicant has appropriate experience. Social Work England also restores previously registered social workers to the register where certain requirements are met.

Social Work England does not currently have the power to require social work students and trainees to register, although there has been ongoing debate about this in the sector.

What is going well?

There was a successful transfer of the social worker register in England from the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) to Social Work England on 2 December 2019. This was in line with the legislation and planned timetable. HCPC publicly confirmed that the migration of registrant records – such as registration status, fee balances and payment arrangements – happened automatically and without requiring action by registrants. This ensured that registration continued without interruption and that social workers could keep working as normal from day one of Social Work England's existence.

The establishment of a single statutory public register by Social Work England was also successful. Social Work England ensured uninterrupted access for employers and the public to verify registration status. Stakeholders, including the British Association of Social Workers, confirmed that both regulators worked collaboratively to affect an orderly and complete transfer of the register. The quality and reliability of the new register were further positive outcomes of the transfer. No oversight body has identified any concerns with the integrity, completeness or availability of the new register.

The principle of registration is valued by registrants. Social workers at all levels who spoke to the review expressed pride in being part of a regulated profession. They saw registration as an important marker of professional identity, expertise and credibility. Social

Work England's 2024 survey found 51% of the 1,058 respondents agreed that annual registration renewal ensures that the register of social workers remains accurate and up to date, and gives the public and employers confidence in the profession.¹⁹

Comments in the call for evidence from practising social workers included recognition that the register allowed public scrutiny, with one social worker commenting that “transparency is at it's [sic] core.” Another noted that it “enables members of the public to search this should they be concerned about someone and enable them to raise concerns about inadequate practice”. Several respondents also commented on the registration process creating a moment of reflection and underlining the personal responsibility social workers have to meet standards and undertake CPD:

“I feel the registration process enables us to be responsible for continuous CPD and reinforces our social work values.”

“The requirement to evidence CPD means that we are held accountable and that we maintain professional standards, as we have to evidence how they have been met.”

Members of the public who responded to the call for evidence had mixed awareness of registration with 44% stating, when prompted, that they were aware that social workers' professional details are publicly available.

The registration renewal process is largely working well (with the exception of how it relates to CPD requirements, which are discussed below). In 2025, 97.6% of the 107,492 social workers eligible to renew their registration did so successfully. This success rate has remained broadly static since 2023 and is an improvement on the 96.3% who successfully registered in 2022. In 2025, 2,514 social workers were removed from the register for not completing the registration renewal process. 541 of those requested their registration status be restored. Social Work England has met key performance indicators for time taken to approve applicants, with average times for UK applicants standing at three working days and seven working days for restorations in 2025 to 2026.

The review heard clear evidence that the international registration process has improved over recent years, with timelines for this process reducing (albeit alongside reduced volumes of applications). This is despite considerable variation internationally in social work education, professional roles and professional regulation, which means Social Work England has been able to pre-approve only a small number of overseas qualifications. The review heard feedback from some social workers and their managers that the process for internationally-qualified social workers was historically time-consuming and difficult to navigate, but recent data and feedback indicate that this is improving. The median time taken to approve applications is now 20 working days. A key stakeholder group confirmed that the experiences of their members on international registration are increasingly positive.

¹⁹ Social Work England, '(Observers) Social Work England board meeting, 14 March 2025', www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/zfkdiyb/k/social-work-england-board-meeting.pdf.

What needs to improve?

Continuing professional development

CPD was identified by many practising social workers, their managers and principal social workers as an area where change is needed. The call for evidence asked social workers and managers if they agreed that the requirement to record CPD means they undertake meaningful development activity that supports their practice as a social worker. Of the 3,087 people who responded to this question:

- 1,771 (57%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed
- 770 (25%) agreed or strongly agreed
- 546 (18%) neither agreed nor disagreed

Many described the process as feeling bureaucratic and a 'tick-box exercise'. There was also widespread speculation – though we saw no direct evidence to substantiate this – that some people may have used generative artificial intelligence (AI) rather than drafting their own responses. If this has been the case, then that would materially undermine the effectiveness of the system.

Most stakeholders with whom we spoke felt that CPD requirements should be more meaningful and rigorous. This view was reinforced by the fact that no checks were made in the 2024 or 2025 renewal period. Although this pause was meant to allow a better system to be designed, this was not well understood or communicated. Social Work England will resume checks of up to 3% of submissions this year and recognises the need to review its current approach to CPD requirements.²⁰ Regrettably the length of time this has taken, together with the lack of strong narrative about why checks were paused, has eroded trust in the regulator's CPD processes.

The review found good support from social workers at all levels during our area visits for a more meaningful and robust process. While there can sometimes be anxieties about 'audit' or 'checking', it was clear that social workers valued and sought feedback, and would welcome a system that encourages good learning and development. There was widespread consternation that checks were not happening.

Frustration with the regulator increased further when Social Work England raised the annual registration fee in 2025.²¹ While Social Work England complied with their duty to consult on their proposed changes, a significant increase in fees was not likely to be favoured by social workers. The timing of this shortly after the decision not to review CPD led many to link the two (although they were not connected) and then to question the value of the fee.

The 2025 Local Government Association-led health check, in which local authorities voluntarily self-assess against sector-led employer standards, similarly identified CPD-related issues. The standard that social workers should have "the time and opportunity to

²⁰ Social Work England, '(Observers) Social Work England board meeting, 13 March 2026', www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/mrmb1qfo/observers-social-work-england-board-meeting-preview.pdf.

²¹ Social Work England, 'Consultation response on proposals to make changes to our fees', www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/publications/consultation-response-on-proposals-to-make-changes-to-our-fees/.

learn, keep their knowledge and skills up to date, and critically reflect on the impact on their practice” consistently scored lowest across adult, children’s and mental health social workers.²² These issues clearly extend well beyond the remit of Social Work England, but they highlight the importance of the regulator setting the right expectations and tone on CPD to enable employers to implement practice in line with those.

Concerns about the current approach to CPD checks have also been raised by the PSA in their 2024 to 2025 monitoring of Social Work England.²³ This concluded that moving into a second year without an audit and only very basic checks constitutes a process which is not “sufficient for Social Work England to satisfy itself that social workers continue to be fit to practise”. Social Work England became the first organisation overseen by the PSA in a decade not to meet this standard. The PSA noted significant stakeholder concern that CPD was “tokenistic, poor, devalued and dismissive”.

Social Work England recognises the need to review its current approach to CPD requirements and has announced the resumption of checks. However, it is disappointing that one year and a half on from their publicly stated intention to reform CPD, the future strategy is not yet clear – albeit that Social Work England has stated that they intend to await the conclusion of this review before setting a strong direction on this topic.

The cycle of CPD recording should also be reconsidered to strike a different balance between public protection and proportionality. Registered social workers complete an annual cycle of registration renewal that includes paying an annual fee, keeping their details up to date, submitting CPD evidence, and making safe and effective practice declarations. This is a similar process to other professions, such as pharmacists or dentists (although dentists may be subject to enhanced CPD checks every five years). There are other professions that have a lighter-touch annual process comprising payment of fees and keeping their details up to date. The CPD element is on a longer cycle for others, including doctors (every five years), nurses (every three years) and those regulated by HCPC (every two years, although may increase depending on the profession).

Some social workers also felt the yearly process showed a lack of trust compared with other professions. However, those supporting a longer cycle noted that, if implemented, strong reminders would be needed so people do not forget to renew, particularly if CPD and registration operate on separate cycles. Additionally, the review also identified that the annual process, including CPD requirements, may operate unfairly for some groups. For example, social workers on parental leave, who may have fewer development opportunities or less capacity to engage. These social workers are likely to disproportionately be women.

User experience

Social Work England should continue to review its systems and user journey for the registration renewal process (including CPD evidencing). The review heard concerns expressed across every local authority that we visited about how employers engage with the system. While not a requirement to do so, as registration is a matter for the individual,

²² Local Government Association, ‘Employer standards survey of registered social workers and social care workers 2025’ (2025), www.local.gov.uk/publications/employer-standards-survey-registered-social-workers-and-social-care-workers-2025.

²³ Professional Standards Authority, ‘Monitoring report: Social Work England 2024 to 2025’ (2026), www.professionalstandards.org.uk/publications/monitoring-report-social-work-england-202425.

local authorities all wanted to assure themselves staff had completed re-registration successfully and maintained their status. To do this, they manually check the public register. After the deadline on 30 November, the register is updated over the next few days, though in some cases this can take longer. The delay creates uncertainty, and some employers even pause social work visits during this time to reduce risk. While Social Work England is clear that social workers can continue to practise while the register is updated, it has recognised the concern and introduced tools to batch check, and employers have noted some improvements. We understand that Social Work England intends to continue this work.

Secondly, the call for evidence included feedback from current and former social workers about CPD recording not being sufficiently flexible to support social workers with neurodiversity and/or disabilities. One typical response set out the following:

“The recording of CPD is not neurodiversity friendly – the format is developed for written communication and could have additional ways to upload and share CPD. It also has no spell check feature and makes life harder than systems social workers utilise in their every day work.”

Restoration

A further area of concern is the restoration process – used by any social worker who has left the register and wishes to return. It was described by practising social workers and their managers whom we met on local area visits as complex, overly burdensome and at times confusing. Some waited months before they could return to practice. The process must strike a balance. On the one hand, it must ensure that those who wish to return to the register and therefore to social work practice are fit to do so, can uphold the professional standards, and have kept their skills, knowledge and experience up to date. On the other hand, it must not be so complex as to be off-putting to those wishing to return to social work. The current process requires social workers to provide information on CPD since leaving the register and evidence of how the applicant has updated their skills alongside other key personal information, which Social Work England aims to process in 20 days but exceeds this and achieves it in seven.

The need for applicants to evidence their experience and professional development must be recognised, but the review heard from a group representing local authority leaders that the process was perceived as complex and a “missed opportunity” to bring experienced social workers back into the profession. One director of adult social services made the following comments:

“The return to social work process is very poorly managed ... The process is expensive for candidates ... The timeliness and responsiveness of SWE [Social Work England] is very poor and we are disappointed with this. It has made us re-think whether we would support candidates to do the [return to social work] programme with us, which is such a shame [as] there is clearly an appetite from some previous SWs [social workers] to re-join the profession.”

Social Work England will want to consider these issues further in their ongoing work to enhance registration processes.

Registration of students

Education providers reported that managing fitness to practise issues about students can be difficult, as expectations of standards and behaviour in social work and fitness to practise in the sector may go beyond a university's typical academic threshold, given the sensitive and high-stakes nature of social work. They also noted significant variation between institutions in how student fitness to practise concerns are handled, reflecting differences in institution guidance about what counts as a concern. They also differ in how they check applicants' behaviour, character and health at entry. A further allied concern is that students with concerns at one university can move to another without a system to share this information. Universities must rely on student self-disclosure. This issue exists both across social work programmes and between wider health and care courses, but cases seem rare.

Education providers and practice educators would welcome more support to manage what is a fairly small number of students where there are concerns about behaviour or practice.

Recommendations for action

It is my view, based on extensive discussions with the sector and with parallel health and care professional regulators, that the current renewal process, including a requirement for annual CPD, is not proportionate and there is no clear evidence that it improves practice and therefore better protects the public.

I recognise the operational necessity for an annual process including the collection of fees and data to ensure financial continuity and an accurate and up-to-date register. However, CPD does not need to happen on the same cycle. Social Work England should urgently develop a new system that checks CPD robustly but less frequently. Drawing on learning from other regulation models, such as the General Medical Council (GMC) and the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), this should include external moderation, in most instances by a social worker's employer and could be linked to appraisal.^{24, 25} First, this would help to ensure recognition of the organisational as well as individual value of CPD. Second, this would help to ensure that social workers are given the space and necessary resources to complete CPD and registration renewal, which is cited as a constraint by many social workers.²⁶

Crucially, CPD regulatory requirements should be primarily about providing assurance that a registrant continues to be capable of safe and effective practice. In order to provide this assurance, any new system should build in checks that CPD is supporting effective professional development. People with lived experience emphasised that CPD should evidence the positive impact of professional development on children and adults needing social work services.

Social Work England has begun the process of reviewing CPD requirements and resuming checks of submissions made in the short term. This is positive, as the messaging to the

²⁴ General Medical Council, 'Guidance on supporting information for revalidation' (2024), www.gmc-uk.org/registration-and-licensing/managing-your-registration/revalidation/guidance-on-supporting-information-for-revalidation.

²⁵ Nursing and Midwifery Council, 'Information for confirmers' (last updated 26 May 2021), www.nmc.org.uk/revalidation/confirmers-and-employers/confirmers.

²⁶ Social Work England, 'Social work and CPD' (2021), www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/publications/social-work-and-cpd.

sector on the pausing of CPD reviews was not well thought through and created considerable resentment among stakeholders. In hindsight, it might have been better for Social Work England to continue sampling CPD while it worked up proposals for a new process in future.

Concerns about fees and operational delivery must also be addressed. While fee increases may be necessary and justifiable, social workers expressed frustration about the regulator's decision to raise fees at a time when the cost of living has been rising so significantly. Looking ahead, Social Work England should develop a clear and transparent long-term fee strategy, informed by the approaches taken by other regulators. This should include a set methodology for uprating fees and a clear articulation of what the fee covers. This will necessarily require the involvement and approval of government, who should work with the regulator to deliver this.

Social Work England should review their systems so employers can see updates in real time to reduce any operational risk that may result from employees who did not successfully renew continuing to practise as social workers.

On student registration, I have concluded that full registration would not strike the optimum balance between the risk and burden. Although there are instances of student registration, including other devolved nation social work regulators, many UK health and care professional regulators, including the GMC, General Optical Council and General Dental Council, take a more active approach without formal registration. Many issue student standards to help students understand expectations, and to help link initial training more closely with regulation. Universities then run fitness to practise systems that meet regulatory standards. For example, the GMC provides guidance for medical schools and educators to support managing professionalism and fitness to practise concerns.²⁷ Only students without ongoing fitness to practise concerns can graduate.

A similar approach in social work would make decisions more consistent and fairer. It would also help students understand the importance of professional regulation earlier, strengthening their identity as future social workers. This could form part of a stronger suitability check at the start and end of training, or through a new process.

²⁷ General Medical Council, 'Student professionalism and fitness to practise', www.gmc-uk.org/education/standards-guidance-and-curricula/guidance/student-professionalism-and-ftp.

Recommendations

4. Social Work England should reform the current approach and processes for CPD requirements to:
 - move from annual CPD requirements to a three-year cycle
 - include external moderation and meaningful assessment of CPD on the impact on professional practice.
5. Social Work England should set clear, consistent oversight processes and standards for student behaviour and explore how to strengthen processes, in partnership with course providers, to ensure a consistent approach when fitness to practise concerns are raised during a student's academic journey.

Post-qualifying standards, frameworks and annotation

Once qualified, social workers are required to practise in accordance with a range of standards, frameworks and expectations that govern professional practice and development. At the centre are the professional standards, which legislation requires Social Work England to determine and publish. These set the level necessary for safe and effective practice and are used to assess fitness to practise.

Professional standards

What is going well?

The professional standards are well known and understood across the social work sector. Almost three quarters of social work managers (71%) and social work practitioners (74%) who responded to the call for evidence agreed or strongly agreed that the professional standards help them to understand the KSBs they need to do their job. One practising social worker summarised their position as follows:

“I think the standards promoted and maintained by the regulator are clear and based upon a robust framework that is realistic and relevant to the profession.”

Another noted the positive impact on their practice:

“As a registered social worker with experience working in both government and non-governmental settings, I have observed the positive impact of the professional standards framework on practice, accountability, and service delivery ... In my own practice, these have served as a benchmark for ethical and person-centred service delivery, particularly in safeguarding and mental health rehabilitation.”

This positive view echoed feedback from our local area and education provider visits, where there was general support for the standards and no specific concerns expressed about their nature and content. In Social Work England's own 2024 Social Worker Survey, which received just over 2,000 responses from social workers, 86% of respondents felt

that the professional standards were important to them and 90% of respondents understood how the professional standards applied to their work as a social worker.²⁸

What needs to improve?

As indicated above, some review respondents expressed positive views about the professional standards but others gave a more nuanced view, particularly about their application and usage in day-to-day practice. The latter group explained they mostly used them for registration renewal (including CPD requirements) and performance management discussions, especially when there are concerns about an individual's practice.

This is reflected in the call for evidence findings. Positive responses fell by 10 percentage points among managers and 12 percentage points among practitioners when asked whether the standards support a high level of care for clients. Responses fell further – by 25 and 23 percentage points respectively – when asked whether the standards support professional development or help identify areas for improvement and growth. This indicates a clear drop-off between agreeing with the standards and using them in practice. As one director of adult social services summarised: “Are they good? Yes. But are they useful?”

Some contributors to the review made specific suggestions for improvement. For example, some social workers and social work academics called for more focus on values and societal context of practice, including inequality and social justice. NHS social workers said the standards focus too much on local authority practice, leaving those working in other settings feeling somewhat marginalised.

Some of the adults and children with lived experience of social work emphasised how important it is to link the professional standards that form the basis of CPD with providing evidence about how they should make a positive impact on their lives. It was suggested that the Think Local Act Personal ‘Making it Real’ statements exemplified well how standards can and should be linked to improving people's lives.²⁹

Some feedback about the professional standards focused on the relative merits of the PCF (as discussed in Chapter 1). Despite their different functions and focus, the professional standards are regularly compared with the PCF, possibly reflecting confusion about their different functions. The more granular and career stage structure of the PCF was viewed as better supporting progression and professional ‘stretch’.

Social Work England should give further consideration as to whether the standards continue to do all they need to as threshold standards, given the mixed views of people we spoke to about their application in practice.

Recommendations for action

I recommended earlier in this report that government must work with others, and most particularly Social Work England, to articulate a clear framework that shows and explains how different standards relating to social work practice should be applied, their respective functions and how they may connect to one another. It is very important that the

²⁸ Social Work England, ‘Social worker survey results 2024’, www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/publications/social-worker-survey-results-2024.

²⁹ Think Local Act Personal, ‘Making It Real’, <https://thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/our-hubs/making-it-real>.

regulator's professional standards are explicitly connected to wider expectations about professional development, as well as what changes would improve them.

Post-qualifying frameworks

Post-qualifying development and training is critical to making sure that social workers continuously develop their skills and knowledge during their careers and can respond flexibly to changes in policy, in response to new knowledge and to changes in the needs of the populations they serve. Social work's post-qualifying frameworks are set by central government, with responsibility for this sitting with DfE for children and families social work, and DHSC for adult social work. These are under the Secretary of State's powers regarding improvement standards. Social Work England does not currently have a role in post-qualifying education and training, except in relation to annotated roles discussed below.

The government's knowledge and skills statements outline expectations at different career stages and underpin key frameworks such as the assessed and supported year in employment. This is a programme that supports newly-qualified social workers in developing professional skills and confidence during their first year of practice. From 2027, DfE intends to replace the knowledge and skills statements with new early career standards for children and family social workers.³⁰ These will offer a more structured and outcome-focused approach linked to a two-year induction programme. However, there are not such specific expectations for social workers in adult services, except as these relate to the work of AMHPs and BIAs.

DfE has recently announced important plans to build a national professional development offer for the social work workforce undertaking statutory children and families work. This includes a new training programme, standards for lead child protection practitioners and a new leadership development offer.^{31, 32}

What is going well?

A well-designed assessed and supported year in employment was widely recognised by employers and practitioners as an important foundation for early career practice for people working in both adult and children's services. This is seen to be essential in preparing newly-qualified social workers for the realities of frontline work. The range of DfE-led post-qualifying developments have also generally been welcomed, although it is too early to comment on the impact of the new early career standards.

What needs to improve?

The post-qualifying landscape needs urgent simplification and consistency if it is to have strong purchase and impact on social workers and their practice. That work must be led by

³⁰ While these are called standards, they are not regulatory standards to which social workers are held to account by the regulator.

³¹ Department for Education, 'Lead child protection practitioner standards' (2026), www.gov.uk/government/publications/lead-child-protection-practitioner-standards.

³² Department for Education, 'Children's social care: World Social Work Week 2026' (17 March 2026), <https://childrensocialcare.blog.gov.uk/2026/03/17/childrens-social-care-world-social-work-week-2026>.

government, working closely with key stakeholders. Although there is a potential role for Social Work England as the regulator, this must be focused on its core purpose.

The review identified four major challenges in the way that post-qualifying training and education currently operates. First, as I have set out in Chapter 1, the complexity and ‘untidy’ nature of the social work standards landscape means that post-qualifying training for social workers is somewhat challenging to navigate.

Second, we heard strong messages from employers and social workers that the implementation of post-qualifying training and support is highly variable across the sector. The range of approaches in the local authorities I visited reflect, among other things, levels of resourcing and the priority given to post-qualifying training. There was particular concern about perceived inconsistency in the quality and level of support provided by different employers in delivering the assessed and supported year in employment to newly-qualified social workers.

Third, social workers and employers repeatedly highlighted inconsistent expectations between adult and children’s social workers. Differences were seen to relate to the level of specificity, degree of oversight and quality of support. Such factors create real and perceived differences in the skills, focus and status between adults’ and children’s social workers. The DfE national professional offer initiatives, while positive, may well reinforce these differences.

Some local authorities worried that the introduction of the new early career standards for children’s social workers, while well-intentioned, may widen this gap. They thought that this could limit opportunities for alignment between adults’ and children’s services at the early career stage, where shared development could help foster a more unified professional identity. Some local authorities have shared the adult and children’s assessed and supported year in employment or early career programmes and see real benefits accruing from this approach, but there was uncertainty about its continued viability under the revised post-qualifying standards and early career standards.

Finally, there were concerns about weak integration between post-qualifying standards and both initial education frameworks and the regulator’s professional standards. This creates confusion but also diminishes the perceived relevance of post-qualifying standards over time. The impact is particularly pronounced in adult social work where, unlike in children’s social care, there is little central government policy and direction on professional development beyond initial qualification and the assessed and supported year in employment. As a result, post-qualifying training and development in adult social work lacks visibility and national strategic focus.

Half of the local authorities visited by the review team had their own CPD and development pathways, often with dedicated staff delivering these programmes, alongside national arrangements. While meeting local workforce needs, this can undermine coherence across the post-qualifying landscape. In contrast, in most other health and care professions, there are core nationally-defined expectations about post-qualifying development and training.

There is also a gap in the pathways and standards for mid-career social workers. Annotated roles offer clear progression for some, but there is no broader framework for mid-career development. Coupled with the open nature of annual CPD, there was a sense

of a lack of assurance of social worker skills and professional development. One social worker in the call for evidence summarised the positions as follows:

“For a regulated profession with high levels of responsibility, [the] absence of structure undermines the very notion of maintaining professional standards.”

The challenges in post-qualifying training and development do not reflect any shortcoming on the part of Social Work England. The creation of any framework to ensure quality standards in post-qualifying training and education (which Social Work England hold in relation to initial education) sits outside the regulator’s legal role. However, other regulators do have a role in setting and overseeing broad standards promoting quality post-qualifying training and education, operating alongside a professional college or body that defines excellence in the curriculum and learning outcomes. For example, the GMC publishes ‘Promoting excellence’ which sets out requirements for the management and delivery of both undergraduate and postgraduate medical education and training.³³ Their ‘Excellence by design’ publication sets out the core requirements for postgraduate curricula which Royal Colleges and faculties follow when developing or amending their specialist curricula and training programmes.³⁴ In a similar vein, the NMC sets out standards for post-registration programmes for nurses and midwives.³⁵

Recommendations for action

The issues identified above reinforce the need for clarity about the role, status and functions of different standards (see Chapter 1). Government should lead on creating a coherent, profession-wide post-qualifying education and training architecture that clarifies progression pathways, associated learning and development, and the standards to underpin practice. This would constitute a significant piece of work, given the current fragmented post-qualifying education and training architecture.

When a coherent post-qualifying education and training architecture has been put in place, then there would be a role for the regulator in setting and assuring the quality of post-qualifying education and training. This would involve Social Work England developing, defining and assuring implementation of a single set of overarching post-qualifying ETS, anchored in the professional standards. Post-qualifying social work education and training programmes would, over time, be expected to demonstrate that they met these standards to serve as a common foundation, enabling greater parity, visibility and relevance while crucially enabling specialised pathways and initiatives.

At present, the legislative framework does not provide Social Work England with equivalent powers in relation to post-qualifying education and training to those held by other professional regulators. The proposed future role for Social Work England would create a shared quality benchmark for post-qualifying training and education while

³³ General Medical Council, ‘Promoting excellence: standards for medical education and training’, www.gmc-uk.org/education/standards-guidance-and-curricula/standards-and-outcomes/promoting-excellence.

³⁴ General Medical Council, ‘Excellence by design: standards for postgraduate curricula’, www.gmc-uk.org/education/standards-guidance-and-curricula/standards-and-outcomes/excellence-by-design.

³⁵ Nursing and Midwifery Council, ‘Standards for post-registration programmes’, www.nmc.org.uk/standards/standards-for-post-registration/standards-for-post-registration-programmes.

supporting necessary flexibility in the design and delivery of programmes for specific career stages or specialisms. Social Work England would not – in accordance with their regulatory role – have responsibility for designing or delivering post-qualifying learning and development. Those responsibilities appropriately should sit with government (and employers).

However, I am not recommending that Social Work England be given the function of setting and assuring post-qualifying ETS at this point in time. The regulator must give unequivocal attention to securing necessary improvements in the execution of their current core functions. Any new function would need to be assigned to Social Work England when the organisation has successfully addressed fitness to practise problems and has appropriate capacity, once national architecture for post-qualifying education and training is in place.

Annotations

In addition to registration, there are two specialist roles that a social worker can add to their entry on the register. This is known as annotation. To gain annotation, they must demonstrate that they have completed specialist training. At present, only two roles qualify – BIAs and AMHPs. Both roles involve legal duties linked to deprivation of liberty.

What is going well?

Social workers in annotated roles I met on visits said annotation does have value in identifying those who had successfully undertaken specialist training. This is important for public protection and allows members of the public to check their status. However, most did not think that it materially affected their day-to-day work, though they valued the training they had had for annotated roles in terms of the skills and status this gave them.

The value of annotation lies in identifying practitioners who are qualified to carry out restricted roles. Some social workers and employers thought that annotation might also confer a degree of prestige and could be used to recognise other roles, such as that of practice educator. However, I agree with those who told the review that annotation should be restricted to roles that have a specific statutory function, as expanding beyond this risks diluting its purpose. Annotation was not intended to confer prestige, nor did those in annotated roles think it did this. Therefore, I believe it is appropriately focused and should not be extended to cover wider areas of specialism or additional responsibilities such as practice education. Work to improve practice education should be developed separately and precede any consideration of formal recognition through the register.

What needs to improve?

Annotation would be strengthened by bolstering legal requirements and, therefore, ensuring accuracy of the register. At present, annotation is optional, meaning not everyone in these roles is listed. Some AMHPs and BIAs said that they were unaware annotation was available, while others were deterred by the perceived administrative burden. Conversely, some individuals recorded on the register may not be actively approved for these roles, as Social Work England currently (in line with the requirements in legislation) checks only that practitioners hold the relevant qualifications, not that they have been formally approved.³⁶

³⁶ Social Work England, 'Registration rules 2019 (as amended)', www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/publications/registration-rules-2019-as-amended.

Indeed, there is no mechanism to remove the annotation once an approval expires, although the review found no examples of this creating problems in practice.

Finally, part of the intention of annotation was that a social worker's status as a BIA or AMHP – made by an individual local authority following completion of relevant training – could be recognised at a national level and support workforce mobility. The review heard that, in practice, this has not been realised due to the rules and practice of making appointments. Social workers therefore must be reappointed when moving between local authority employers.

Recommendations for action

Changes will be required to how the annotation system operates. In October 2025, the government confirmed its intention to proceed with implementing Liberty Protection Safeguards and to undertake a consultation in 2026 on implementation and revisions to the Mental Capacity Act Code of Practice.³⁷ Once implemented, Liberty Protection Safeguards will have implications for the current annotation framework. The BIA role will be removed and replaced by approved mental capacity professional roles, which will sit alongside the AMHPs role. It is important to note that although my focus here is on social workers holding these roles, other registered professionals, such as nurses, can also hold them. It will therefore be crucial that changes are considered in the round and that thought is given to the impact on other professions. DfE is also considering whether to introduce annotation for the lead child protection practitioner role, although no decision has yet been taken.³⁸

These changes offer an opportunity for reviewing which statutory roles should be included within the annotation system. There should also be an opportunity for strengthening annotation by making clear that annotated professionals are required to register with Social Work England and to update the regulator when their status changes. This will ensure that the register reflects current post-holders accurately and consistently.

Recommendations

6. Government should consider, with key partners, including Social Work England, how best to support the development of a coherent, profession-wide architecture that clarifies progression pathways, associated learning and development, and the standards that underpin practice. In the longer term, the quality of post-qualifying education and training should be strengthened by extending Social Work England's role to include the setting and assuring of post-qualifying ETS.
7. Government should update regulations to require that social workers, whose registration includes an annotation, inform Social Work England of their appointment to an annotated role and notify the regulator of any changes to that status.

³⁷ Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, 'Improved safeguarding and protections for vulnerable people' (2025), www.gov.uk/government/news/improved-safeguarding-and-protections-for-vulnerable-people.

³⁸ Department for Education, 'Lead child protection practitioner standards' (2026), www.gov.uk/government/publications/lead-child-protection-practitioner-standards.

Chapter 3 – Promoting and maintaining public health, safety and wellbeing

Key points

- While there are no concerns about fitness to practise decision-making, timelines for decisions (which are the slowest among UK wide health and care professional regulators) are too long and impacting on those involved as well as overall sector confidence in the regulator. Current performance is unacceptable.
- Social Work England is operating in a challenging context, including increasing numbers of referrals.
- Progress has also been hampered by challenges with resources, including legal capacity and constraints on handling legally restricted information.
- Action has been, and is being, taken to address delays and there are some green shoots. However, activity to date has lacked necessary strategic focus and drive and not yet delivered the improvements required.
- There are disparities in referrals for some groups. These persist at all stages of fitness to practise and must continue to be tackled.
- Communications are not good enough and require significant improvement.

The ability of a professional regulator to deliver its fitness to practise functions is the litmus test of its effectiveness. Delivered fairly and efficiently, fitness to practise processes should protect the public from incompetence, misconduct or health issues that adversely affect a registered professional's ability to practice. Effective delivery of this function should uphold the reputation of a profession by robustly addressing behaviour that risks undermining public trust and confidence.

In their work to help and protect vulnerable children, adults and families, social workers make – often in concert with others – decisions with profound and lasting consequences. In doing so, they exercise significant power and authority, frequently derived from legislation. It is therefore imperative that their regulator operates a fair, equitable, transparent and timely system, capable of taking evidence-based decisions where concerns arise about a professional's ability to meet required standards.

While vital, assessment of fitness to practise is a regulatory function that is inherently likely to provoke challenge and criticism. These processes are, by their nature, onerous, distressing and costly for registrants, complainants and employers alike. While process improvements are both possible and necessary, no regulatory model can eliminate the high stakes involved. A key objective must therefore be to minimise avoidable harm, delay and uncertainty.

The delivery of a swift, fair and transparent fitness to practise process has been a persistent and significant challenge for Social Work England. Like many regulators, it has failed to meet the PSA expectations for timeliness and transparency.³⁹ Indeed, since taking on duties from HCPC, the average time taken to progress at each stage of the fitness to practise process has increased, in some cases substantially. While not all cases require a final hearing, for those that do, the median time for a case that progresses to a final conclusion at a hearing in 2025 to 2026 stood at four and half years – the highest of health and social care regulators.

The review identified major and widespread concern by all key stakeholders about the speed of decision-making for fitness to practise cases and the related failure of Social Work England to address and resolve these problems. The way that the regulator engages and communicates with registrants, members of the public and more generally was similarly a major source of concern. There was in particular a perception that the regulator does not bring due understanding and appreciation of the human impact on all those involved in fitness to practise processes, particularly given the uncertainty that delays in awaiting an outcome can bring.

These messages were strongly reinforced by practising social workers who engaged with the review – both those who had been involved in fitness to practise and those without direct experience. One practising social worker responding to the call for evidence told us:

“I have colleagues who have been waiting years for outcomes to complaints made against them which creates anxiety for an already over-stretched and under appreciated workforce and doesn't in still [sic] much hope for members of the public or other agencies that may have made these complaints and years on still don't have appropriate outcomes.”

It is important to recognise that Social Work England began operations in an exceptionally challenging context. It inherited a very substantial number of legacy cases when it assumed responsibility from HCPC and was faced with restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic in its initial year.

I have no doubt that the leadership of Social Work England is resolved and committed to improving fitness to practise. There is evidence that some important elements are now in place, including actions being progressed to secure improvements in triage and hearing timeliness. However, it is too early to conclude whether this will result in the necessary sustained improved performance.

³⁹ Professional Standards Authority, 'Annual Report and Accounts 2024/2025', www.professionalstandards.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/PSA%20Annual%20Report%20and%20Accounts%202024-25%20%28accessible%29.pdf, Page 23, Paragraph 3.20.

Background and context

On 2 December 2019, Social Work England became the regulator for social workers in England. From that date, it assumed responsibility for ongoing fitness to practise cases previously held by HCPC. These cases were handled under the specific 'just disposal of transfer cases' policy.

Legacy cases from HCPC presented a substantial challenge to the newly-established regulator and significantly affected its early operations. At the point of transfer, Social Work England inherited 1,459 open cases, none of which it had had access to previously because of data-sharing restrictions and HCPC's continuing legal responsibility until transfer (although HCPC and Social Work England did have a series of meetings to discuss complex cases due to be handed over).

Almost immediately thereafter, Social Work England faced dealing with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, with national lockdown imposed just weeks after its initial assessment of the backlog. In response, Social Work England had to implement remote working rapidly, including the suspension of physical hearings and the redesign of fitness to practise processes for virtual delivery. At the same time, pressures on the social work workforce during the pandemic led to concessions for social workers and employers in lower-risk cases, reducing the pace at which historic cases could progress.⁴⁰ Social Work England was also required to operationalise an additional temporary registration scheme to support the deployment of social workers for the pandemic response.

During Social Work England's first two years of operation, the PSA recognised the combined impact of inheriting cases from HCPC, COVID-19 and higher-than-forecast referral volumes when making their judgements about the timeliness of fitness to practise. However, by 2021 a hearings backlog emerged from new referrals received directly by Social Work England, which worsened the following year. An increase in fitness to practise timescales caused significant concern to the PSA. Social Work England failed PSA standard 15 for the first time in 2021 to 2022.⁴¹ Continued failure in 2022 to 2023 and 2023 to 2024 culminated in a formal letter from the PSA to the Secretaries of State for Health and Education in March 2025, highlighting the urgent need for action. The PSA has since confirmed that Social Work England also failed standard 15 in 2024 to 2025, prompting a further letter in March 2026.

We understand that 32 HCPC legacy cases remain open and are still awaiting a hearing. Social Work England has advised me that, of the remaining 32 legacy cases awaiting a hearing, six are being targeted for listing in 2026 to 2027. Five have had a hearing that was adjourned. They have noted that all cases are being actively progressed and will be prioritised for listing as soon as possible.

In the meantime, referrals into Social Work England have been consistently higher than the original business case forecast and, in the last 18 months, have increased significantly.

⁴⁰ Social Work England, *Board paper: 'In focus: Fitness to practise'* (23 October 2020), www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/3445/20201023-social-work-england-board-item-7-ftp-in-focus.pdf.

⁴¹ Professional Standards Authority, 'Monitoring Report - Social Work England 2021/22', www.professionalstandards.org.uk/publications/monitoring-report-social-work-england-202122.

Since the scale of the challenges in fitness to practise became clear, Social Work England has, with significant additional funding from DfE in recent years (albeit below what Social Work England feel is needed), taken a range of actions to improve performance. These include reviewing and making changes to the legislation and rules to enable a more efficient fitness to practise process, increasing fitness to practise staffing and resources, improving case management systems, and reviewing communication with registrants and complainants.

The difficulties described above are not unique to Social Work England. Many professional regulators experience persistent problems with fitness to practise timeliness: seven of the 10 regulators overseen by the PSA currently fail to meet the relevant standard.

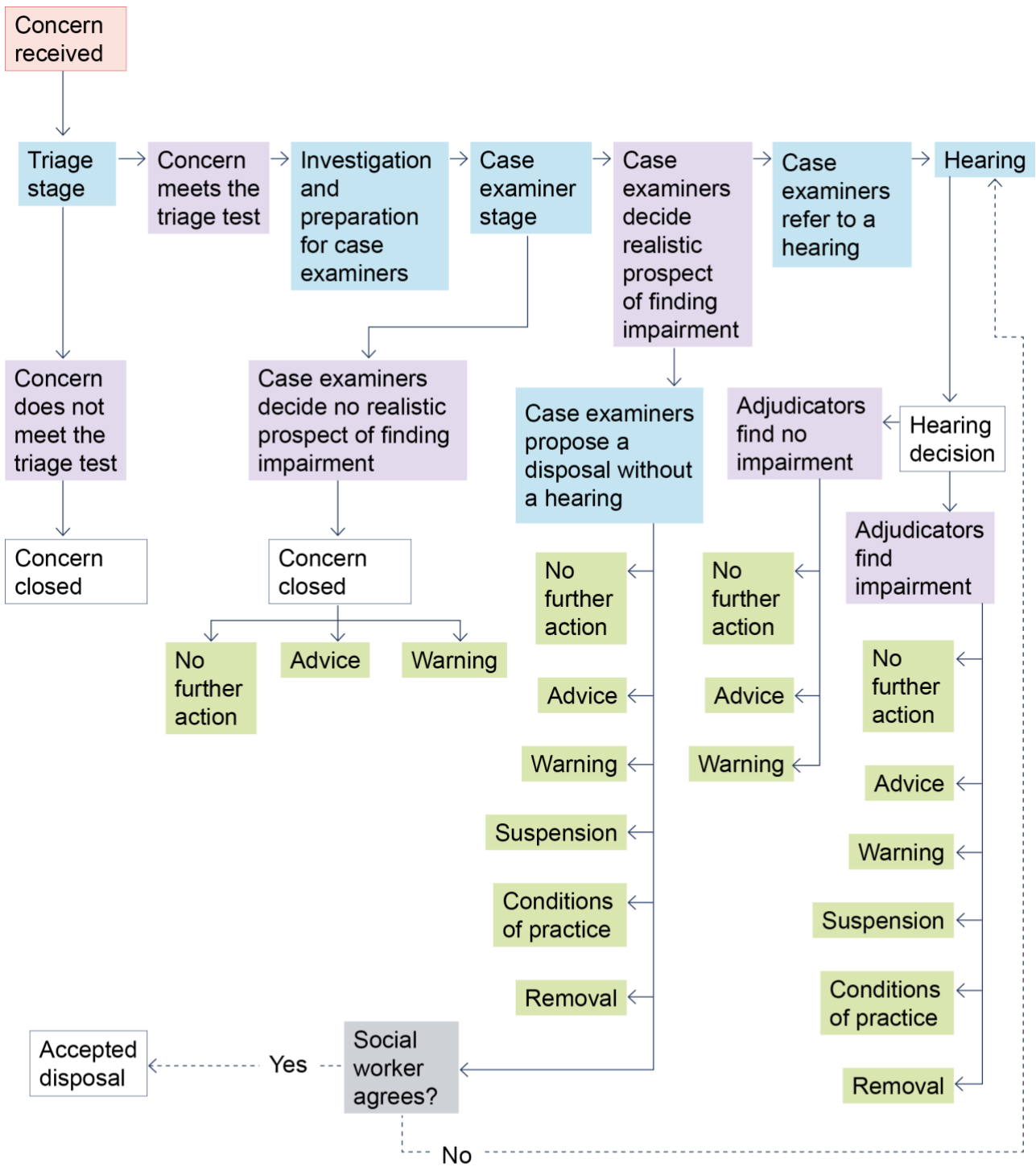
Social Work England has faced additional unique challenges. This includes a specific issue relating to handling legally restricted information, particularly family court information, that has resulted in a proportion of cases being significantly delayed. Current rules allow limited communication of court information to Social Work England by parties or legal representatives for the purpose of making or pursuing a complaint about a person involved in the proceedings. However, they do not allow a person or organisation to share information about proceedings when responding to a complaint. Onward sharing of information by Social Work England for the purpose of its fitness to practise proceedings is only allowed where specific consent is obtained from the complainant on each subsequent communication – which sometimes sees consent being withdrawn part way through the process. This leads to delays.

It is also important to note that, where a case involves ongoing criminal or court proceedings, regulators may pause their investigations until those proceedings conclude, in order not to prejudice those proceedings. This can significantly affect overall timescales.

This context is important but does not fully explain the current delays seen in fitness to practise cases. It is crucial that the organisation now moves into a new phase of improved performance in this key area.

This chapter describes and then evaluates the regulator's performance at each stage of the fitness to practise process, concluding with an overall assessment of what is working effectively and where further reform is required. I have also considered equalities impacts of the fitness to practise system and the experience of those involved in cases as registrants and complainants across different fitness to practise stages. Figure 2 below sets out the approach to decision-making by the regulator at each stage of the fitness to practise process.

Figure 2: Social Work England fitness to practise process map



Key:

- = Process outcome
- = Final decisions
- = Social Work England process
- = Social worker decisions
- = Final outcome types

Triage

Social Work England is required, by the standards of the PSA, to enable anyone to submit a concern. Triage is the first stage of the fitness to practise process and considers all concerns submitted. Social Work England determines whether the concern relates to a registered social worker and whether it relates to statutory ground of impairment. Where both thresholds are met, it becomes a referral and Social Work England undertakes initial investigations to determine whether the case meets the triage test.

The triage test is whether there are reasonable grounds for investigating whether the registered social worker's fitness to practise is impaired. This assessment considers:

- the seriousness of the concern
- whether there is likely to be sufficient evidence to support the concern
- whether there is evidence of a breach of established standards or guidance
- whether the incident is isolated or repeated
- what action has been taken already to address the concern

Social Work England is required to err on the side of investigation, unless it can be clearly demonstrated that there are no reasonable grounds to consider whether a registrant's fitness to practise may be impaired.

Outcomes at triage are Social Work England closing the case or progressing it to full investigation. At this stage, adjudicators appointed by Social Work England may also impose an interim order (a temporary restriction on practice) while enquiries continue, for example where a registrant has been charged with a criminal offence. Triage decisions are not published.

Investigation

When a referral passes the triage test, Social Work England progresses it to the investigation stage. At this stage, Social Work England undertakes proportionate enquiries to gather evidence relevant to the concerns identified at triage. Investigators consider evidence that supports, mitigates or is neutral in relation to the alleged concerns. The purpose of the investigation is to assemble sufficient and appropriate evidence to assess whether, if allegations were proved, there is a realistic prospect that the social worker's fitness to practise would be found to be impaired.

Investigators will seek information from the social worker concerned, who may also identify evidence that Social Work England should consider. Once an evidence bundle has been assembled, it is shared with the social worker – and their representative where applicable – (unless progressed as 'no case to answer'), to allow them to comment on any material they believe to be inaccurate or incomplete. Investigators may then amend the bundle and/or seek additional evidence before progressing the case to case examination.

Case examination

The case examination phase is the stage at which Social Work England makes decisions about next steps following the investigation of a concern about a social worker. All cases that complete investigation are allocated to a pair of case examiners, comprising:

- a lay case examiner (with no background in social work)
- a professional case examiner (a practising, registered social worker)

Their role is not to undertake further investigation, but to evaluate the evidence gathered and determine whether the concern should continue to progress through the regulatory process.

The central purpose of this stage is to apply the 'realistic prospect' test: that is, whether there is sufficient evidence for a future hearing panel to reasonably find the allegation proved, and whether, if proved, the matter could amount to impaired fitness to practise.

Where the case examiners conclude that there is a realistic prospect, they must then consider whether it is in the public interest to refer a case to a hearing. If they determine that a hearing is not required in the public interest, they may consider whether public protection can be achieved through the imposition of a sanction without a hearing. In such cases, they will propose an appropriate sanction and seek the social worker's agreement to this outcome through a process known as 'accepted disposal'. If the social worker admits the key facts, acknowledges that their fitness to practise is currently impaired and accepts the sanction, the case is closed without proceeding to a hearing and a decision is published on the Social Work England register. If the social worker does not agree, or if the case examiners determine that a hearing is required in the public interest, the case proceeds to the hearing phase.

If the case examiners decide the evidence is insufficient or that the concern is not serious enough to affect fitness to practise, the case will usually be concluded with no further action, unpublished advice or a warning.

Hearings

The panel hearing stage is where an independent panel, convened by Social Work England, determines whether a social worker's fitness to practise is impaired. Hearings are usually held in public and are conducted by an independent panel of two or three adjudicators, typically comprising a chair (who is not a social worker) and a registered social worker, and sometimes a second lay member. The panel considers the evidence impartially and reaches an independent decision.

At the hearing, Social Work England presents the case and sets out the allegations. Witnesses may give evidence and be questioned. The social worker, or their representative, has the opportunity to respond to the allegations, challenge the evidence, question witnesses, and provide their own evidence or witnesses.

The panel considers, in sequence, whether the facts alleged are proven and if so, whether the grounds of impairment are met. The panel then decides whether the social worker's fitness to practise is currently impaired and, if so, whether a sanction is required. If impairment is not found, the case may be closed with no further action, or the panel may

issue advice or a warning. Where impairment is found, no further action or advice may be the result. Alternatively, available sanctions include a warning, conditions placed on the social worker's practice, suspension from the register for a specified period, or removal from the register.

Following the hearing, the panel issues a reasoned written determination explaining how it reached its conclusions. Decisions are published on a social worker's registration record.

Case review

If case examiners or adjudicators impose conditions of practice or a suspension order, the case is referred to the case review team. The team works with the social worker to support their understanding of conditions of practice, including providing advice on reflective writing and CPD to support their compliance. The team also monitors and collects evidence on the social worker's compliance with the order and organises reviews of the order. Upstream of this, they also work with case examiners, and hearings panels where requested, to consider the conditions of practice they are considering placing on a social worker's practice, to give views on whether they are workable, fair and proportionate.

Where an interim order is place, reviews take place every six months and can also take place earlier if circumstances require it (such as evidence that the order is not being complied with, or the social worker requesting a review on the basis of new evidence). The purpose of the review is for the adjudicators to make a fresh assessment of the risks and determine whether the interim order should be confirmed, replaced, revoked or the conditions varied.

If the case examiners or adjudicators impose conditions of practice or a suspension order at a final decision, a review hearing will be scheduled shortly before the order expires (and again can happen earlier in some cases). The purpose of the review is to determine whether the concerns previously identified have been addressed. Review adjudicators do not reconsider the original findings – they focus solely on evidence of progress or remediation since the order was imposed. If they conclude that the social worker remains unfit to practise without restriction, the existing order may be extended or replaced with a more severe or less severe sanction, including removal from the register where appropriate. In some cases, a further hearing is not required, and adjudicators may review the order on the basis of documentary evidence alone.

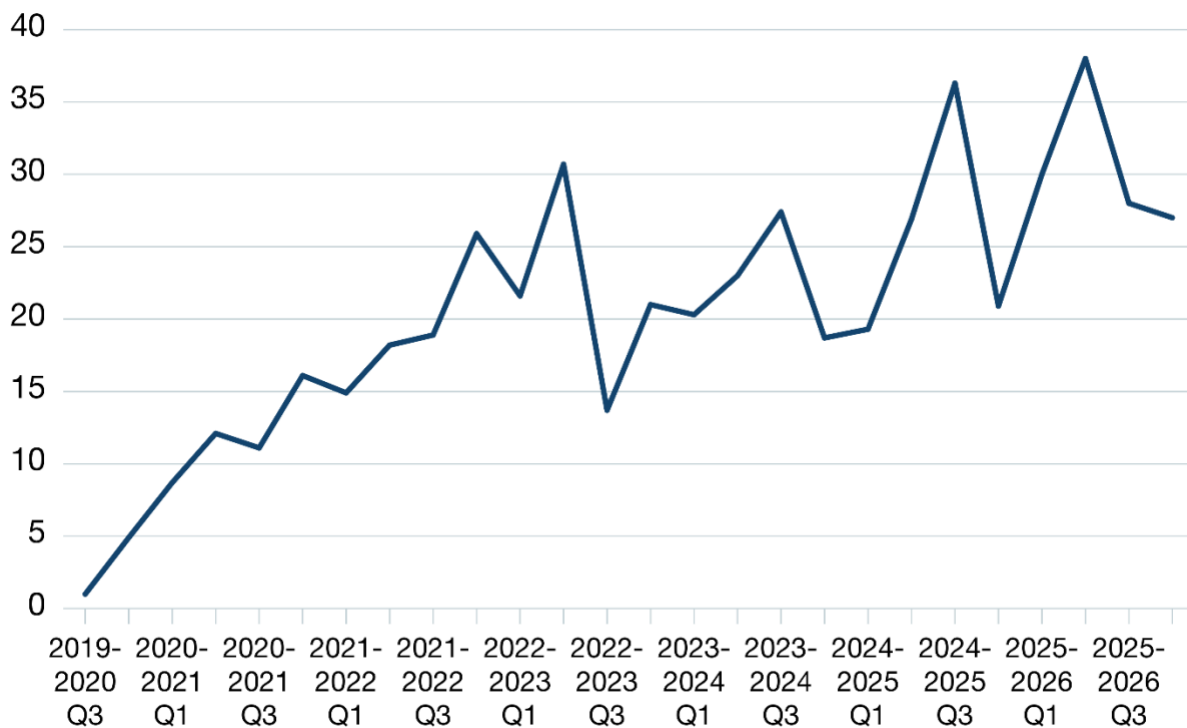
Performance

Triage

In its first year, Social Work England received 52% more referrals than anticipated. Referral volumes were broadly stable until December 2024, but have since diverged significantly from the modelling assumptions of around 154 referrals per month. In the final quarter of 2025 to 2026 alone, they averaged 251 per month. Volumes reached 2,329 in 2025 to 2026, compared with capacity for 2,143 triage decisions.

Social Work England has taken steps to increase closure rates at triage, which now stand at 84%. However, triage decisions are taking too long (see Figure 3 below). This impacts on complainants, registrants (where they are aware of a referral) and their employers, who must assist with the process. Social Work England agrees with this assessment.

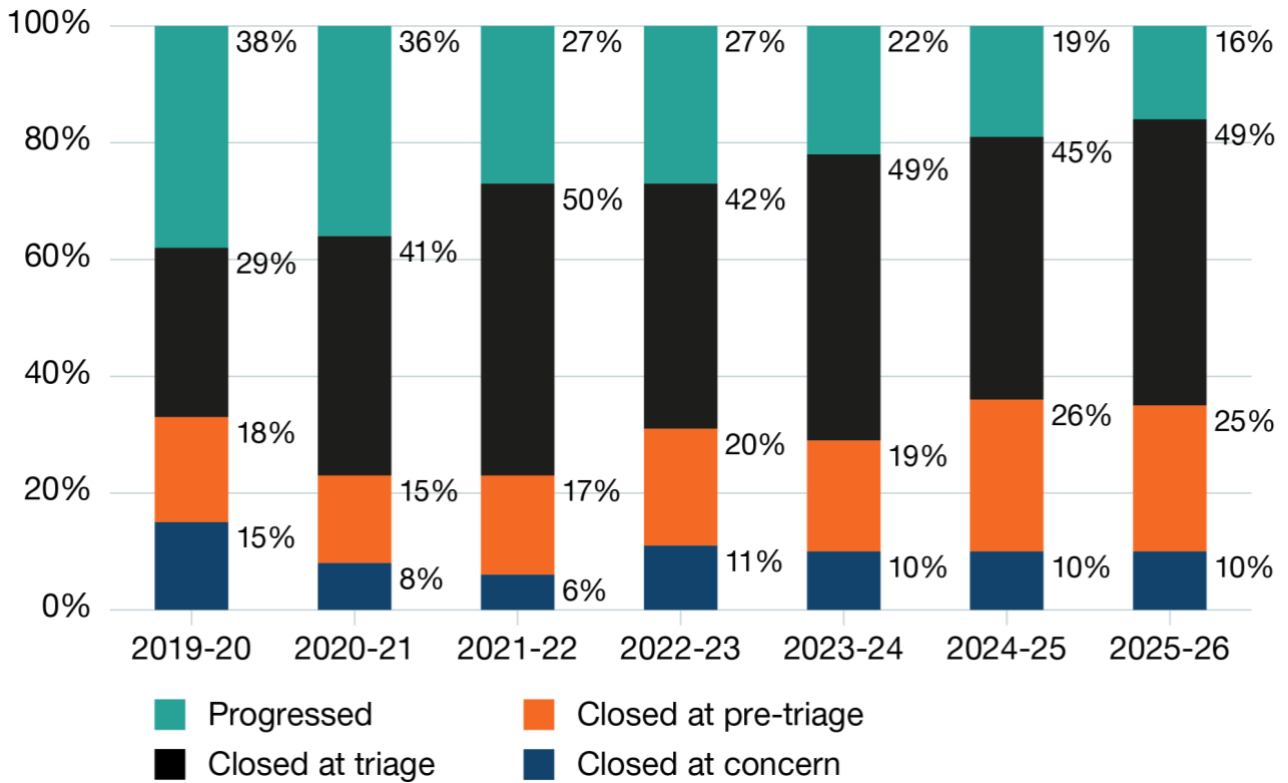
Figure 3: Time taken to complete triage stage by year (weeks)⁴²



The review heard repeated examples of extreme delay, including social workers remaining in triage for one, two or even three years. Of their open caseload in March 2026, around a third of cases had been in triage for between six and 12 months, around 19% for between one and two years, 2.4% for two to three years and 0.4% for three to four years. While these cases may well be on hold for unavoidable process reasons such as ongoing court proceedings, Social Work England data shows that the majority of cases which are closed in triage are closed after making it through the initial stages (Figure 4). This may suggest that processes to close cases early are not yet fully effective.

⁴² The data presented in Figures 3, 5, 6 and 7 spans quarters 1 to 4

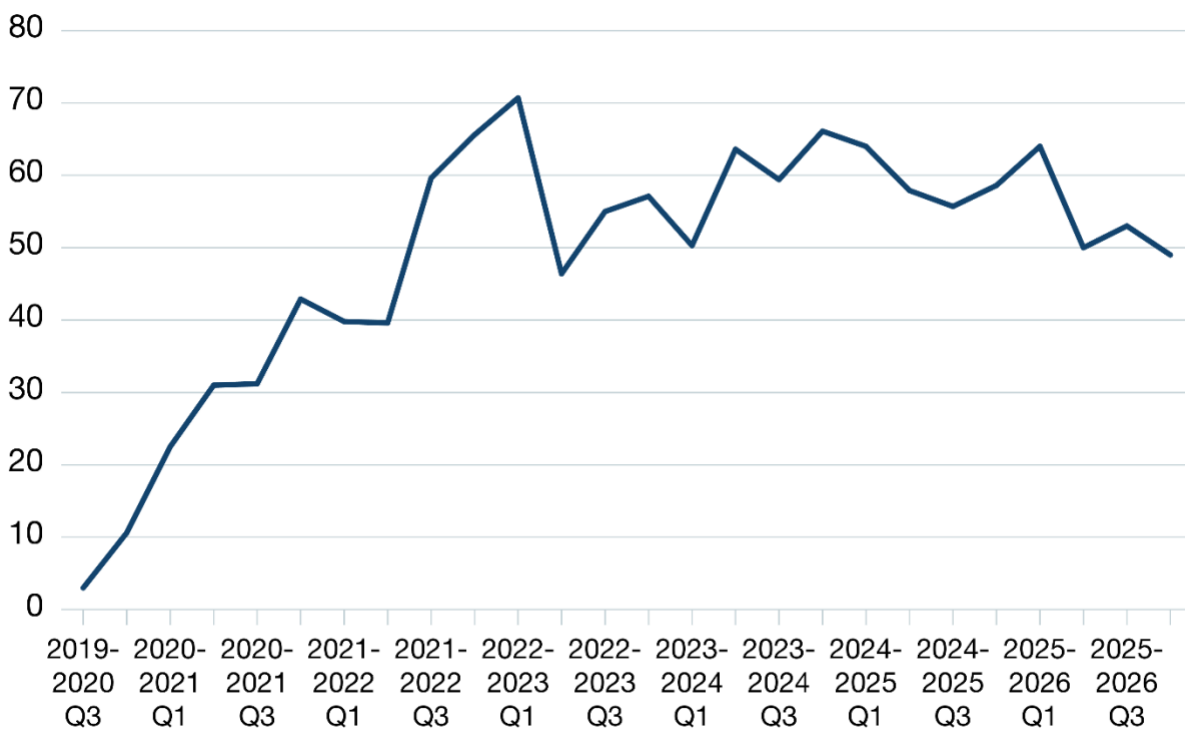
Figure 4: Triage cases by percentage closed at each triage stage



Investigations

The number of cases entering the investigations phase from triage has increased in the last year after many years of reductions. This, in part, reflects the increased throughput in triage.

Figure 5: Time taken to complete investigation

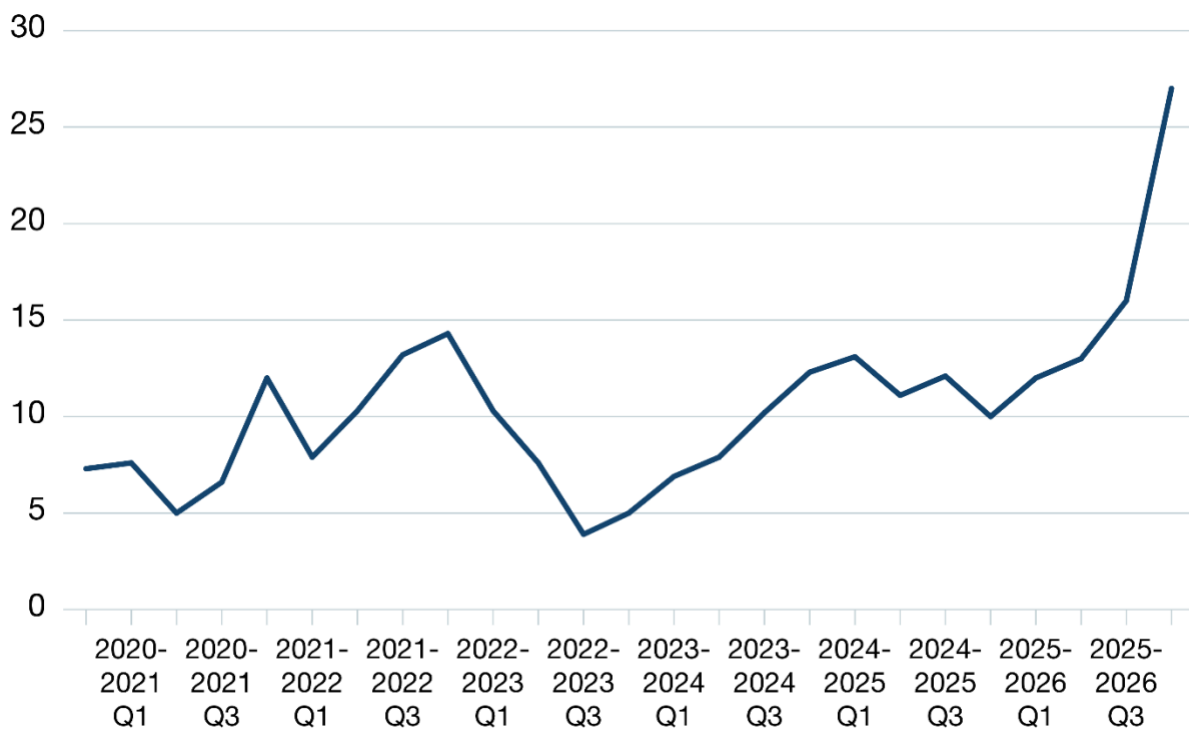


As Figure 5 shows, investigations are broadly within the current key performance indicator of 54 weeks. However Social Work England’s own expectation remains that this stage will take over a year on average in 2026 to 2027, reducing to 40 weeks by 2028 to 2029.

Case examination

As Figure 6 shows, timelines for case examination have largely kept within the 12-week key performance indicator and are projected to return to this by the end of 2026 to 2027 (recent increases are the result of staff turnover in 2025 to 2026 and are expected to now stabilise).

Figure 6: Time taken to complete case examiner phase



Between April 2021 and March 2024, Social Work England resolved 255 cases through accepted disposal, resulting in estimated cost avoidance of over £9.7 million, given the significantly higher costs associated with progressing cases to final hearings.

Hearings

As set out earlier, case volumes at hearing stage have been consistently higher than anticipated, creating a bottleneck where capacity is most constrained by the available legal resource and capacity required to move cases through the hearing stage. By mid-2022, it had become clear that a new hearings backlog was forming, driven by increases in new referrals. Of the 1,459 legacy cases inherited from HCPC in 2019, 409 progressed to final hearing, and 32 of these remain unresolved.

The median duration of cases at the hearing stage in 2025 to 2026 was 168 weeks (or a little over three years). Although there is no formal performance standard for time spent at the hearing stage, timeliness is deteriorating more sharply here than at any other point in

the process. Figure 7 shows how the average time to complete a hearing has increased since 2020 to 2021. Figure 8 provides information about numbers of cases progressed, cases concluded and the open hearings caseload.

Figure 7: Average time to complete a case at hearing

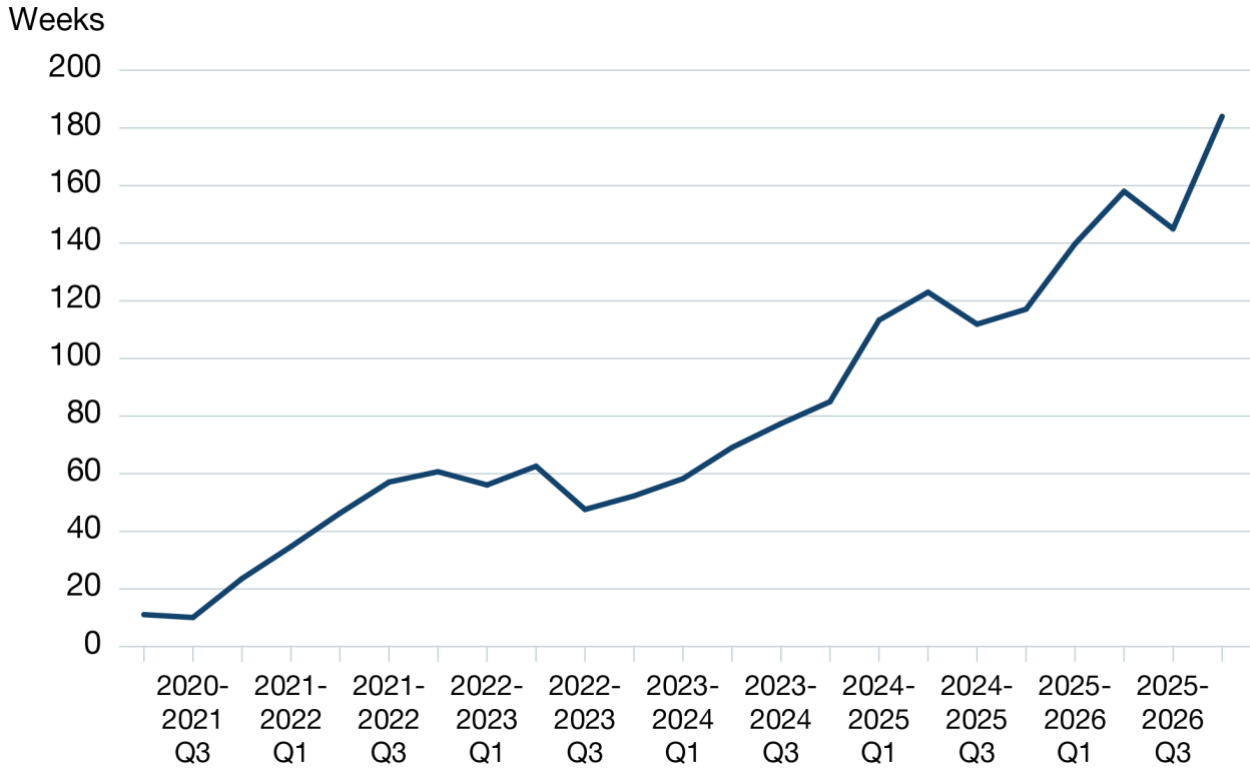
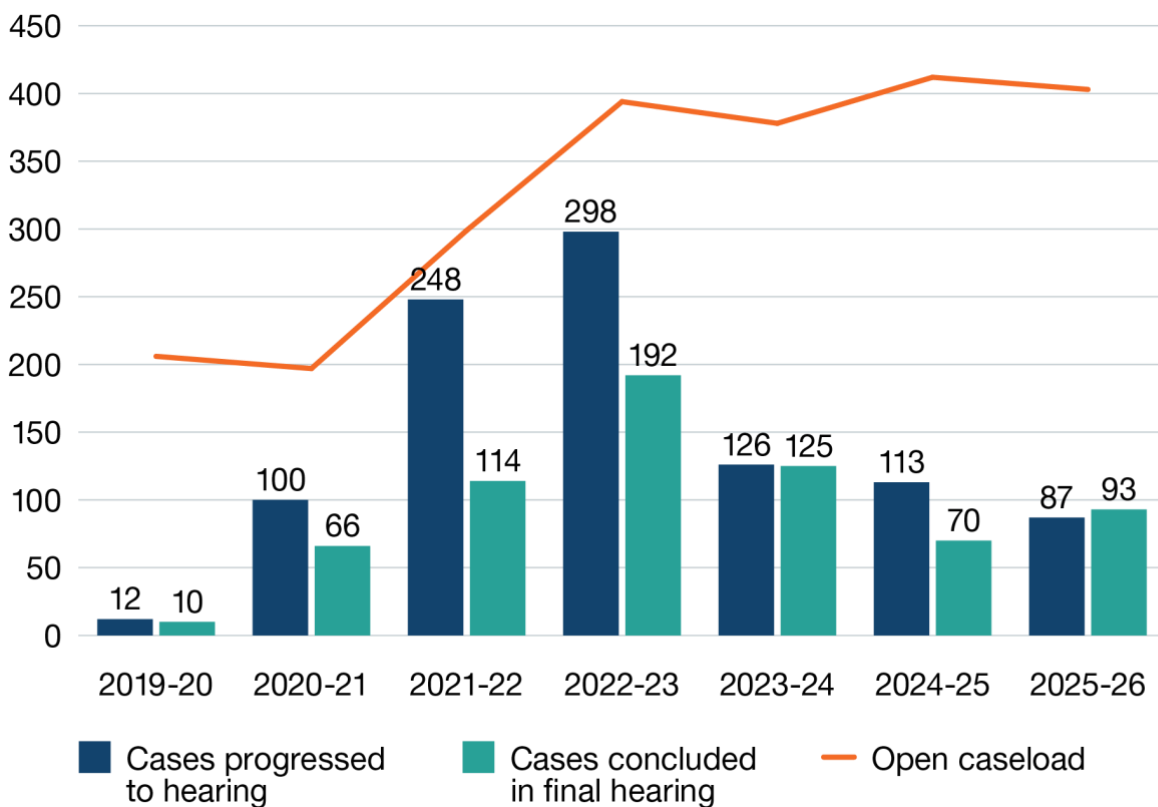
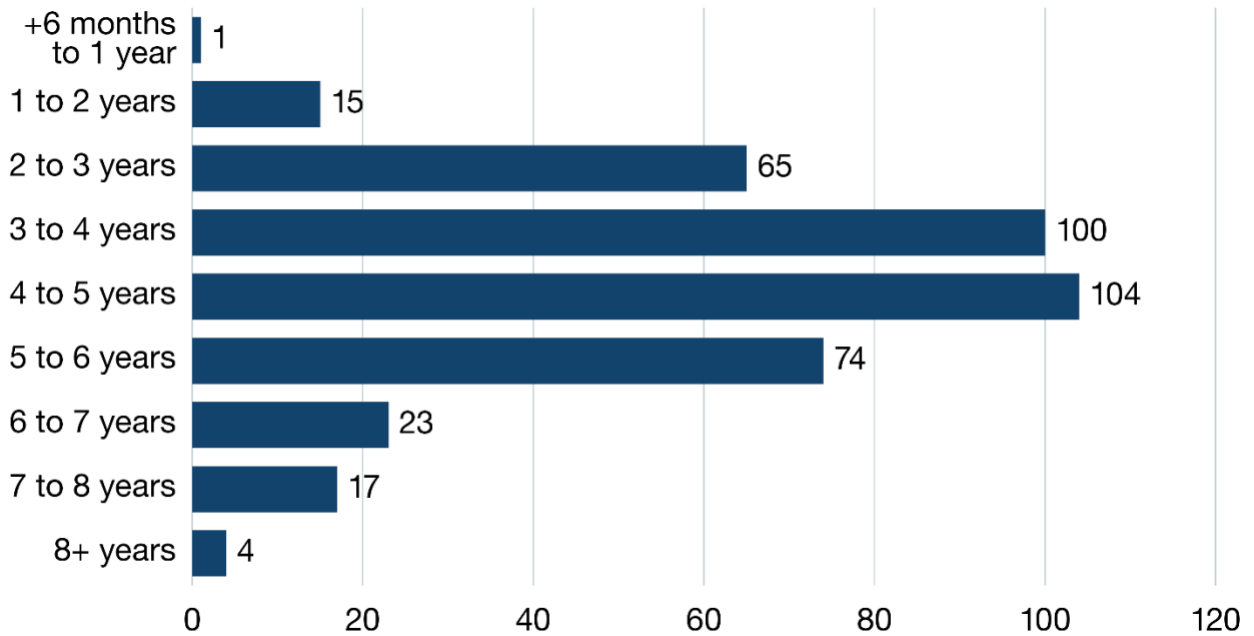


Figure 8: Cases progressed and concluded at hearing and open caseload by year



Four to five years in the system is the most common current duration of a case awaiting a hearing, with 26% of cases having waited this long. Four cases have been waiting longer than eight years to be heard. This is illustrated in Figure 9 below.

Figure 9: Age of cases awaiting hearings (as at 31 March 2026)



It is important to note that more cases were concluded in 2025 to 2026 than in the previous year, and Social Work England achieved its target for the year. On this basis, Social Work England projects the hearings backlog will fall to manageable levels by 2030 to 2031 and cases will take on average between 40 and 56 weeks to complete once they are referred by a case examiner to the hearings stage. This is illustrated in Figures 10 and 11 below.

Figure 10: Hearings concluded: target vs actual

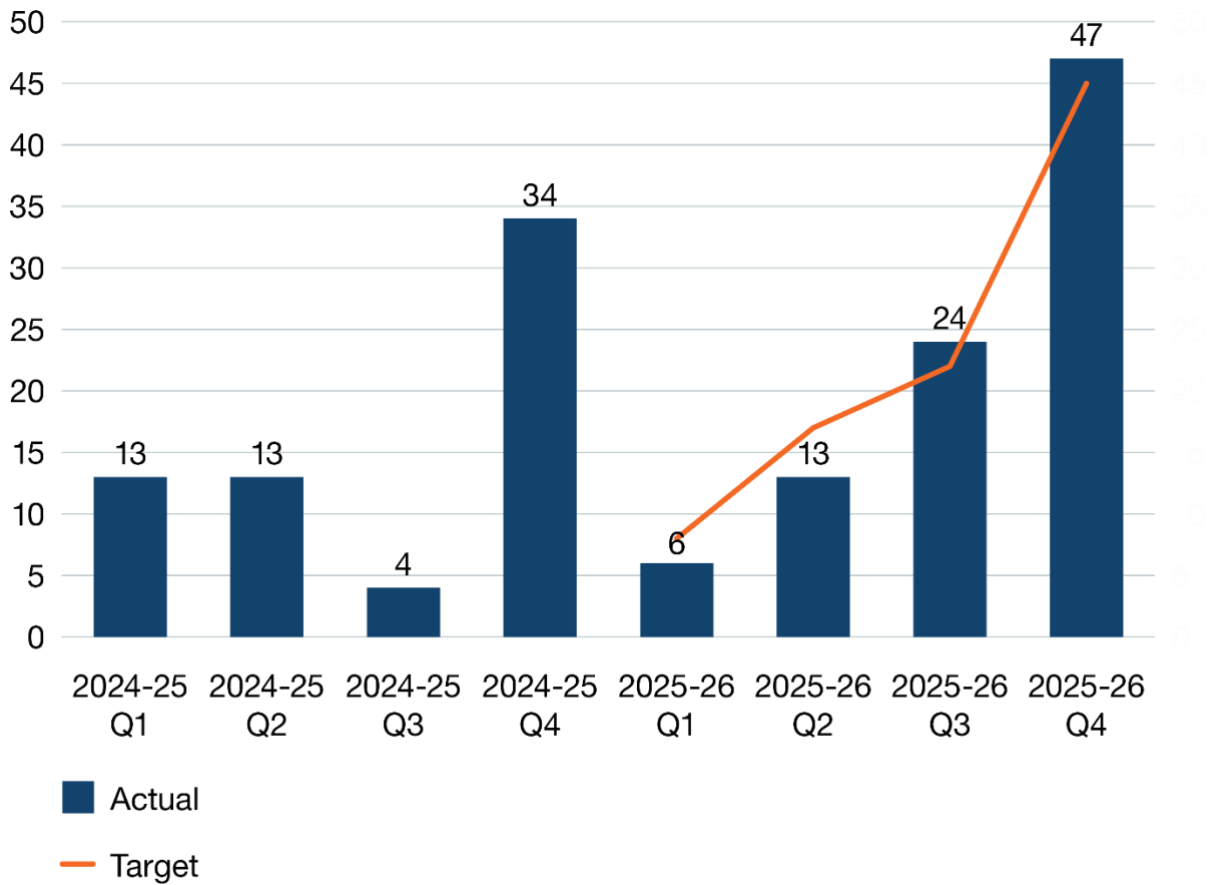
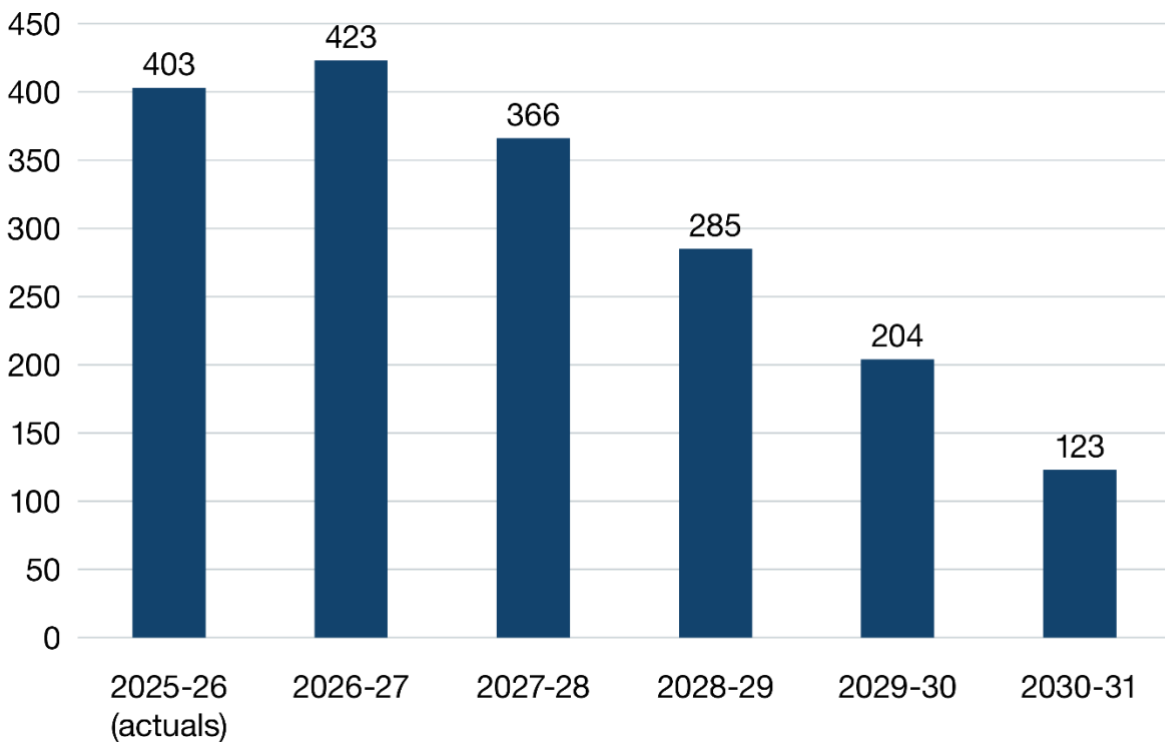


Figure 11: Projected end-of-year caseloads



The PSA has lodged a total of 11 appeals of hearing decisions against Social Work England cases since its inception. The number of appeals has decreased over time, with one appeal lodged in each of 2023 to 2024 and 2024 to 2025, and no appeals lodged in 2025 to 2026. Of the 11 appeals lodged by the PSA, four were upheld, six cases were settled and one was withdrawn (due to the registrant being removed from the register in relation to another fitness to practise case). Registrants may appeal decisions themselves.

Case review

Since 2019, Social Work England's case review team has supported the conclusion of 430 Final Orders where a panel or the case examiners initially imposed a suspension or conditions of practice order upon the social worker's registration. They have developed a model to help social workers understand both the timing for reviewing sanctions and steps they can take to demonstrate remediation and return to unrestricted practice. As a result, 259 social workers have been able to return to unrestricted practice as they had been able to demonstrate their remediation and insight into the concerns to a sufficient level so that the reviewing panel felt their fitness to practise was no longer impaired.

Removal from the register of the remaining 171 social workers has usually resulted either from non-engagement from the social worker or from their expressed desire to be removed.

Equalities

Data shows persistent and concerning disparities for some groups in fitness to practise referrals. Social Work England reported in March 2024 overrepresentation of social workers aged over 40 (64% of the register but 65% of referrals), male social workers (16% of the register but 22% of referrals), and social workers who are of Black, African, Caribbean and Black British ethnicity (17% of the register but 19% of referrals). Social Work England has also reported that these groups experience higher progression rates from triage to investigation, and from case examination to hearings, compared with other groups. Those aged 40 or over represent 77% of cases reaching hearing, men represent 33% and Black, African, Caribbean and Black British social workers represent 24%.

Public experience of fitness to practise

Before discussing what is going well and what needs to improve in the various stages of fitness to practise, I reflect on what we heard from members of the public who told the review about their experiences of the process via the call for evidence. Fitness to practise is central to the regulator's role in protecting the public and maintaining public confidence. The perspectives and experiences of those who have encountered difficulties and suffered a loss of trust need to be kept at the forefront of this discussion.

82 respondents to the call for evidence were members of the public who experienced the fitness to practise process. The dominant perception among this group of respondents is that the fitness to practise process does not operate in a way that is timely, transparent or effective from a public perspective. Most respondents expressed low or no confidence in the process, often citing cumulative procedural and communication failures, rather than dissatisfaction with a single decision.

Delays were the most consistently reported concern. Respondents described cases remaining in triage or investigation stages for prolonged periods, in some instances several years, with minimal communication. Those respondents often stated that in their view, delays undermined public protection and prolonged harm, particularly where safeguarding issues were ongoing.

Communication was widely described as infrequent, impersonal and difficult to navigate. Respondents noted lengthy periods without updates, reliance on written correspondence, and lack of a named contact.

Several indicated that the process was particularly inaccessible for individuals experiencing trauma, disability or stress related to safeguarding or court proceedings. As one respondent summarised this:

“The whole premise of Social Work England rests on complainants having the capacity to navigate a complaints system when they have just gone through the most distressing event of their life.”

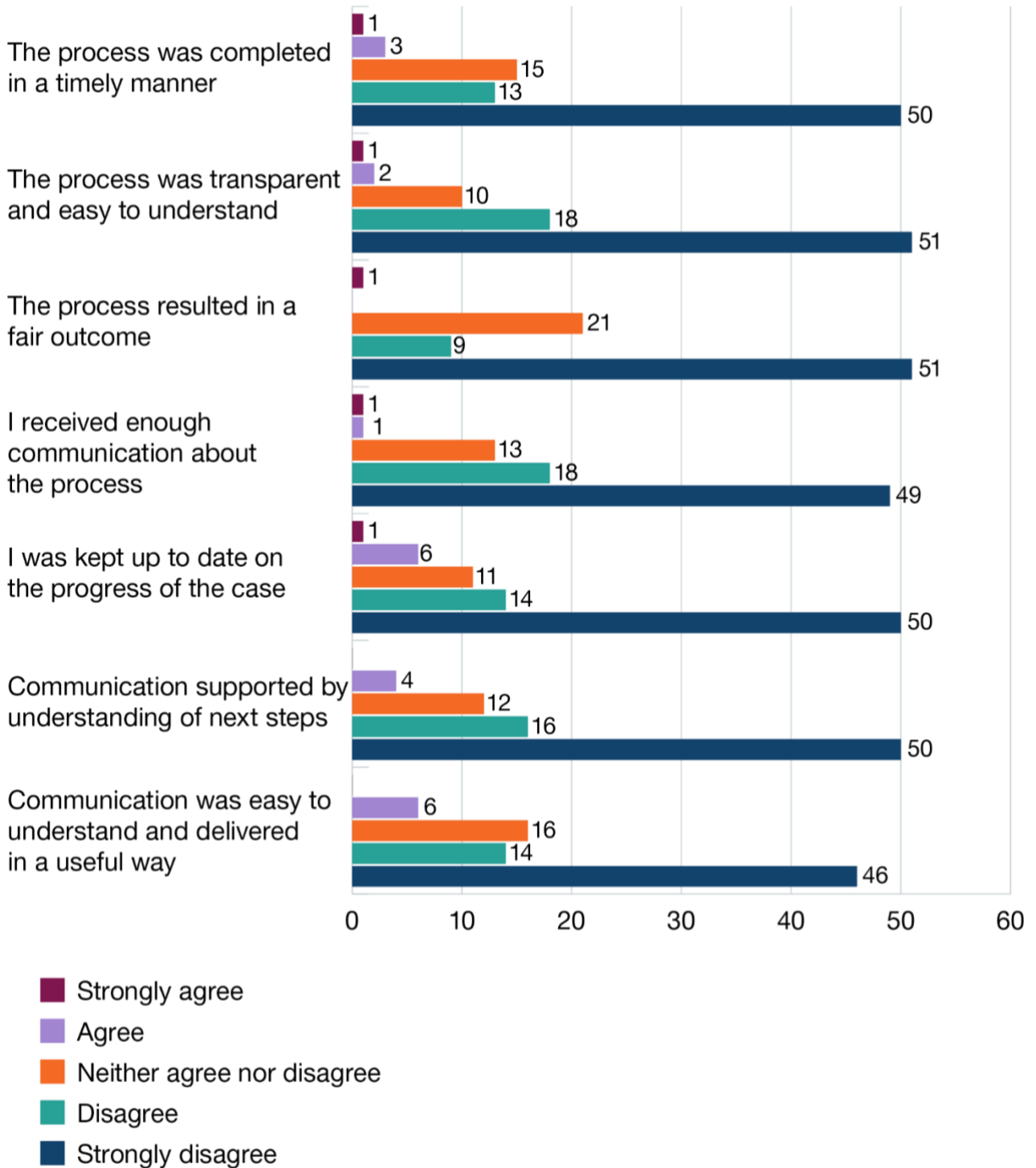
It was also noted that any complaints process can, of itself, impact on an individual's ability to move on from difficult situations. While complainants may choose to progress their concerns despite the personal impact, it remains the case that doing so can impact on their own wellbeing as it may require them to recount difficult events. While this is an unavoidable aspect of the sensitive cases handled by Social Work England, lengthy timescales are likely to prolong this experience and people's ability to move on.

Respondents frequently reported difficulty understanding how decisions were reached or why cases were closed. Limited explanation of reasoning and lack of clarity about Social Work England's remit – particularly in relation to court-related social work activity – contributed to perceptions of opacity. This group of respondents consistently experienced the fitness to practise process as slow and difficult to engage with, raising questions about its effectiveness in delivering public reassurance and maintaining confidence in professional regulation.

The review also met with adults with experience of social work who echoed these concerns, describing the process as inaccessible and burdensome. They further noted that

many only made complaints to Social Work England after raising their concerns locally, meaning the overall process is even longer than evidenced in statistics on the timelines of the regulatory process.

Figure 12: Call for evidence response by members of the public reflecting on the fitness to practise process



What is going well?

Triage

The high rate of case closure at triage is positive. While most complainants would doubtless wish their complaint to proceed, there is consensus that earlier conclusion is generally beneficial given the significant personal and professional consequences for social workers entering the fitness to practise process, and the importance of providing timely clarity to complainants. Early decisions also enable redirection of resources to later stages of the process, where there is more likely to be a finding of impairment.

Social Work England has acted to increase its capacity to process cases at triage. In the early stages, more resource was put into triage. A full review of the fitness to practise rules and regulations also led to legislative change allowing more extensive investigations at triage to improve decision-making. In late 2024, a fitness to practise legal team was established, in part to support complex cases at this stage.

In 2025 to 2026, Social Work England undertook, with external consultants, a process review of both triage and investigations to inform the re-design of these functions. Actions from this include increasing staffing during 2025 and remodelling triage throughput on three occasions to respond to rising volumes. A head of triage role was created in January 2026 to strengthen leadership and oversight. This action has collectively led to an increase of 59% in triage case decisions made in 2025 to 2026 in comparison to the previous year. This is significant. Planned actions for the 2026 to 2027 business year include a new pre-triage process, a revised team structure and a new resource-forecasting model.

Social Work England has estimated that these measures will reduce the full triage caseload from 1,731 at the end of 2026 to 2027 to 1,311 at the end of 2027 to 2028. As a result, they project that timescales will reduce, from 31 weeks in 2025 to 2026 to 15 weeks by 2028 to 2029, which would reflect a very significant improvement (although would still, in my opinion, be too long).

Social Work England is acting to understand what is driving the rise in referrals, which is being felt across the regulatory system. The wide referral 'funnel' reflects the difficult balance all regulators must strike between maintaining an accessible complaints system for the public and avoiding high volumes of referrals that clearly fall below threshold and divert limited resources. Social Work England is considering this issue both as a standalone organisation and working together with other health and care regulators. This will be a vital component of developing plans to forecast trends.

Investigations

Social Work England is taking steps to improve timelines and processes at investigation stage. Additional resource was put into investigations in early 2022 to deal with the increasing volume of cases. Later that year, investigations split their teams to cover legacy cases and new cases separately. The review of rules and regulations enabled triage to request interim orders, rather than leaving this entirely to investigations, thereby freeing capacity. The fitness to practise legal team established in late 2024 also supports complex cases in investigations.

The 2025 to 2026 review (of investigations and triage) has resulted in a range of recent and planned improvements. This includes increased senior and in-house legal involvement earlier in investigations, strengthened internal challenge through introducing complex case sessions for investigations, sharing of learning from case examiners to investigations, and better case planning. These changes are intended to enable earlier case closure where legal thresholds cannot be met, timelier witness statements, and more robust evidence. Social Work England expects improvements to generate efficiencies later in the process, improving outcomes for all parties. It projects that average time spent in investigation will reduce, from a median of 55 weeks across 2025 to 2026 to 40 weeks by 2028 to 2029.

The planned changes appear well-judged, grounded in a systematic review of both investigation and triage, and informed by learning from other regulators with mature fitness to practise systems. These reforms have the potential to streamline the investigation stage, improving efficiency and quality and delivering benefits further downstream in the process.

Case examination

Accepted disposals are a valuable innovation and the reduction in overall case timescales that they create is positive. Where cases are concluded via accepted disposal, there is an average reduction of two years and nine months on the total timeline from complaint to decision as compared to a decision at hearing.

Although similar consensual early resolutions approaches have been used by social work regulators in the devolved administrations for some time, these are relatively new across UK-wide health and care professional regulators. Other regulators are moving towards agreed outcomes and fewer adversarial hearings, with the GMC, NMC and HCPC adopting similar powers.

We heard perceptions from the small number of registrants or employers of registrants with direct experience of an accepted disposal that there is a lack of fairness, or equity, with outcomes for those who proceed to a full hearing. However, the review found no evidence that sanctions imposed via accepted disposal are harsher than those imposed following hearings. The PSA has also reported that the accepted disposal process “is capable of dealing with many fitness to practise cases swiftly and fairly in a manner that protects the public, particularly where the facts of those cases are simple and uncontroversial”.⁴³

Social Work England is using accepted disposals in a growing number of cases and has worked to improve processes to support this. In particular, it has taken action to improve communications and support to registrants involved. While overall sector understanding and trust in the accepted disposal process is more limited, individual communications with social workers offered an accepted disposal are now seen to be of good quality. This will support individuals involved to make the right decisions and ultimately should build up knowledge in the sector over time.

⁴³ Professional Standards Authority, ‘Review of Social Work England’s process for accepted outcomes in fitness to practise cases’ (2021), www.professionalstandards.org.uk/publications/review-social-work-englands-process-accepted-outcomes-fitness-practise-cases.

Social Work England has taken some steps to speed up case examination. In early 2021, more resource was added to this area. Their review of rules and regulations led to interim order applications being considered in-house, rather than by case examiners, freeing up their capacity.

Hearings

Social Work England has made several changes to speed up how cases are handled. These include holding hearings online as the standard approach and using smaller two-person panels, where appropriate (which is expected to save about £150,000 each year). It has also simplified rules around interim orders and extended how often these orders are reviewed – from every three months to every six months – bringing its approach closer to other regulators as part of a wider legal review in 2022. More recently, Social Work England introduced ‘adjudicator consensual disposals.’ This means that, in suitable cases that have already reached the final hearing stage, both the regulator and the social worker can agree on the outcome without a full hearing, as long as adjudicators approve it. The aim is to resolve cases more quickly when both sides agree on the facts, the level of impairment and the appropriate outcome.

Upstream reforms resulting from their full review of their legal framework in 2022 have also reduced pressures on hearings, including allowing voluntary removal during fitness to practise proceedings, and extending accepted disposal powers to permit removal from the register. Social Work England estimates that these delivered annual savings of around £900,000.

Social Work England cannot hold reserves to manage backlogs, unlike some regulators. However, it received £7.4 million in additional funding to address HCPC legacy cases over three financial years (2021 to 2022: £1.9 million, 2022 to 2023: £4.3 million, 2023 to 2024: £1.2 million), and DfE has agreed further funding for post-2020 backlog cases over five years from 2025 to 2026. For 2025 to 2026, this included £1.675 million, rising to £5.7 million in 2026 to 2027. Future years are subject to DfE’s annual business planning processes, government spending reviews (post-2027) and HM Treasury agreement, but funding requirement is likely to be positioned as a similar value, if not more.

This funding is intended to sustain a steady-state throughput of around 150 hearings per year. Funds will be used primarily on external legal services, panel fees and related costs, enabling backlog cases to be prepared and concluded while ensuring new cases proceed to hearing. Social Work England continues to recruit adjudicators and now has 194 adjudicators, who conduct interim order and final order reviews. They have also recruited and trained an in-house legal advocacy team to prepare and present interim order applications and reviews, and final order reviews, thereby freeing up external legal capacity to the final hearings backlog. As a result, there are some green shoots of improvement in timeliness of hearings.

The review conducted a small review of nine recent fitness to practise published decisions (four accepted disposals and five final hearings) to consider the assessment of the impairment, the consideration of sanctions, the reasoning for decisions and the proportionality of sanctions. The participants in this exercise – including myself – concluded that decisions seemed to be well-reasoned and the sanctions appropriate to the facts and impairment found. While this was a small sample of only the published information and cannot be said to be conclusive, it was encouraging to see direct evidence

about the quality of the process and decision-making. Recognising that we did not have access to all evidence considered, we thought, however, that in a small minority of cases, clearer published reasoning for decisions and the rationale for specific sanctions would have been helpful.

Social Work England systematically reviews decisions made through the process via their Decision Review Group, which includes members of their National Advisory Forum (a group which provides expert advice, support and challenge to Social Work England made up of social workers, individuals with lived experience, and a representative from another regulator). It also conducts audits of decisions and case progression and makes recommendations and embeds learning from all these processes. In addition, the PSA reviews all final fitness to practise panel decisions and, with the exception of accepted disposals, can appeal decisions they believe do not adequately protect the public. Lastly, registrants can appeal their own decisions, though the number who do so is low.

Feedback from social workers in the call for evidence included indications that outcomes were well understood in the sector and therefore supporting confidence and understanding of the process. For example, one practising social worker commented:

“When I read the judgements of concern raised against a social worker, I am convinced that the intention of the SWE [Social Work England] is to protect, promote and maintain the health, safety and well-being of the public. They're quite thorough and leave no stone unturned.”

Similarly, another practicing social worker respondent commented:

“Being able to access information of concerns and details of how these have been investigated via the Social Work England website gives me confidence that poor practice is being looked at properly and fairly.”

Equalities

Social Work England has published two major pieces of analysis covering diversity data in fitness to practise referrals.⁴⁴ It has also established a data oversight group, involving senior statisticians and analysts from the GMC and the NMC, supported by an independent academic advisor. This group provides independent challenge and assurance on analytical methods and conclusions. It is also seeking to improve its methodologies and analysis to provide greater insight into the drivers of overrepresentation and is currently finalising a more detailed analytical report.

Social Work England has also taken practical steps in response to its findings. This includes the publication of fair referral principles, co-produced with the single point of contact network, to support employers in deciding when concerns should be referred to the

⁴⁴ Social Work England, 'Social Work England's fitness to practise process: an initial analysis of diversity data' (2023), www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/publications/social-work-england-s-fitness-to-practise-process-an-initial-analysis-of-diversity-data. Social Work England, 'An update on our analysis of diversity data in our fitness to practise processes' (2024), www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/publications/an-update-on-our-analysis-of-diversity-data-in-our-fitness-to-practise-processes.

regulator.⁴⁵ These principles aim to reduce disproportionality and promote fair and consistent referral practice across the workforce.

Social Work England advised the review that it is developing an anti-racism training programme for all staff and partners involved in fitness to practise, to be delivered between 2026 and 2027. This builds on earlier training delivered in 2024 to 2025 on fitness to practise operations, which included information on the Equality Act 2010. Social Work England has met the PSA standard 3 on equality, diversity and inclusion for 2024 to 2025. The PSA highlighted strong board oversight, work with witnesses and on fair referrals, engagement with employers, and staff training. However, it also noted that Social Work England does not yet collect diversity data for its board members or for complainants. The PSA referenced Social Work England's equalities work in its published good-practice guidance on addressing health inequalities.⁴⁶

Social Work England's approach to fitness to practise diversity data was awarded second place in the 'innovative practice' category at the 2026 Institute of Regulation Awards and highly commended for its integrity and professionalism in a sensitive area of regulatory practice.

Communications

Social Work England has sought to strengthen employer engagement through a 'single point of contact' network in all local authorities and some other organisations that employ social workers. This seeks to improve communication and evidence-gathering in relation to fitness to practise cases. However, Social Work England acknowledged that the network has not fully delivered the intended benefits, citing frequent turnover of single point of contact personnel within employers. Employers told us the role was useful in principle, but inconsistent use by Social Work England has reduced its effectiveness (for example, leaving the single point of contact out of communications on individual fitness to practise cases). Social Work England has acknowledged the need to develop the network and strengthening its wider communications approach.

It is also taking action to improve its assistance to registrants and witnesses, including a new emotional support line, which is due to go live in July 2026.

⁴⁵ Social Work England, 'Equality, diversity and inclusion quarterly updates (January to March 2026 update)', www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/edi-quarterly-updates/.

⁴⁶ Professional Standards Authority, 'Monitoring Report - Social Work England 2024/25', www.professionalstandards.org.uk/publications/monitoring-report-social-work-england-202425.

What needs to improve?

Triage

Timeliness in triage emerged as a major and consistent concern in stakeholder feedback. Individuals who had been through the process, complainants, social work managers and a representative organisation for employers all highlighted the issue. Delays at triage appear to be driven by three main factors, although their relative impact is unclear.

First, a sustained increase in referral volumes outpaced triage capacity. Initial modelling of projected referral numbers were considerably below actual figures. As a result, timelines for triage decision-making have been growing. The final months of 2025 to 2026 saw some improvement, although it is too soon to know if this will be sustained.

It is also worth noting that a large and increasing majority of referrals from a known source are from the public, of which a far higher proportion are closed at triage.⁴⁷ Around 97% of public referrals were closed at this stage, compared with around 42% of employer referrals. Social Work England is now making a greater distinction between public and employer referrals and should keep the impact of this under review. Similarly, the lower, but significant, closure rate of employer referrals suggests there may be merit in further targeted work with employers to improve understanding of referral thresholds and criteria. It may be fruitful to record more information on the specific source of referrals by sector and type of employer to consider where best to focus efforts.

Second, regulatory change in December 2022 expanded triage functions by extending Social Work England powers to require information from employers and others. While this has enabled more cases to be resolved appropriately at triage, it can also lengthen timescales, both in determining what information is required and awaiting its receipt.

Third, there have been changes in the way that legally-restricted information is handled to ensure compliance with court rules regarding communication of information about court proceedings, particularly in relation to family court material. Social Work England estimates that 40% to 50% of cases involve such information. Revised handling requirements have slowed progression across the fitness to practise system, with a particularly pronounced impact at triage. Social Work England have raised this with DfE, who are working with the Ministry of Justice to address challenges relating to this issue.

In addition, Social Work England's review of triage highlighted that there is a culture of risk aversion leading to deferred decision-making. We are not able to conclude definitively whether or not decision-making at pre-triage and triage is overly risk averse, resulting in strict procedural compliance rather than the exercise of proportionate regulatory judgement. However, this is an aspect of decision-making that Social Work England must keep under review. There is also, of course, an inherent danger of focusing on speed at

⁴⁷ Social Work England data, provided ahead of publication. In 2025 to 2026, referrals from members of the public accounted for 72% of referrals with a known source, up from 64% in 2024 to 2025. These are percentages of referrals from known sources, with the categories of employer, member of the public and other source. There are a significant proportion of referrals each year where the source is unknown. Many of these are also likely to be members of the public.

triage and closing cases early so that it tips the balance too far in the wrong direction, with cases sifted out that could have merited closer inspection.

Putting aside the challenging context that has pushed up timelines, the current target to complete triage within 26 weeks is not sufficiently ambitious and too many are closed too late within this period. The regulator's aspiration to reach 15 weeks by 2028 to 2029 is to be welcomed but it remains relevant that some regulators complete triage in under 15 weeks. As noted above, Social Work England's slower timeline partly reflects changes to regulations made in 2022 expanding its powers to collect evidence at triage, which reflects a deliberate choice to expand its scope and facilitate safe decisions to close cases as early as possible.

While welcoming the current and planned improvements for triage, the likely impact of these changes is not yet clear or tested. The pace of implementing changes continues to be of concern. For example, nearly a year elapsed between the initiation of this work and full implementation of decisions made as a result of the review.

Investigations

Investigations are still taking too long. While there have been improvements against internal metrics, the investigation stage was widely perceived by registrants, employers and complainants as slow and opaque. Three factors are driving these issues.

First, case volume has been significant and was driven early on by the inheritance of HCPC legacy cases, many of which were at investigation stage, and higher-than-anticipated progression from triage in the early years, resulting in an initial backlog at the investigations stage in 2020. The ongoing presence of cases that have been in the system for a considerable period continues to affect capacity. The existence of aged cases in the overall caseload will continue to affect key performance indicator performance until they are closed.

Second, Social Work England's own process review found that early investigative approaches were too light-touch, lacking sufficient senior and legal input to support robust decision-making and the handover of comprehensive cases to the next stage of the process. The staffing structure lacked resilience, with turnover leading to lengthy delays.

Third, investigating social work practice is inherently complex, relying on mixed evidence sources in some cases, including verbal testimony, employer records and court material. Social Work England reports that delays in obtaining information – particularly from employers, or indeed from the social workers under investigation themselves – further hinders timely progression.

Employers and social workers expressed frustration with Social Work England's approach to engagement during investigations. A consistent concern was the imbalance between long periods of inactivity followed by urgent requests for information. Employers and registrants reported receiving short deadlines after extended silence, sometimes for material already submitted or requested again in a different format. Where cases have been open for long periods, this has been particularly problematic, as institutional memory inevitably fades, making rapid responses more difficult. One social work manager responding to my call for evidence said:

“I was given tight timescales to respond, usually less than 7 days and then they would not respond for months.”

Current proposals to improve the process should help address more systemically longstanding issues with timeliness and delays and to reduce their impact going forward. However, as with the changes at triage, we are yet to see the impact and so cannot yet conclude that they will significantly move the dial.

Case examination

Accepted disposals are doubtless a positive alternative to a hearing where they are suitable. However, there are opportunities to learn from reforms to wider health and social care professional regulation to build on their use as well as to increase transparency.

A key barrier to increased rates of accepted disposals is the high proportion of social workers who do not engage with the process and therefore do not offer agreement on the facts or sanction. The GMC, under its new accepted disposal powers for physician associates, can impose an accepted disposal where a registrant is entirely unengaged with the fitness to practise process (although it still cannot do so when the registrant engages and refuses consent).

There should be no pressure or presumption of an accepted disposal simply to improve throughput. When the public interest test is met, cases should proceed to a full hearing. However, in principle, accepted disposals should facilitate swifter resolution in appropriate cases, without compromising public protection. It merits further consideration as to whether this should include registrants who are not engaging.

The review did not find evidence of any differences in outcomes at accepted disposal but there were perceptions among the small number with direct experience that there was a lack of fairness and transparency in their use. Increasing transparency will support Social Work England to address these views. Unlike final panel determinations, the PSA currently lacks the powers to review or appeal decisions agreed at the case examiner stage. The review supports the PSA's position that it should have the power to scrutinise and, where necessary, request a revision of case examiner decisions. Cases resolved through this route can result in sanctions equivalent to those imposed by a panel, and it is out of step with wider regulatory reform that the PSA currently lacks oversight of these decisions.

This power for a PSA review is currently under consideration in relation to doctors.⁴⁸ While the detailed proposals for the GMC are subject to further scrutiny through the current consultation and subsequent rule-making, once this process is complete legislation should be amended to allow the PSA to exercise scrutiny of Social Work England in this area, drawing on the approach being developed for the GMC.

Finally, as with all stages of the fitness to practise process, Social Work England should challenge itself on the timeframes. Timelines have largely kept within the 12-week key performance indicator and are projected to return to this by the end of 2026 to 2027 (with

⁴⁸ Department of Health and Social Care, 'Reforming the General Medical Council legislative framework - consultation document' (2026), www.gov.uk/government/consultations/reforming-the-general-medical-council-legislative-framework/reforming-the-general-medical-council-legislative-framework-consultation-document.

recent increases a result of staff turnover in 2025 to 2026). However, I question the ambition of the 12-week key performance indicator and the length of the timeline to improve this to eight weeks by 2028 to 2029, given the overall need to improve timeliness.

Hearings

Social Work England forecasts that the timescale for completing hearings will reduce to an average of between 40 and 56 weeks by 2030 to 2031. This forecast is welcome but should not detract from the fact that, for many more years, social workers referred to a hearing are likely to wait a long time for their cases to be resolved.

The hearing backlog has material cost implications. Cases awaiting hearing can require interim orders – temporary conditions of practise or suspension while the case is resolved – which must be imposed or reviewed at hearings at least every six months, consuming capacity that could otherwise be used for final hearings. A case waiting a year for a hearing costs around 25% more than one proceeding directly.

Social Work England's view is that lack of financial resources, leading to a pause for a considerable proportion of hearings in 2024, has been a key driver for hearing delays. An initial case for additional funding for hearing backlogs was made to DfE in December 2022. This set out that efficiencies already realised from the changes in the Social Workers Regulations 2018 (amendments in 2022) and other efficiencies yet to be realised would go some way to freeing up budget, but that fee increases and additional government funding would still be required. However, it was not until August 2024 that a case was approved by DfE to enable additional resources for Social Work England to tackle this issue, and a consultation on fee increases was not approved and launched until February 2025.

Government must bear some responsibility for the impact of these decisions. However, in my view, a more robust articulation of the case could also have supported an earlier resolution.

A key enabler for processing more cases at hearing is sufficient legal capacity. When legal services were last commissioned in 2022, only one bidder came forward. Since 2024, Social Work England has considered expanding provision to two providers. In early 2026 it launched a new tender to secure legal services when the current contract expires. This tender has been completed, and two successful suppliers have been provisionally awarded contracts. This should help relieve pressure on hearings and help reduce delays.

The review also understands that an unbudgeted cost-of-living payment in 2023 (£355,000) – provided in line with other government bodies – led Social Work England to reduce hearings activity (delaying 20 to 30 final hearings) and pause recruitment, to address a budget shortfall. It is concerning that the hearings budget was the area that was impacted – I think it is reasonable to have expected Social Work England and the previous government to have found a solution that did not impact on the very regulatory function that was already in difficulty.

Although vital to focus on hearings, there seems to have been an over-concentration on addressing the hearings backlog in isolation, at the expense of timeliness challenges in earlier stages of the fitness to practise process, particularly triage. For example, the investment case to DfE for addressing fitness to practise delays focused exclusively on

hearings, potentially missing opportunities to take a whole-system view of end-to-end timeliness.

Social Work England identified several contributory factors for the delays, including:

- difficulties re-engaging social workers and witnesses in older cases
- implications of legal advice relating to legally restricted information
- caution about scheduling hearings ahead of budget confirmation
- limited legal capacity constraining annual throughput
- complexity of cases

The human impact of delay is stark. One organisation representing social workers told the review, via the call for evidence:

“I have represented social workers whose cases have been ongoing for over 5 years – some of which are still waiting a hearing being listed. Not only does this have an extremely negative impact on the registrant, it affects the ability of the regulator to hold a fair hearing as witness memories have significantly faded by the time the case does reach full hearing.”

Concerns have also been raised with the review about the hearing process itself. Several people and organisations described their experience as overly adversarial. In contrast, panel members described hearings as well-run, respectful and consistent with other regulators’ practice.

I have also noted Social Work England’s power to impose suspensions of up to three years is notably longer than the 12-month maximum applied by other health and care regulators. Of the 222 social workers who had received a suspension up to April 26, only 5% received the maximum sanction but almost a third (30%) did receive over a year, which risks appearing disproportionate, particularly as prolonged suspension can erode skills and make return to practice difficult.

It is my view that it would be more proportionate, and consistent with other regulators’ practices, to cap suspension at two years, with removal from the register where there is no evidence of remediation thereafter. I think that the majority of suspensions should not exceed one year and guidance should be clearer on this point.

Case review

The review heard numerous examples of social workers struggling to secure employment while subject to conditions of practice. These conditions can, in practice, significantly restrict employability, particularly where employers are unwilling or unable to meet supervision or reporting requirements.

Social Work England told the review that the case review team is now working more closely with regional engagement leads to identify agencies who are not taking on social workers with conditions, or other employers who routinely decline to employ them. This work is intended to improve employer understanding of the process and the purpose of

conditions, and to address barriers to appropriate employment where it is safe and proportionate to do so. Social Work England has also told the review that it has committed to considering how it may be able to change its bank of conditions to ensure that it is not preventing social workers from engaging with them.⁴⁹

Equalities

During discussion about fitness to practise disparities involving race and ethnicity, social workers and employers suggest that this was likely to reflect wider systemic racism and prejudice in British society, requiring a concerted response from all parts of the system. This then raises connected questions about the quality of support provided to social workers from ethnic minority backgrounds by their supervisors and managers.

Employers offered limited evidence of systematic efforts to examine potential disparities in the referrals they make to Social Work England about their own staff. This is not to suggest that employers are not taking action to address inequalities more broadly, but little evidence of such activity was presented to the review. We also discerned through the call for evidence that many social workers are unaware of what Social Work England does in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion. This may be an area for Social Work England to address in their communications strategy.

Greater transparency about Social Work England's equality, diversity and inclusion work will be important in rebuilding confidence arising from the high-profile case of a social worker who was sanctioned for posting private Facebook messages in relation to trans people.⁵⁰ It was evident in some responses to the review's call for evidence that the perception of Social Work England had been damaged by what had happened in this case. At a tribunal, findings of harassment were upheld in relation to Social Work England's conduct. It has acknowledged the findings and acted as the judgement required.

Communications

A strong and consistent theme from social workers, complainants and employers was the poor quality of communication from Social Work England in fitness to practise. Participants described investigations as inconsistent, opaque and slow, with updates often only forthcoming after repeated chasing, and responses frequently delayed or limited despite Social Work England committing to updates at least every eight weeks. These experiences mirrored some of those described by members of the public and set out earlier.

Social Work England has recognised these shortcomings and has taken some steps to improve guidance and communications, including refreshing the online referral form to allow complainants to attach supporting information. It has also developed plans, from

⁴⁹ Social Work England, 'Fitness to practise conditions bank' (last updated 9 June 2026), www.socialworkengland.org.uk/concerns/fitness-to-practise-conditions-bank.

⁵⁰ Meade v Westminster City Council and Social Work England [2024] EWHC (Admin), judgment dated 8 January 2024. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/607d6cba0ef43a2dbb27df45/t/659d3816f1b61a3f93f35e32/1704802327468/2200179+2022+and+2211483+2022+Meade+v+Westminster+City+Council+and+Social+Work+England+judgment+give+to+parties+8+January+2024.pdf>.

2026 to 2027, to provide more regular and meaningful updates to parties involved, recognising that current communication is too infrequent to be helpful.

In addition, social workers and employers reported their experience of high turnover of Social Work England staff allocated to individual cases (though this may also reflect cases moving through stages), resulting in delays and repeat requests for information already provided.

The General Dental Council has produced research on communication in fitness to practise, concluding that urgent improvements in clarity, empathy, cultural responsiveness and operational consistency were needed in the work of this regulator.⁵¹ It suggested that co-designed, user-informed resources, staff training in trauma-informed communication, and improved internal coherence are needed to rebuild trust in their fitness to practise processes. This highlights that the problem is not uncommon, although this should not detract from challenges in Social Work England's performance.

Some social workers and employers raised a specific matter relating to the timing of social workers being advised of concerns during triage. Social Work England does not routinely inform social workers that a concern has been received about them while the case remains at triage but may contact third parties – including employers – to seek information. Some employers told the review that this places them in a difficult position of having information not held by the social worker. Some social workers also expressed concern that they are not sighted on the full complaint, contributing to a sense of unfairness. However, others welcomed this approach, given that early notification can cause anxiety when most cases do not proceed beyond triage.

The review also heard mixed views from employers about the clarity of referral thresholds. While some felt guidance was clear and valued support from Social Work England's regional engagement leads, others reported inconsistent advice and called for greater clarity. It is notable that, while employer referrals are more likely to progress beyond triage, a significant proportion (42%) do not.

⁵¹ General Dental Council, 'Communication and support in fitness to practise at the General Dental Council' (2025), www.gdc-uk.org/about-us/what-we-do/research/detail/report/communication-and-support-in-fitness-to-practise-at-the-general-dental-council.

Engagement and representation

Social worker engagement with the fitness to practise process is an area of challenge for Social Work England. This is sometimes intrinsically linked to another area of difficulty – representation. Research by Plymouth University for the General Dental Council and NMC suggests that engagement of a registrant in a fitness to practise process can be a key factor in determining the seriousness of a case and the eventual outcome of it.⁵² Research also suggests that legal advice and representation are important in supporting registrants to navigate the complex fitness to practise process. Research by the GMC found lack of engagement was associated with poorer outcomes.⁵³

Social Work England estimates that a maximum of around 25% of social workers going through the fitness to practise process beyond triage have representation. Legal advisors can provide some factual support to unrepresented registrants but, unlike many other health and care professions, social workers do not have state-funded professional indemnity insurance that may cover costs of legal representation.

We heard from some social workers and from Social Work England staff that those who have had representation in the process are sometimes advised to delay engagement until all evidence had been collated, possibly reflecting a degree of mistrust in the fitness to practise process. By contrast, Social Work England emphasised – in line with the research noted above – that early engagement can improve the quality and speed of investigation by identifying evidence sources and misunderstandings sooner, and can thereby reduce social workers' anxiety during the process.

It is for other bodies, and most particularly representative bodies for social workers, to address matters relating to representation in fitness to practise and to encourage this. Social Work England will wish to work with them to improve levels of engagement and representation.

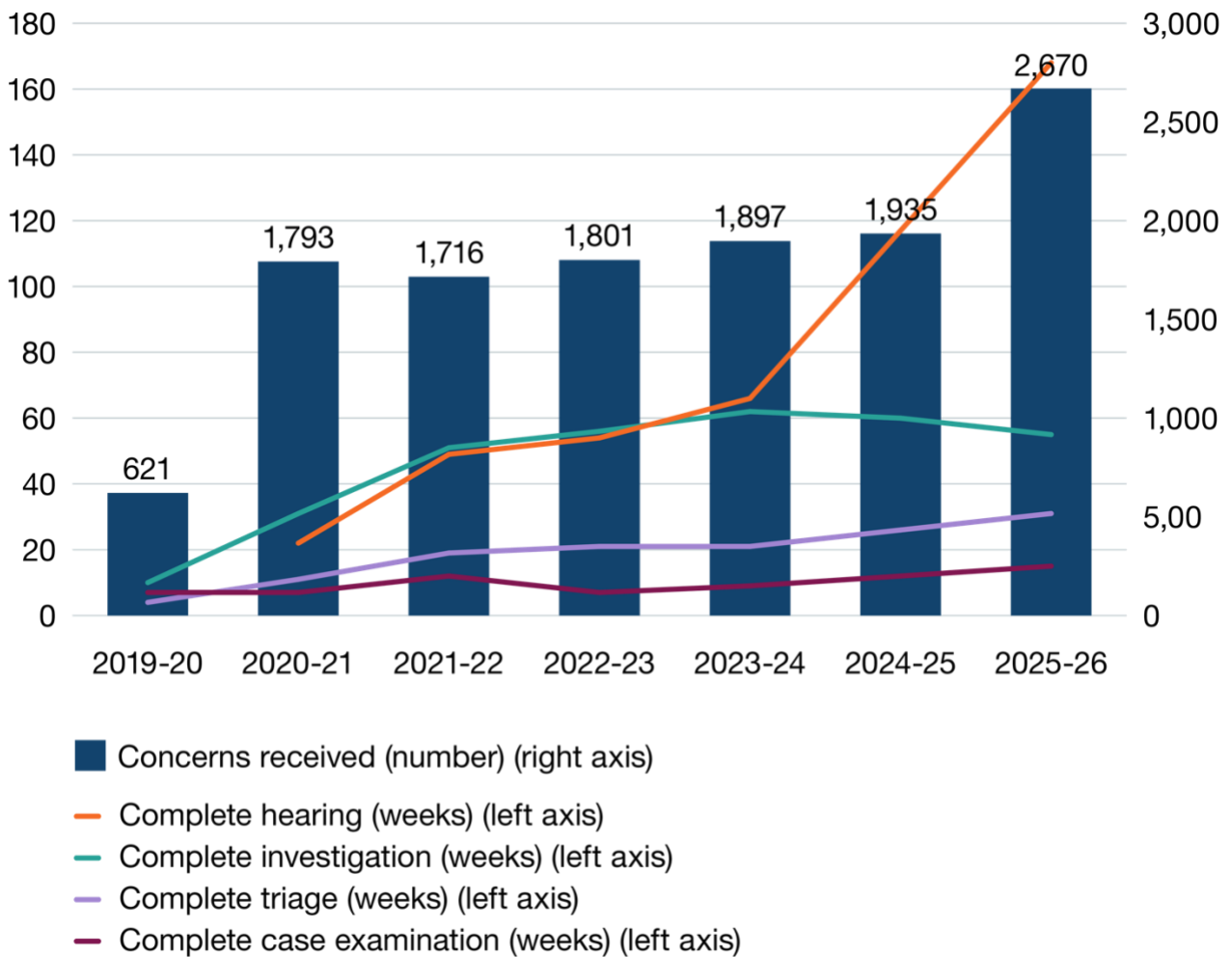
Overall evaluation

Social Work England has undoubtedly made important efforts to address the quality and timeliness of its fitness to practise processes. In doing so, it has faced significant and well-documented challenges, including a substantial legacy inherited from HCPC, and ongoing resource and capacity constraints. Figure 13 below provides information about numbers of cases received, by financial year, and the length of time it took each year to complete different stages of the process across the years it has been in operation.

⁵² Marie Bryce and others, 'The concept of seriousness in fitness to practise cases' (2022), www.gdc-uk.org/docs/default-source/research/february-2022_concept-of-seriousness-in-fitness-to-practise-cases.pdf.

⁵³ Javier A Caballero and Steve P Brown, 2019, 'Engagement, not Personal Characteristics, was Associated with the Seriousness of Regulatory Adjudication Decisions about Physicians: A Cross-Sectional Study', <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31771585/>.

Figure 13: Cases received and time spent in fitness to practise stages



Social Work England’s current performance is unacceptable. Despite most social workers being clear that fitness to practise is a necessity, the concern about how Social Work England has managed and addressed concerns is loud and unanimous and at all levels including, importantly, from complainants themselves. Senior leaders in local authorities I talked to spoke of their dismay at what they have perceived to be a worrying drift in tackling fitness to practise problems. Some expressed their strong feeling that problems on the scale observed in fitness to practise would have been unacceptable in other public sector organisations. Such manifest problems in timeliness were seen to be neither fair on registrants nor beneficial for the confidence of the public and people who have a social worker.

Addressing these performance deficits must be its number one priority. As indicated, timeliness remains a major concern. Although timelines at each stage have been broadly stable since 2021 to 2022 (except for hearings), earlier delays have become entrenched, leaving the overall process now about four and a half years from complaint to final hearing in 2025 to 2026. This is unacceptably long.

Recognising the challenges in making comparisons with other regulators, it is striking that Social Work England’s timeline both up to the point of hearing and including to the final hearing decision are longer than all other UK health and care regulators overseen by the PSA. All these other regulators have faced many – although I accept not all – of the same

contextual challenges as Social Work England in terms of working through the COVID-19 pandemic and seeing large increases in public referrals. Figures 14 and 15 below show Social Work England’s relative performance from receipt of complaint to reaching panel stage and then to a final panel decision.⁵⁴

Figure 14: Median time taken from receipt of initial complaint to the final investigating committee decision (to reach panel stage) for UK health and care regulators for the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025⁵⁵

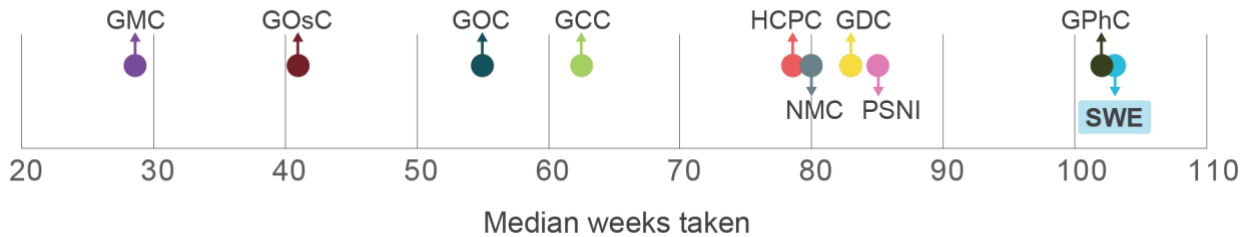
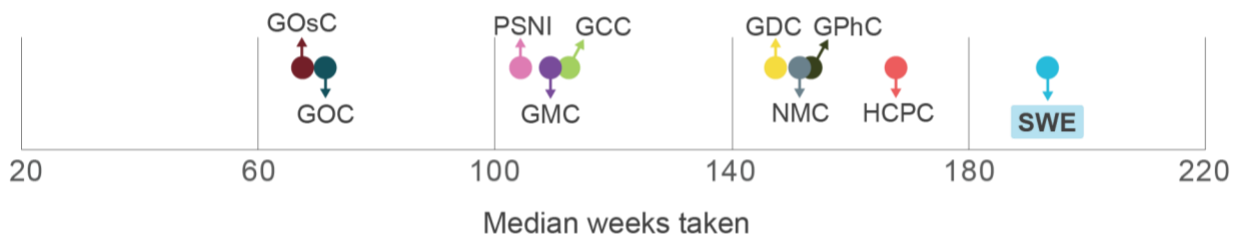


Figure 15: Median time taken (in weeks) from receipt of initial complaint to final fitness to practise hearing determination for the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025



Social Work England’s ability to resolve systemic and operational weaknesses appears to have been constrained by three interrelated factors. First, there has been insufficient strategic grip across the fitness to practise system as a whole. Interventions have too often appeared reactive and ad hoc, with limited strategic reflection and analysis of how processes and practice needed to be improved and changed across the full process. For example, action it took to close more cases at triage by introducing greater investigative powers was intended to support appropriate and sustainable caseloads in later stages. However, this has resulted in timescales increasing considerably at triage. Paired with rising referral rates in recent years, this has put significant pressure on the triage stage. While Social Work England could not have anticipated the level of increase in referrals that have created this pressure, it is notable that volumes began rising above original business case projections from 2020 to 2021 (albeit at a much lower rate). While additional resources were put into triage in the early years, the review of triage and investigations

⁵⁴ Acronyms used in Figures 14 and 15 mean the following. GOsC: General Osteopathic Council. GMC: General Medical Council. GOC: General Optical Council. GCC: General Chiropractic Council. HCPC: Health and Care Professions Council. NMC: Nursing and Midwifery Council. GDC: General Dental Council. PSNI: Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland. GPhC: General Pharmaceutical Council. SWE: Social Work England.

⁵⁵ Professional Standards Authority, ‘Annual report and accounts 2024 to 2025’ (2025), www.professionalstandards.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/PSA%20Annual%20Report%20and%20Accounts%202024-25%20%28accessible%29.pdf.

operations was not launched until May 2025. Earlier action and a strategic view across the process might have prevented unintended consequences resulting from the changes to triage in 2022.

Social Work England has told us financial resources have been insufficient to properly manage the HCPC legacy caseload, increased volumes of referrals and external challenges. While they have sought additional funding from DfE during budget negotiations, I think that a thorough review of fitness to practise earlier, when it was clear that original business case assumptions were inaccurate, would have been beneficial. This would have provided clearer evidence and a strong narrative to make a compelling case to DfE that a reassessment of baseline funding was required, recognising that any case would have been made during a time of constrained fiscal conditions. That said, I accept that the previous government made a cost-benefit assessment with regards to the cases Social Work England did put to them about resources and therefore must accept some of the consequences in terms of fitness to practise performance.

Second, possibly in part because timeliness has posed challenges for many regulators, we have observed an acceptance in parts of the organisation and within parts of government that the problem is inherently extremely difficult to resolve. This has fostered, if not complacency, a lack of strong and concerted ambition, which needs to be accompanied by a greater sense of urgency commensurate with the seriousness of the issue.

This is reflected in the overall end-to-end timeline, which remains unacceptably long. Even if all current key performance indicators are met, the process to reach a hearing would take approximately one year and nine months, with the hearing stage in addition to this (there is no key performance indicator for this stage but it is currently taking an average of 168 weeks, or three years and three months). While Social Work England has ambitions to shorten this, their future state will not be achieved until 2030 to 2031.

Figure 16: Timeline for completion of fitness to practise process up to hearing based on Social Work England's current key performance indicators



Third, Social Work England has not delivered a robust, transparent or effective communications strategy for fitness to practise – either to individual registrants and complainants or to the wider sector, including employers, professional bodies and the public. As noted earlier, we were struck by the significant disconnect between Social Work England's internal confidence in its improvement strategy and the despair and anger expressed by social workers, employers and others at its apparent failure to address these problems.

The user experience of fitness to practise has been poor, with participants describing communication as deficient, and that processes are opaque. This has probably been

exacerbated by staff turnover and frequent case handovers, which have undermined continuity and confidence.

The Secretaries of State for Education and Health and Social Care have received formal letters two years in a row from the PSA about Social Work England's timeliness on fitness to practise. The scope of this review requires me to consider the Children and Social Work Act default power for the Secretary of State. This power enables them to give the regulator a remedial direction if the regulator has defaulted in performing any functions and has not remedied the default. Given the challenges Social Work England has faced and the comparison to other health and care regulators, most of which also struggle on fitness to practise timeliness, I do not feel that an opportunity has been missed to date by declining to use this power. That said, if action in response to the review does not result in appreciable improvements, I suggest that the Secretary of State consider whether remedial directions may be suitable to impose.

Social Work England has now been operating for six years and has received significant support from government to improve the timeliness of fitness to practise processes. I have concluded that historical factors, together with more recent and significant rises in the number of referrals, do not fully explain or justify the persistence of major delays in this core regulatory function. It is to be hoped that the actions which Social Work England is now taking will deliver, at pace, the improvements needed for better outcomes, particularly in relation to the timeliness of decisions.

It would be premature to express full confidence about whether the current approach and plans will drive the scale of change required across different elements of the fitness to practise system. I have not yet seen sufficient and substantive evidence demonstrating that all necessary ingredients are in place. This includes staffing capacity and capability, organisational culture and resources. The scale and nature of necessary improvements to deliver on acceptable timeliness for the fitness to practise system underlines the vital need for strong strategic and operational oversight and system co-ordination. It will be for Social Work England's leadership to communicate clearly both internally and externally its strategy for what, how and when improvements will be delivered (leadership and governance is discussed further in the next chapter).

The conditions for success needed to drive and deliver improvement include thorough consideration of business processes, clarity about funding and workforce resource requirements resulting from such business process work, and high-quality internal and external communication. Most critically there must be a strong performance management culture, with clarity about measures for success, continued evaluation of impact, and senior leaders visibly challenging and driving performance.

Recommendations for action

We cannot under-estimate the undoubted costs to people making complaints, to registrants, to employers, to Social Work England and to the public purse if fitness to practise problems are not robustly tackled.

I welcome the actions that Social Work England is now planning to take to address problems at different stages of the fitness to practise process. It is vital that the proposed actions are brought together to create a coherent and credible end-to-end strategic improvement plan that can be clearly communicated to all key stakeholders. This should include revised forecasts and key performance indicators on timeliness and methods to

track progress, and recalibrate at pace where needed. Importantly, such an end-to-end strategy should not be viewed as a one-off improvement exercise, but as an ongoing strategic framework to guide continuous performance improvement, planning and decision-making.

This must be Social Work England's top priority. I recommend that there should be robust and strong external challenge and scrutiny of the delivery of its strategic plan. This will help give key stakeholders a fair and good understanding about what Social Work England is doing to deliver the much-enhanced performance that is so urgently required. This does not mean that current improvement should be put on hold: the opposite is in fact the case. Agreed actions must be implemented with due pace while work on the proposed end-to-end strategic improvement plan is progressed. This must be paired with strong internal challenge and performance management processes that drive organisational improvement and incentivise excellence.

Social Work England will need to work with the PSA, government and other health and care professional regulators to consider approaches to referrals, and particularly those which might be resolved differently outside of fitness to practise processes. Interestingly, Social Work England's work on this highlights that closure rates are rising in cases relating to referrals from members of the public, suggesting that the increase in referrals is not being driven by a similar increase in concerns that require further regulatory action.

Social Work England must create an improved communications strategy for fitness to practise so that engagement with all participants in the fitness to practise process is greatly strengthened. Social workers under investigation and those who have made referrals should receive regular, predictable updates, be told what information is required of them, and be asked only once for pieces of evidence wherever possible.

Given evidence that fitness to practise timeliness is a shared problem across most, if not all, regulators, Social Work England will want to continue its work with peer organisations to learn from different approaches. There is also a need to enhance internal case management systems so that, where cases are transferred due to staff absence or turnover, there is continuity of service, reducing duplication and frustration caused by repeated requests for information.

It must also do far more to explain its performance, processes and improvement strategy, communicating clearly its resolve and commitment to secure materially better outcomes. This should include information about its work addressing the over-representation of those specific groups who experience worsening disparities as they progress through the fitness to practise process. Social Work England should use data to identify and highlight some of these disparities to support employers to understand and take responsibility for disparities in fitness to practise referrals which may originate within their organisations and areas. Social Work England must also continue to examine why disparities persist and sometimes worsen after referral.

Recommendations

8. Social Work England should deliver, within six months, a comprehensive, end-to-end strategic improvement plan for fitness to practise. This should include revised forecasts and key performance indicators on timeliness and methods to track progress and recalibrate at pace where needed. Social Work England should work with a relevant independent expert to provide effective challenge and scrutiny to this process and assurance of delivery improvements.
9. Government should take the next available opportunity to legislate to improve fitness to practise, including:
 - prioritising amending the Family Procedure Rules 2010 and/or the associated Practice Directions, to enable information relating to private family court proceedings to be lawfully shared with Social Work England in a manner which enables its lawful use in fitness to practise proceedings
 - updating Social Work England's powers on accepted disposals to enable them to impose an accepted disposal where a social worker has not engaged at all with the process
 - enabling the PSA to request that a case examiner decision be revised
 - limiting the upper time a social worker can be suspended to two years

This should also include any further legislative change identified by the improvement plan set out in Recommendation 8.

10. Government should work with the PSA, Social Work England and health and care professional regulators to consider what changes are needed to support appropriate referrals, particularly when other avenues have not been exhausted.
11. Social Work England should develop a refreshed communications strategy focused on:
 - all registrants – ensuring effective and clear communication with registrants and applicants
 - fitness to practise – ensuring those under investigation, those who have made referrals and witnesses receive regular updates on their cases, employers are clear what is required of them, and evidence-gathering with them is streamlined
 - the wider system – improving transparency about performance, processes and the organisation's improvement strategy
12. Social Work England should increase visibility of the action it is already taking on equalities, including by publishing more substantive and detailed data on equalities aspects of regulation and encouraging employers to take action based on the data.
13. Social Work England should commission research or evaluation on fitness to practise to explore and address concerns about differential impacts on groups with particular characteristics.

Chapter 4 – Ensuring public confidence in the profession

Key points

- Social Work England’s scope and purpose should be clarified to address misconceptions that their role extends to professional development and advocacy.
- Social Work England’s board and leadership have played a pivotal role in establishing a new regulator in the face of significant challenges. The board and leadership now must focus on sustained improvement, particularly on fitness to practise, where renewed grip is needed. Government should support this by considering the expertise on the board when making future recruitment decisions.
- Communications from Social Work England are not sufficiently strong in articulating the regulators improvement strategy and activity at a strategic level, nor are they consistently clear, compassionate, and sensitive at an individual level. The regulator should prioritise improving both.
- The sector must work together to strengthen and embed the employer role with regards to professional regulation, to support its effective delivery.
- Social Work England can do more to improve the quality of the rich data it holds, enabling it and – in the longer term – government to benefit from the insight this provides on the workforce and regulatory activity that will support improved operations and policy.
- Government should support Social Work England to deliver through improved oversight and clearer strategic direction by implementing joint DfE and DHSC oversight, with enhanced senior official and ministerial engagement.
- A strategic focus on improvement must be supported by appropriate consideration of resources and financial management, which government should support Social Work England to achieve.

The primary purpose of any professional regulator is protection of the public. This involves, among other things, ensuring that the public can have confidence that people working as social workers are operating to the very best professional standards. Securing public confidence is therefore a central objective for Social Work England that is threaded through all its regulatory functions, guiding and supporting how these are delivered.

This chapter considers a range of critical drivers of Social Work England’s role in promoting public confidence in the profession, including about organisational scope, leadership and governance, the role of employers, data, organisational status and financial efficiency. Securing public confidence requires Social Work England to be well governed, well led and clearly focused. It requires that the organisation has a clear sense of purpose, is transparent in its decision-making and uses its powers carefully and appropriately. It

also means that the organisation should use its resources in the most efficient and effective way to deliver on its roles and responsibilities.

Organisational scope and purpose

The purpose of Social Work England as set out in the Children and Social Work Act 2017 is protection of the public. There was considerable debate on how this was positioned and what it might entail, which I have summarised in Annex C. In pursuing this overarching objective, Social Work England should work to:

- protect, promote and maintain the health, safety and wellbeing of the public
- promote and maintain public confidence in social workers in England
- promote and maintain proper professional standards for social workers in England

What is going well?

Since its establishment in late 2019, Social Work England has worked effectively to establish necessary systems and processes to discharge its functions as set out in the Children and Social Work Act 2017. These reflect the core elements of a professional regulator, as well as:

- bespoke and innovative systems and processes to deliver its functions, including early resolution of fitness to practise cases, noted above
- a model of regional engagement leads to work with employers on a regional basis and build engagement with regulation and understanding of scope and purpose

Our contact with a wide range of stakeholders indicated that, while detailed understanding about the scope and purpose of Social Work England is somewhat mixed, social workers are generally aware of the regulator and its broad role. This in itself is an important achievement for a profession which has had several changes to both the regulating body and model in the last 15 years.

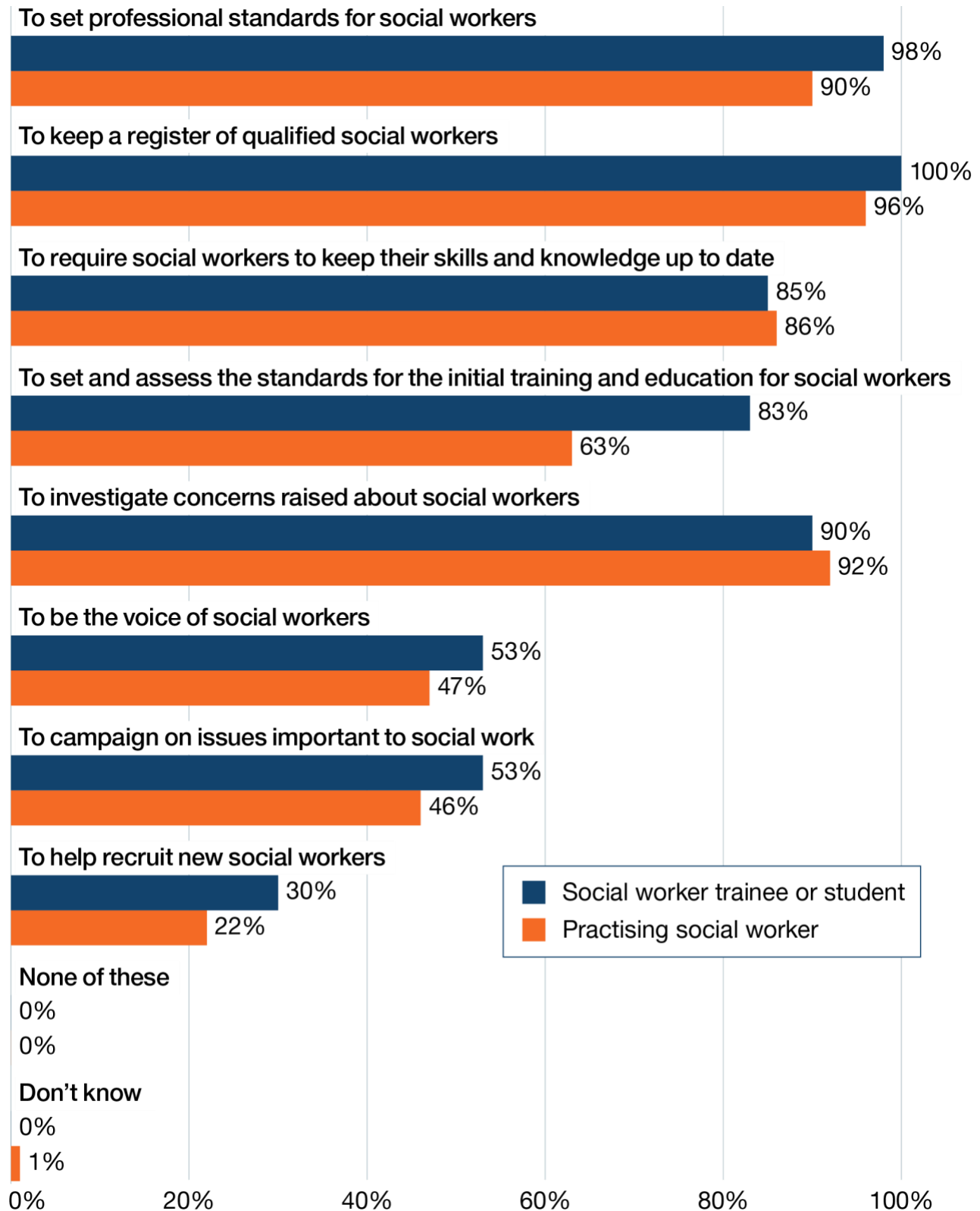
What needs to improve?

Although social workers are aware of Social Work England's broad role, it is abundantly clear from wider engagement with stakeholders that there is not yet a consistent or widely acknowledged clear understanding of the scope and purpose of Social Work England as a professional regulator, or indeed that there is a shared vision for what its role should be. Two factors have contributed to the range of views among social workers about what Social Work England is and should be there to do.

First, the three major organisational changes in regulation in the past 15 or so years, discussed in Annex C, have not been accompanied by a sufficiently strong and coherent narrative about the purpose of regulation nor the drivers behind each shift. Second, the strong feeling within some parts of the sector that there is a glaring absence of an organisation with the authority to provide a voice for and about social work has, albeit inadvertently, led to some social workers looking to Social Work England as the body best placed to do this.

Our call for evidence responses show that, notwithstanding generally good awareness of Social Work England and its core functions, there remains confusion about its precise remit, with some thinking that it does or should extend beyond these core functions.

Figure 17: Responses to call for evidence question “Which of the following do you think are responsibilities of Social Work England?”



It is perhaps unsurprising, given confusion among social workers about the regulator's role and its visible challenges in delivering fitness to practise functions, that reported confidence in the regulator among practising social workers was low. 58% of social worker respondents to the call for evidence and 63% of social work manager respondents reported being 'not confident at all' in Social Work England. Students were more positive: 30% reported no confidence, while 20% described themselves as very or extremely confident.

Social Work England's own 2024 survey of 2,120 social workers found higher levels of confidence in the organisation, with over 40% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that Social Work England was an effective regulator, 35% responding neutrally, and 25% strongly disagreeing. However, in both the evidence for this review and that gathered by Social Work England, confidence is lower than desirable.⁵⁶

There were mixed views about what Social Work England's remit should be. Some social workers and some within Social Work England felt the regulator could appropriately expand into professional development, given that this could align with the public confidence role. We discerned a view among some social worker practitioners and managers that the regulator should play a wider advocacy role, with some linking this to the fees they pay and related wish for a stronger 'offer' from Social Work England. These perspectives highlight continued confusion and misunderstanding about the purpose of regulation (and therefore the reason for paying fees).

In contrast, others expressed a strong view that Social Work England should focus sharply on its core functions to promote clarity of purpose and to ensure that performance improvements in core functions are prioritised. To paraphrase what one social worker with experience of regulatory processes told the review, public confidence will be won through swift and effective action on poor practice by Social Work England and employers.

Taken together, it is clear that there are tensions in the expectations of Social Work England. Such ambiguity extends to government, which has established Social Work England for core regulation functions but also commissioned and funded the regulator to deliver 'Change the Script'.⁵⁷ This is a national public perception campaign which seeks to illustrate what social workers do to protect, support and empower people to improve their life chances. While this is valuable work, it is an example of work outside core regulation activities that may have contributed to and perpetuated sector misunderstanding about Social Work England's role.

Similarly, Social Work England leads Social Work Week. This is a national initiative, co-produced with the sector and those with lived experience, to address key practice themes affecting social workers. This work garnered mixed views. Some social workers valued this offer, but others were either unaware of it or unclear on why this was delivered through the regulator. It is worth noting, in this context, that similar initiatives in wider health and care professions are not regulator-led.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Social Work England, 'Social worker survey results 2024', www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/publications/social-worker-survey-results-2024.

⁵⁷ Social Work England, 'Change the Script', www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/change-the-script.

⁵⁸ Royal College of Nursing, 'International Nurses Day', www.rcn.org.uk/Get-Involved/Campaign-with-us/International-Nurses-Day. NHS England, 'Allied Health Professions (AHPs) Day', www.england.nhs.uk/ahp/ahps-day.

These concerns echo well-established views in regulatory literature that when regulators expand into improvement or advocacy activity, there is a risk of diluting focus on core functions.⁵⁹ This can undermine perceptions of independence from the profession they regulate, instead serving the private interests of the profession rather than protecting the public.

It is important to be clear that these initiatives are fairly small scale and that Social Work England remains largely and appropriately focused on core functions. These activities have nonetheless probably contributed to the expectations and appetite of some for the organisation to have a broader role.

People with lived experience of social work also reported confusion about Social Work England's role, particularly in relation to local authorities and inspectorates. Many said they were not aware of Social Work England and did not know where to raise concerns. This suggests a gap in public understanding about the regulator's work.

Recommendations for action

The fact that Social Work England, government and the sector lack a shared and settled view of Social Work England's role is problematic. It has contributed to widespread misunderstanding among social workers about the regulator's role. There can be no doubt about the strong wish of some professionals to have an organisation that can provide a strong and credible professional voice for social work. This is understandable given that social work, and especially statutory child and family work, has long attracted considerable public and media attention.

However, the most effective and appropriate way for a regulator to build confidence in a profession is not through advocacy, but rather through setting and enforcing clear standards

Social Work England can and should contribute to service or professional improvement, but it should do so through collecting and publishing insights derived from its regulatory activity. Such insights can then support improvement, workforce planning and policy development. Responsibility for leading these functions should sit mainly with employers, government, education providers and professional bodies.

The absence of one – and arguably two – elements of the traditional professional 'holy trinity' (regulator, professional body and professional association) has probably contributed to a blurring of understanding about Social Work England's purpose. Continuous organisational changes in social work's infrastructure have led to expectations of the regulator's role sometimes drifting into wanting it to fill functional gaps. This has been detrimental to effective regulation and contributed to a not-yet mature and shared understanding within social work about what it means to be a regulated profession.

It is vital that steps are taken to resolve these ambiguities and ensure that all those involved in social work operate with a shared understanding about Social Work England's mandate and functions. In broad terms, these are to deliver:

⁵⁹ Koop, C., 'Independence and the boundaries between regulators and regulatees', CARR Discussion Paper 81, London School of Economics (2011), www.lse.ac.uk/accounting/assets/CARR/documents/Regulatory-Agencies-under-Challenge/CARR-DP81-Christel-Koop.pdf.

- an accurate and transparent register, including clear and proportionate expectations for CPD requirements and processes
- clear ETS with monitoring and reporting against them
- a fair, proportionate and timely fitness to practise process
- reflection through the use of data and insight from core regulatory functions to assess performance
- a stable regulatory system capable of being sustained over time without repeated structural upheaval

If government determines that Social Work England should have an improvement remit, then it must make that clear and resource it appropriately. This is not my recommended approach.

Clarification of Social Work England's role and mandate also inevitably brings into sharper relief the absence of a professional body for social work. This gap was referenced by many stakeholders, recognising that previous attempts to establish such a body were unsuccessful – most notably the short-lived College of Social Work (for which I was the Chief Executive for two years up to its closure). There remains a risk that Social Work England will continue to be drawn into activity beyond its regulatory role unless this absence is addressed. It is therefore important that a clear position is set out about the future organisational arrangements for professional development and voice. Potential solutions need to be explored in parallel with the proposed reforms.

Recommendation

14. Government should clarify the role of Social Work England as focused on core regulatory functions. This does not preclude Social Work England using its unique position to support improvement through the provision of data and intelligence, but it should not carry out improvement or advocacy activities.

Governance and leadership

Non-executive members (including the Chair) are appointed to the Social Work England board via the public appointments process.⁶⁰ The board provides overall leadership and strategic direction for Social Work England. It is responsible for setting its strategy and overseeing its delivery. This includes providing oversight of the organisation's execution of its statutory duties and making sure that it operates effectively and transparently.

What is going well?

The current leadership has played a pivotal role in the demanding job of establishing Social Work England as a new regulator and steering it through an exceptionally challenging early period. This included managing the handover of functions from the previous regulator, addressing inherited legacy cases, and ensuring operations during the

⁶⁰ Cabinet Office, 'Public appointments' (2022), www.gov.uk/guidance/public-appointments.

COVID-19 pandemic. This created strong foundations for the new organisation and ensured that core activity continued during a period of considerable uncertainty.

It is worth noting that the public appointments process is robust and provides an open route to board member recruitment. The current board has a valuable range of expertise and experience, and all members share a strong commitment to improving its effectiveness and credibility. This has not been an easy task given that the organisation was newly established and that, for one reason or another, two previous social work regulators had not succeeded.

Significant progress has been made to strengthen governance arrangements, particularly in terms of the board's maturity and effectiveness. Among other things, board expertise has been enhanced and the quality of the reports it receives has substantially improved. Social Work England recognises its status as a relatively young regulator and sought to improve continuously its work. It has been transparent and open with the review team, regarding this review as an opportunity for improving how it operates.

The board and senior leaders are grounded in knowledge and appreciation of the realities and requirements of social work. We heard concerns from some social workers that Social Work England is disconnected from the unique demands and challenges of social work as a sector. However, we did not find this to be a reflection of the board's approach. The board's appreciation of professional realities is in part enabled by having two social workers as members of the board. Additionally, the Chief Executive Officer has a social work background. Three board members bring lived experience of social care. Social Work England has also taken steps to support registrants to build the interest and skills needed for board roles through its involvement in the boardroom apprentice scheme.⁶¹

Finally, and importantly, the review saw clear evidence of a strong and supportive workplace culture. Staff expressed trust in the organisation's leadership and feel well supported to do their work.

What needs to improve?

That the leadership of Social Work England is determined to be a strong and effective regulator is beyond doubt. However, this review has identified four connected challenges in governance and leadership that have, in my view, inhibited its capacity to drive and deliver some of the required changes.

First, stronger strategic drive and oversight need to be brought to tackling areas of manifest challenge, most notably in relation to critical fitness to practise functions. Chapter 3 explained that Social Work England has at different points in time initiated a range of actions to tackle fitness to practise performance problems. The cause and manifestation of these problems are complex and diverse but there has been a somewhat piecemeal and ad hoc approach to improving fitness to practise timeliness. It has been difficult to identify a coherent, end-to-end system improvement strategy. Developing this, with earlier and stronger engagement with external partners (including government as well as other expert partners on regulation and business processes), would have provided a more solid foundation for securing necessary improvements at pace. A more coherent and transparent improvement strategy would also have helped convey a stronger 'story' when

⁶¹ Boardroom Apprentice, 'The Boardroom Apprentice programme (UK)', <https://boardroomapprentice.com/uk>.

communicating with stakeholders (including registrants) about performance challenges and how these are being tackled.

The second – and connected – issue, informed by observing the board and wider leadership, is that leaders need to set high but realistic ambitions about how and where improvements must be secured. The positive and supportive culture should be commended, but a more robust accountability-based approach would encourage open and continuous challenge. The review saw evidence of views in parts of the organisation that fitness to practise problems were seen as largely due to a range of external drivers (including regulatory ‘rules’). This links to our view noted in Chapter 3 that there has perhaps been an implicit acceptance within parts of the organisation and beyond that fitness to practise matters are intrinsically ‘too difficult to solve’ for a single organisation. Therefore, I have a concern that these views may have reduced the collective sense of urgency and organisational confidence to tackle successfully fitness to practise problems.

In contrast, Social Work England’s leadership conveys, both internally and externally, strong confidence and belief that performance will improve because of the measures being implemented. It is of course crucial to convey confidence that problems will be successfully tackled. However, it has not been clear to the review whether there has been the consistent and timely challenge of performance and trend intelligence that is so critical to securing improvements in a function as complex as fitness to practise.

The impact of improvement actions would be considerably strengthened by making sure that there is rigorous internal and external scrutiny of the nature and delivery of improvement plans, aligning them with a visible end-to-end strategic improvement strategy. This should give sustained attention to testing the impact of actions, revising assumptions and amending plans as quickly as possible when indicated.

A third factor relates to the organisation’s risk appetite. Regulatory organisations are often risk averse, possibly necessarily, as a result of their rules and functions. One question for the review is whether, in some operational areas, Social Work England could have been braver and more proactive in securing changes. For example, it has been clear for some time that most referrals come from the public and over 95% result in no action. However, it is only this year that plans have been developed to manage these referrals differently, without compromising the right of any member of the public to make a complaint.

Finally, while those working within the organisation experienced a very supportive working environment, we received a striking number of examples of communications with the sector that have been seen to be lacking empathy, due sensitivity and what might be described as ‘the human factor’. We were given examples of social workers informing Social Work England that they were finding delays on restoration to the register stressful, for the regulator then to open a fitness to practise case in relation to their mental health. On most visits, at least one newly-qualified social worker provided an example of heavy-handed communications during their application process to the register over misuse of title, when they mistakenly referred to themselves as ‘trainee social worker’ or similar. While such mistakes must of course be caught and investigated to confirm no unlawful practice, the tone of communications was reported to be intimidating – giving an unfortunate first impression of the regulator.

Some of these examples are supported by evidence of emails with the regulator that can be seen to indicate a lack of understanding and insight into the individual circumstances of registrants. It is of course absolutely right and necessary for a professional regulator to

take robust action to enforce standards, but communication with registrants in such circumstances must also be compassionate.

Recommendations for action

Social Work England has moved on from its very demanding set-up phase and is now operating in a more stable context that has brought new demands and needs, requiring action by Social Work England and government. Social Work England must now concentrate on securing sustained improvements, especially in its fitness to practise function. This must be the organisation's top priority – and the top priority of government in relation to its role in social work regulation. This will involve strengthening scrutiny, focusing clearly on outcomes, and ensuring that the organisation has the necessary leadership capacity, expertise and resources to deliver high-quality regulatory performance.

The board intends to commission another independent board evaluation in this financial year. This is in line with best practice and will provide leaders with a clear understanding of the board's current strengths and areas for development.⁶²

There will also be enhanced scrutiny of governance across all regulators from the PSA. New PSA standards include stronger scrutiny of the governance of UK-wide health and care professional regulators, reflecting the importance of organisational leadership, risk management and effective safeguards in protecting patients and the public.⁶³ This should be helpful to Social Work England. Consistent with this, proposed changes to the GMC's regulatory framework that are currently out for consultation include a new power to require information sharing with the PSA.⁶⁴ This power will support the PSA in exercising its oversight. At the next legislative opportunity, this power for the PSA to require information should be extended to Social Work England, to ensure that the PSA can provide effective external scrutiny and align Social Work England's policy and practice with wider regulatory reform.

The board, with DfE, could also benefit from reviewing what expertise and experience is now required to oversee a complex and maturing regulator. Specific attention should be given to enabling the board to provide high challenge and high support in its oversight of the delivery of the strategy for tackling the organisation's most significant challenge – delays in fitness to practise cases.

The current composition of the board has successfully struck the necessary balance between bringing independence and focus on public protection while being grounded in the realities of the profession it regulates. Action should be taken to maintain this once the

⁶² HM Treasury and Cabinet Office, 'Corporate governance in central government departments: code of good practice' (2017), page 23, www.gov.uk/government/publications/corporate-governance-code-for-central-government-departments-2017. Social Work England, 'Annual report and accounts 2023 to 2024' (2024), page 69, www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/v41jecl1/swe-report-23_24-final.pdf.

⁶³ Professional Standards, Authority, 'Standards for Regulators and Accredited Registers (2026)', www.professionalstandards.org.uk/publications/standards-regulators-and-accredited-registers-2026.

⁶⁴ Department of Health and Social Care, 'Reforming the General Medical Council legislative framework – consultation document' (2026), www.gov.uk/government/consultations/reforming-the-general-medical-council-legislative-framework/reforming-the-general-medical-council-legislative-framework-consultation-document.

term of those with relevant expertise ends. I therefore recommend that the framework document is amended to explicitly require social work expertise at board level.

The board and senior leaders will want to consider how to organise the delivery of Social Work England's functions in order to meet the challenges set out in the review. It will also want to reflect on how best to create the high ambition, high challenge and high support organisational culture that is a pre-requisite to delivering changes and improvements.

Finally, Social Work England must significantly improve how it communicates with its stakeholders, and especially with registrants and employers. Attention to the tone of all its communications is particularly crucial. Social Work England recognises that this is an area of priority. It also needs to tell a clear and compelling story about its role and work so that registrants better understand its purpose, priorities and performance. This is absolutely critical to managing expectations about what it does (and what it does not do).

Recommendations

15. Government should work with Social Work England to support effective and strong succession planning and recruitment to the board. This should include early consideration about required expertise, including in change management, particularly in regulation, as well as codifying the requirement to have appropriate social work expertise within its membership in the framework document.
16. Government should introduce a new power for the PSA to require information to support their oversight and scrutiny functions.

Employer role

The majority of social workers in England are employed by local authorities. However, there are a range of other employers, and most notably the NHS (where increasing numbers of social workers are employed), CAFCASS (the largest single employer of social workers), and the charity and voluntary sector (where social workers are employed in diverse contexts).

Employers play a critical and complementary leadership role in creating the conditions in which social workers can practise in accordance with Social Work England's professional standards. This includes making sure that they have effective supervision, manageable workloads and that their professional development is fostered and supported. Employers also play a role in providing the high-quality placements that are so crucial in supporting and gatekeeping entry to the profession.

Finally, employers engage with Social Work England when there are fitness to practise concerns about members of their workforce. This may be by making direct referrals or by engaging with the regulator about staff who have been referred by someone else. In all these roles, employers must work effectively with the regulator and other organisations to protect the public.

What is going well?

It was clear from our engagement with the sector that most employers have local strategies for supporting their social worker workforce, taking action where professional standards are not being met and by offering support to prospective social workers during training. Employers also execute important roles in helping social workers to complete requirements for renewal, including completing the regulator's CPD requirements.

We were impressed by the range of local models for delivering CPD so that social workers have access to high-quality professional development opportunities. We met dedicated workforce teams who facilitate such learning and development and who are often involved in co-ordinating placements and the work of practice educators.

What needs to improve?

There is uneven engagement by employers with the regulatory system despite their role in this being so critical to their social worker workforces. I acknowledge the frustration expressed by a significant number of employers about aspects of the work of Social Work England, but this should not detract from the undoubted need to make sure that employers are well engaged with regulator matters affecting their workforce. There are several areas where better engagement by employers is warranted.

First, as noted in Chapter 2, employers have a responsibility to ensure that good-quality practice placements and practice educators are available for all initial qualifying training routes. Second, in terms of registration – where employers have no formal role – employers must make sure that they are not inadvertently undermining protection of title through a lack of understanding of what this means. We heard evidence of employers employing newly-qualified graduates who had not yet registered as 'trainee social workers' or similar, despite this not being lawful. Third, Social Work England reported to us that employer engagement in fitness to practise is highly variable. While many employers are knowledgeable, supportive and prompt in their responses, others make inappropriate referrals, respond slowly to information requests and can be seen to 'obstruct' investigations.

Finally, the review also learned about local authority employers' concern about agencies supplying 'agency' social workers. Some local authorities spoke of their lack of confidence that such agencies would consistently act on concerns raised about a social worker's practice. Concerns were expressed too about the limited expertise in these agencies, which could prevent them from identifying and acting on matters requiring referral.

Recommendations for action

Greater clarity is needed on the vital role that employers play in different aspects of the regulation of social work. This will yield benefits for employers, for social workers and importantly for those needing social work services.

The Local Government Association has established standards for social work employers on behalf of the sector, supported by a self-assessment tool. These standards are voluntary.

I recommend that the Local Government Association refresh and strengthen its employer standards, informed by the issues identified by this review. This refresh should place greater focus on employers' responsibilities for placement availability and quality, CPD provision and support, and timely and effective engagement with the fitness to practise

process. Employers should be expected to commit formally to these standards, and they should be actively promoted and embedded across the sector. Relevant government departments will need to consider how they should best support the delivery of these standards.

Finally, principal social workers, as the lead professional voice at a local level, are critical to driving, with other senior leaders, many of the changes proposed by this review. While principal social workers carry out their roles in different ways and contexts, their professional leadership responsibilities position them well to strengthen understanding about what it means to be a regulated professional, to promote high standards and make sure that CPD is available and meaningful.

Recommendation

17. Government should work with the Local Government Association and wider sector to strengthen and embed the employer standards, with a focus on employers' role in regulation.

Data and analytics

Under The Social Workers Regulations 2018, Social Work England has powers to collect and publish information in relation to the exercise of their statutory functions. It also has a duty under the 2017 Act to provide information to government that is requested, subject to the general restrictions on sharing data under wider legislation on this point.

Social Work England currently collect much of their data through annual registration, where information is collected on all individuals applying to join the register, a subset of which is published on the public register. Social Work England also routinely publishes aggregated and anonymised data on core regulatory functions. This includes data on the workforce, registration, renewals, CPD and fitness to practise cases. It also carries out ad hoc analysis of specific issues such as about the demographics of those referred to fitness to practise.

What is going well?

As the custodians of the register of social workers, Social Work England holds extensive data on all registered social workers in England. This includes details about education, ethnicity, age and gender, as well as personal information that may impact on suitability to practice (for example, about criminal convictions or health). Social Work England operates these functions in accordance with the 2017 Act and associated regulations, as well as other rules about data protection and data sharing.

Social Work England has rightly identified and is acting on the importance of expanding and improving the data that it collects and how this is used. As a relatively young regulator, it is entirely appropriate that this activity should be taking place now, learning from its first years in operation. It has taken steps to understand the challenges faced and to develop plans to address them, including a digital, data and technology review. This sets out a range of actions, including improving data governance, strengthening data architecture, and enhancing internal reporting on areas such as key operational functions and finance.

Social Work England has conducted early work on how emerging technologies, such as AI and machine learning, could support its work safely and ethically. This has involved exploring potential uses and how these might be tested and applied. Used appropriately, such tools could enhance key processes, recognising that any such use would need to be underpinned by strong data governance, transparency and clear ethical safeguards, particularly given the sensitive nature of Social Work England's operations and data.

What needs to improve?

The government's June 2016 policy statement outlined its initial goals of a bespoke regulator as including "making effective use of workforce-related data, to offer evidence and insight to inform workforce planning by both local and central Government".⁶⁵ It is my view that, with the right safeguards in place, including those provided by wider legislation on data protection, the effective delivery of a regulator's core functions can sit alongside the strategic use of its data to support workforce planning and other objectives without negatively impacting on its core purpose or relationship with registrants. It is neither Social Work England's role or their wish to provide policy commentary or to become directly involved in policy development. They can nonetheless play an appropriate role in presenting reliable data and analysis to support those responsible for policy-making.

A necessary first step to achieve this will be to improve the rich data Social Work England holds about the sector and which they have rightly recognised as an area to change and improve. Three areas require attention.

First, significant data cleaning is required given concerns about data quality and validation. A large number of free text fields are used when social workers submit information, leading to inconsistent entries and limited standardisation. I was struck, while undertaking this review, by the challenges Social Work England sometimes faced in providing robust and complete data to support analysis. This would indicate issues about data quality. Social Work England is aware of this, has provided helpful explanations and commentaries, and advised that they have plans to address these issues. However, there are challenges in prioritising and identifying the resources required. It also lacks data dictionaries – centralised reference documents or repositories that define and describe the organisation's data – and collection guidance which would improve consistency and use of data.

Second, there are gaps in the data collected. For example, they do not directly ask individuals raising fitness to practise concerns about their relationship to the registrants that they are referring – that is, in terms of whether they are parents, adult service users, the children or carers of people receiving support from a social worker, or someone else.

Third, the review heard from those in government of a strong desire for a greater level of data sharing than Social Work England currently provides, with a view to better supporting policy and workforce planning, and as envisaged by the 2016 statement on the case for a sector specific regulator.

Social Work England's hesitance about expanding data collection and sharing is underpinned by two key issues. First, there is a lack of a clear legal route for data sharing with DfE on a wider scale, noting that they are required to collect data for the discharge of

⁶⁵ Department for Education and Department of Health, 'Regulating Social Workers: Policy Statement (June 2016)', https://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2016-0569/Policy_Statement_Social_Work_Regulation_June_2016.pdf, p. 15.

their functions rather than wider purposes. Secondly, Social Work England also cites data quality as a barrier to sharing, noting that almost all data is collected on the basis of self-declaration, with no legal powers or resources to validate this so data be safely used by others.

Recommendations for action

One of the founding aspirations for Social Work England was that it should create richer, more social work-specific data. An important first step to this being realised is undertaking work to improve data quality and completeness through better collection and validation. For example, there could be reductions in the amount of free text fields or limiting options where applicable. The review recommends that existing efforts to strengthen data collection and its quality should be prioritised in Social Work England's future business plan.

There are a range of areas where expanded data collection could provide valuable insights into regulatory functions. For example, it would be useful to routinely capture data from fitness to practise processes about registrants' education and training backgrounds, whether they have had legal or professional representation during proceedings, and the relationship between the person raising a concern and the registrant. Such data would support Social Work England's wider regulatory functions and help identify areas where improvements may be required.

It is my view that, once data quality and completeness are improved, there should be good alignment between the scope and purpose of Social Work England as a regulator and their ability to work with government to agree on ways of expanding and enhancing data sharing that would comply with data protection law. There would need to be appropriate safeguards in place to ensure that highly personal data is shared for appropriate purposes and that that this is clear to registrants when they provide such data.

Recommendations

18. Social Work England should prioritise improvements in data collection, data governance and data validation set out in their strategy.
19. Social Work England should extend data collection and analysis relating to fitness to practise proceedings. This should include collecting additional consistent data on those referred, including:
 - whether individuals have legal or professional representation
 - educational and training background
 - the relationship of the complainant to the registrant

Status and oversight

The 2017 Act established that Social Work England would operate as a non-departmental public body operating at arm's length from government. As an arm's length body (ALB), it has several layers of governance:

- it is accountable to government through the sponsor department (DfE), with the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury providing system-wide governance and financial controls rather than direct operational oversight
- it is subject to external scrutiny from the PSA
- it has operational independence in regulatory decisions led by Social Work England's Chief Executive, and overseen by the board

Social Work England publishes the framework document that sets out the broad framework within which the organisation operates.⁶⁶ The framework was agreed by DfE and DHSC in accordance with HM Treasury's Managing Public Money handbook.

The PSA is the independent body that oversees regulation and registration in health and social care, including social work. Social Work England is subject to annual review from the PSA, where it is assessed against defined standards.⁶⁷ In addition, the PSA reviews every relevant decision made by the regulator's final fitness to practise panels.

The ALB model is standard for regulators that need independence from government while remaining publicly accountable and funded, such as the Care Quality Commission, Health and Safety Executive, Financial Conduct Authority and social work regulators in devolved administrations of the UK. However, it is unique in UK-wide health and care professional regulation where other regulators are independent charities and do not receive government funding.

What is going well?

The status of Social Work England as an ALB is entirely appropriate, particularly given that full independence would require significantly higher fees for social workers which, as a result of government funding, remain lower than other PSA-regulated professions.⁶⁸ The ALB structure provides a sensible balance between the requirements for independence, public accountability and affordability for the profession.

The review heard only very limited concern about the model of governance for Social Work England. This is important given concerns articulated during the passage of the Act that

⁶⁶ Social Work England, 'Social Work England framework document' (2022), www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/publications/social-work-england-framework-document.

⁶⁷ Professional Standards Authority, 'Standards for regulators and accredited registers 2026' (2026), www.professionalstandards.org.uk/publications/standards-regulators-and-accredited-registers-2026.

⁶⁸ Professional Standards Authority, 'Annual report and accounts 2024 to 2025' (2025), page 26, Table 6, www.professionalstandards.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/PSA%20Annual%20Report%20and%20Accounts%202024-25%20%28accessible%29.pdf.

closeness to government could hamper independence.⁶⁹ A small number of people with whom I spoke felt that this structure, and particularly sponsorship by DfE, has resulted in a stronger focus on children's and public sector social workers to the detriment of adult social workers and those working in the non-statutory sector. However, most social workers with whom I spoke did not see the regulator's status as presenting any material challenges or conflicts.

Sponsorship

As Social Work England is an ALB with grant funding from government, it has a sponsorship relationship with DfE, who holds this function on behalf of government. The purpose of this relationship is twofold. First, it is to ensure the organisation is appropriately supported in delivering its statutory functions (including, for example, providing additional funding to address fitness to practise backlogs). Second, it is to provide effective challenge and oversight on how these functions are delivered.

What is going well?

A good working relationship has been developed between government and Social Work England. The sponsorship arrangement in place is offering good day-to-day support for Social Work England and has escalated concerns appropriately, resulting in productive discussions enabling resolution, including the agreement of additional funding to support it to address the hearings backlog.

The PSA reported no concerns with Social Work England's ALB status or sponsorship. It considered DfE's role in leading board appointments to be an adequate safeguard.

What needs to improve?

There are complexities in how the ALB model operates because the work of Social Work England spans two government departments (DfE and DHSC), although sponsorship sits with DfE. While multi-departmental oversight is entirely appropriate given the distinct policy responsibilities for children's and adults' social work, the lack of joint sponsorship creates challenge for the regulator in that DfE is perceived to be closely and consistently engaged, whereas DHSC plays a more limited role. This imbalance may contribute, or be seen to contribute, to a stronger focus on children's social work by the regulator.

I was advised of how resourcing and capacity differs between departments. DHSC has broad and very significant responsibilities across the NHS and wider adult social care system which can result in proportionately less focus on the regulation and policy related to the high-impact, but comparatively small, professional workforce of social workers.

I saw some evidence that effective government sponsorship has been constrained by limitations in the timeliness and depth of information available to relevant teams. Going forward, there needs to be strong and enhanced senior oversight to create and ensure the necessary balance between support and challenge of the regulator, and most particularly in terms of the imperative of improving timeliness in fitness to practise.

⁶⁹ House of Lords, 'Hansard, Children and Social Work Bill [HL]', 13 July 2016, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2016-07-13/debates/20C05A33-A990-4251-A94A-83E91E7C2343/details>.

Recommendations for action

As Social Work England continues to improve delivery of its core functions, enhanced and clearer accountability is required in the relationship between the regulator and government. This will require joint oversight, supported by more involvement from senior leaders and ministers across both departments. This will help support Social Work England to be clear about government's expectations, to receive constructive challenge, and to enable and have good oversight of necessary improvements.

There needs to be careful consideration about the focus and resourcing of social work matters within DHSC. Social workers play a vital role in enabling adults to live independently, with clear benefits for both personal wellbeing and demand on wider services, including the NHS. A clearer strategic commitment to social work within DHSC would strengthen adult social care policy, improve outcomes for individuals and support longer-term system resilience.

Recommendation

20. Government should strengthen sponsorship arrangements through better joint working across DfE and DHSC, with clearer strategic direction set through joint ministerial oversight. This should be complemented by greater senior official involvement to reinforce accountability, to support consistent strategic alignment, and to ensure Social Work England has clear expectations from government.

Financial model and efficiency

As an ALB of government, Social Work England is funded through a combination of fees and grant-in-aid (via DfE). This funding model is different to other UK-wide health and care professional regulators. Other regulators, such as the GMC and NMC, are independent and fully fee-funded. These organisations have much larger registrant bases and charge higher fees. Social Work England, with a smaller base and lower fees, cannot rely on fee income alone without significant increases and therefore receives government funding.

Grant-in-aid funding operates as part of an overall agreed financial envelope, meaning that changes in fee income can influence the level of departmental funding required. Social Work England cannot hold reserves and must return any unspent budget in line with grant-in-aid funding rules and HM Treasury spending controls. This is a standard process across government grant-in-aid agreements.

As an ALB, Social Work England's annual report and accounts are subject to independent external audit by the National Audit Office, providing formal financial assurance and accountability to Parliament. This statutory audit function is the established mechanism for financial oversight. This review complements that function by offering broader commentary and insight drawn from its scope and evidence. Social Work England's most recent audit took place in June, ahead of final accounts being published in July.

What is going well?

There is good evidence that Social Work England is generally operating efficiently as compared to other health and care professional regulators. Comparing regulators is nonetheless inherently difficult because of differences in regulatory models and operating

contexts. I have also necessarily compared slightly different time periods, due to differences in reporting processes. That said, the review has noted that at £191.80 per registrant, Social Work England expenditure is around the average within the sample group on expenditure per registrant.

Table 1: Regulator register size and financial information

Regulator	Reporting period	Registrants	Expenditure (£million) ⁷⁰	Expenditure per registrant (£)
General Medical Council⁷¹	1 January 2024 to 31 December 2024	393,357	147.07	373.9
Nursing and Midwifery Council⁷²	1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025	853,707	126.2	147.8
Social Work England⁷³	1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025	104,857 ⁷⁴	20.11	191.8
Health and Care Professions Council⁷⁵	1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025	356,104	38.96	109.4
General Optical Council⁷⁶	1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025	34,895	12.83	367.7

Social Work England has taken action to increase efficiency though reducing pressure on hearings through upstream reforms to rules and regulations in 2022. It has also implemented a number of process changes to reduce costs, delivering estimated annual savings of approximately £900,000 without impacting on decision-making quality. It has

⁷⁰ Expenditure data (excluding depreciation, amortisation and impairment) in the most recently published set of accounts for each regulator.

⁷¹ General Medical Council, 'General Medical Council Annual Report 2024', www.gmc-uk.org/about/how-we-work/corporate-strategy-and-plans/annual-reports. To note that GMC currently have additional regulatory responsibilities such as quality assurance of postgraduate training.

⁷² Nursing and Midwifery Council, 'Annual report and accounts 2024 to 2025 and strategic plan 2025 to 2026' (2025), www.nmc.org.uk/globalassets/sitedocuments/annual_reports_and_accounts/2025-annual-report-and-accounts/annual-report-and-accounts-20242025.pdf.

⁷³ Social Work England, 'Social Work England annual report and accounts 2024 to 2025' (2025), <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/687501fb352c290d20dcade8/social-work-england-annual-report-and-accounts-2024-to-2025-web-version.pdf>.

⁷⁴ Social Work England registration numbers are not available in the annual report and accounts 2024 to 2025, and are therefore taken from: Social Work England, '(Observers) Social Work England Board Meeting – 15 May 2026', page 35, www.socialworkengland.org.uk/news/board-papers-15-may-2026.

⁷⁵ Health and Care Professions Council, 'Health and Care Professions Council annual report and accounts 2024 to 2025' (2025), www.hcpc-uk.org/globalassets/resources/reports/hcpc-annual-report/hcpc-annual-report-and-accounts-2024-25.pdf?v=638968047030000000.

⁷⁶ General Optical Council, 'Annual report for the year ended 31 March 2025' (2025) <https://optical.org/static/3acbad72-50ab-466e-bc20cee076091e6c/GOC-ANNUAL-REPORT-2025.pdf>.

reviewed 'back office' functions. Together with changes to regulations, this has delivered one-off savings of around £4.7 million.

The review has noted that, by taking a risk-based approach to the initial legacy cases transferred from HCPC, a significant proportion were concluded without the need to refer them to case examiners, while following the agreed transfer rules from HCPC. I have been advised that this approach avoided potential additional costs of £1.7 million.

There has, particularly in recent years, been much discussion about how government can best support Social Work England with the right resources to improve fitness to practise performance. In its early years, the regulator was provided with additional funding of £7.4 million to address these issues when it became clear the HCPC backlog was both larger and more complex than anticipated. The investment enabled 93% of legacy cases to be closed.

Social Work England has also worked with DfE to identify its resourcing needs. Social Work England identified a resourcing risk in October 2022 due to a growing hearings backlog, partly caused by underestimating case volumes in its original business case. In December 2022, it submitted a proposal to DfE outlining how to reduce the backlog through £900,000 annual efficiencies, service improvements, fee increases (subject to consultation) and additional programme funding. However, while this bid is noted in several corporate papers, no record of this documentation has been located so I am unable to assess the consideration of this and rationale for the outcome not to agree this funding.

DfE has also agreed to support the backlog of cases, particularly at hearings, by investing additional programme funding. For 2025 to 2026, an additional £1.675 million was added. For 2026 to 2027, an additional £5.7 million has been provided. The intention from DfE, subject to business planning and HM Treasury approval, is that additional funding will be provided over the next three financial years.

What needs to improve?

Adequate resourcing is critical to delivering the complex and resource-intensive fitness to practise process. I concur with Social Work England's view that appropriate government funding is essential to improving performance, particularly those cases that progress to the hearing stage. The review has identified two key issues in Social Work England's approach to financial planning.

First, while I do not have access to some of the documentation from earlier cases for additional resource, I have concluded based on the evidence I have seen that the lack of a strategic approach to fitness to practise systems identified elsewhere also constrained their ability to make a compelling case for additional resources from government. The original business case prepared by government in the establishment of Social Work England underestimated both the HCPC legacy cases and the volume of concerns Social Work England would go on to receive. This had been clear since 2020 to 2021. An early end-to-end strategic assessment of business processes, alongside rules and regulations, could have enabled the regulator to make an iron-clad compelling case to government of its resource needs. In the absence of such a strategic approach, it is difficult to conclude that the organisation did all it could to resolve resourcing issues.

However, as I set out above, individual cases for additional funding do appear to have been made in December 2022 and government must accept some responsibility for the

resulting impact when those cases were not agreed. That Social Work England and DfE came together to tackle hearings in 2024 is positive, but I cannot help but conclude that an opportunity to do more earlier was missed.

A second concern relates to the management of government finance cycles. There are challenges of operating within annual funding cycles, often confirmed late in the year and sometimes into the new financial year, with no ability to build up reserves. This late funding has created additional challenges in an already challenging fitness to practise system. Ultimately it has delayed commitment to spend in some areas, and has contributed, alongside unexpected variations in fee income, to underspends in some years.

Recommendations for action

As recommended earlier, an end-to-end strategic improvement plan of the fitness to practise process should be used to clearly articulate where pressures are arising and to inform robust resource and financial planning. This should enable clearer, evidence-based decisions about funding requirements. Given the critical importance of these functions, government should carefully consider how it responds, recognising the need to provide appropriate support to Social Work England at this pivotal point.

Government should do more to provide Social Work England clarity on their funding allocations earlier and support them in managing risk where this is not possible. Cabinet Office guidance notes that ALBs perform best when departments provide clear, timely and stable sponsorship, including predictable funding and clarity on financial delegations.⁷⁷

Equally, I noted that all government departments and ALBs operate with these funding conditions and must adapt processes including, where necessary, taking appropriate risks to ensure delivery of key functions and programmes.

I am recommending that government consider providing Social Work England with indicative funding allocations several months earlier, even if this would need to be subject to final confirmation. This would allow it to improve long-term planning and workforce management and is consistent with Managing Public Money expectations for stable public-body planning. DfE should build these expectations into the annual business-planning cycle. They could also consider letters of comfort where needed to provide some financial certainty.

The government should also consider the use of multi-year grant funding for specific projects. This can enable a plan, for example, to process volumes of fitness to practise cases which would run over a period of time. A multi-year grant would need to be specific about expected tasks and require HM Treasury approval.

Government should also consider providing Social Work England with an explicit risk-tolerance statement setting out the expectations around financial prudence, reserves and commitments. This will help Social Work England to consider risk tolerance and plan to reflect early indicators of funding. Any difference between indicative and actual fundings should result in decisive action from Social Work England on the deliverability of plans, and whether any revisions to planning assumptions are required. This is standard practice

⁷⁷ Cabinet Office, 'Arm's Length Body Sponsorship Code of Good Practice' (2022), www.gov.uk/government/publications/arms-length-body-sponsorship-code-of-good-practice.

for ALB sponsorship and would enable Social Work England to make planning assumptions in the absence of early certainty.

Recommendation

21. Government should consider ways of providing Social Work England earlier and clearer indications of its funding. This could include letters of comfort for its ongoing budget into the next financial year and multi-year grants for specific programmes where appropriate. Government should also include providing Social Work England with an explicit risk-tolerance framework setting out expectations around financial prudence, reserves and forward commitments.

Chapter 5 – Conclusions

This review has taken place at an important moment in the development of social worker regulation in England and for Social Work England itself. At the time of Social Work England's formation, there had been three regulators of social workers in eight years. The moment of its creation came shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic. The early years of the regulator also saw significant challenge in processing a very large number of cases from HCPC. Social work regulation, and Social Work England itself, is now entering a phase where there is a genuine opportunity to become more settled and established, with a more consistent level of performance and a clearer sense of its role and position within the sector.

Evaluating its performance six years on from Social Work England's formation inevitably requires balancing the realities of its formation – including the backdrop of two previous regulators being closed in quick succession, a very high starting caseload and the disruption of a global pandemic – alongside expectations placed on it as a national regulator.

Against this backdrop, Social Work England has made meaningful progress on a number of its core functions. It has established a coherent framework for ETS, developed a clear set of professional standards, and created a fully functioning national register covering a large and diverse workforce. These are important achievements. There is clear evidence that the organisation is maturing, with leadership and staff demonstrating commitment to learning, reflection and continuous improvement.

However, this progress has not been consistent across all areas. The pace of improvement in fitness to practise functions has been too slow. While this reflects a combination of high volumes of referrals, developing models of delivery and wider system pressures, these factors do not fully account for the persistence of delay. The consequences are serious. It undermines the core objective of public protection, erodes confidence among both the public and the profession, and creates uncertainty for those subject to investigation. To date, the response has not demonstrated the level of grip or urgency that the issue warrants and remains the organisation's most significant weakness.

There are grounds for optimism. Social Work England recognises the challenges it faces, and there are some strong foundations on which to build. The organisation must now sharpen its strategic focus, particularly in addressing fitness to practise timeliness. I am therefore strongly recommending this is its first and dominant priority as a result of findings in this report. The work must include full and due focus on what business process changes may be required as well as clearly identifying resource and other gaps. The board must provide effective challenge to ensure the executive team are laser-focused on delivering changes needed. This will require high-quality internal and external communication, and a stronger and effective performance management culture, with senior leaders visibly challenging and driving performance. Everyone must focus relentlessly on delivering an improvement strategy that manifestly enhances regulation outputs for both the public and registrants.

This must be supported by sustained oversight, constructive challenge and appropriate resourcing from government – which should be the first priority of government when responding to this report.

If these conditions are met, then Social Work England will be well placed to strengthen its effectiveness and provide the stable, consistent regulatory presence that has been lacking. Over time, a more consistent and well-functioning regulator can help embed a clear understanding of professional expectations, reinforce standards in practice, and enable the sector – and those it serves – to realise the full benefits of effective regulation.

Annex A: Review terms of reference

Background

Social workers are at the heart of our care and health system, working with a range of different agencies, to ensure individuals get the support they need. As part of this, they play a range of essential roles – helping and supporting individuals and families, protecting vulnerable children and adults from harm and abuse, and enabling and supporting people to lead independent, fulfilling lives.

Part 2 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017 sets out how social workers are regulated, including establishing the framework to create Social Work England (SWE), the independent body which maintains standards for the profession which ultimately supports some of the most vulnerable and marginalised members of society. It also creates powers for the Secretary of State for Education and for Health and Social Care, including setting improvement standards and ensuring adequate provision of social work training.

Under section 64 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017, the Secretary of State is required to commission an independent person to undertake a review of the operation of Part 2 of the 2017 Act.

Dame Annie Hudson has been appointed to conduct a review in accordance with these requirements and to ensure that the regulation of social work is fit for purpose, and benefits both the professionals it oversees and the individuals it aims to protect.

Scope

The primary purpose of this independent review is assessing the effectiveness and impact of Social Work England. The Reviewer will assess how effectively Social Work England is discharging its statutory functions and delivering against the overarching objectives set out in the Act, which are to:

- protect, promote and maintain the health, safety and well-being of the public;
- promote and maintain public confidence in social workers in England; and
- promote and maintain proper professional standards for social workers in England.

In carrying out the review, the Reviewer will:

- Assess the establishment of SWE and the transfer of powers from the Health and Care Professions Council to SWE.
- Assess the regulatory mandate of SWE as set out by the 2017 Act, and review the Social Workers Regulations 2018, to understand how SWE are delivering against the legislation in co-ordination with other bodies concerned with the delivery of social care functions in England and the Devolved Administrations.
- Evaluate SWE's governance and accountability mechanisms, including reporting on activities and providing information and advice.

- Assess the effectiveness and efficiency of SWE's core regulatory functions: registration, professional standards, education and training standards and approval including for AMHPs and BIAs, and fitness to practise.
- Assess the delivery of the Secretary of State's powers as set out in the 2017 Act in relation to SWE's fees income; grants; oversight of SWE's transparency and performance; the use of improvement standards as set out in the 2017 Act for social workers; and to ensure adequate provision of social work training.
- Assess how SWE's functions relate to the wider social work landscape, with particular reference to how initial education and training standards and professional standards align with others, including those from government.

In addition, the Reviewer will consider the current model of professional regulation for social workers and make recommendations on whether any changes to SWE's delivery of its functions are needed to enable more efficient and effective regulation and / or to improve the standards of social work practice.

Review lead and structure

The Secretary of State has appointed Dame Annie Hudson to undertake this Review.

As set out in the 2017 Act, the Reviewer will consult representatives of the social work profession and anyone else that the Reviewer considers appropriate. The Review will be undertaking a programme of engagement in Autumn 2025 to hear from social workers across adults' and children's social work, as well as others with experience and expertise in social work practice and regulation.

In addition, a reference group will be established to act as a critical friend to the lead Reviewer as they conduct the independent review into the operation of Part 2 of the 2017 Act.

Annex B: Methodology and approach

The review's methodology has been designed to promote good triangulation of evidence, transparency of approach and independence of judgement.

Key components of evidence gathering are outlined below.

Analysis of key documents and legislation to understand the intentions for Social Work England and the regulatory framework for delivering this. This included:

- the Children and Social Work Act 2017 and associated regulations
- Social Work England's guidance, rules and standards
- published and unpublished reports and papers produced by Social Work England assessing their functions, history and improvement activity
- published and unpublished government policy papers

The review also considered Social Work England annual reports, performance data and published evaluations to understand how activity has been taken forward in practice. These have been referenced throughout the report.

The review has gathered information about regulatory models in health and related professions in the UK and in social care in the devolved nations to compare Social Work England's approach within the wider professional regulatory landscape. This included observing fitness to practise hearings (as a member of the public can) for social workers, teachers, paramedics and nurses.

The review also considered nine recent fitness to practise decisions at accepted disposal and final hearing stage, led by the review Chair, representatives from the reference group and chief social workers and supported by legal counsel.

Analysis of quantitative evidence to assess operational performance. This has included analysis of registration data, workforce demographics, fitness to practise trends and education quality assurance outcomes, drawing on published and unpublished data supplied primarily by Social Work England and central government as well as from other regulators and representative organisations. Where published, these have been referenced throughout the report.

Qualitative engagement and testimony formed a central component of the methodology, incorporating testimony from individuals and organisations that approached the review directly, alongside bespoke engagement activity commissioned to support it. This was essential to understanding how regulatory functions are experienced by the profession, employers, educators and people with lived experience, both individually and through the organisations that represent these groups.

Qualitative engagement meetings with the Chief Executive of Social Work England and his leadership team, the board Chair, the board and staff at a number of points during the course of the review. This also included interviews with key individuals and wider organisations, roundtables on key themes including education and practice, and over 4,000 written submissions during the consultation.

The consultation was open for three weeks, launching on 5 November 2025 and closing on 26 November 2025. The consultation was shared with a range of stakeholders including through Social Work England, charities, employers, trade union forums and working groups. The consultation was advertised through direct email communications, online publications and direct engagement with key sector groups, in addition to sector-wide newsletters from the department (such as the children's social care newsletter for local authorities). Respondents to the consultation chose to participate voluntarily, rather than it being a closed survey to a specific group of individuals and organisations.

A copy of the questions can be found online.⁷⁸ This includes all the various questions for the different respondent types.

A total of 3,975 responses were received via the online consultation form, with 97.5% submitted by individuals and 2.5% on behalf of organisations. Response rates varied across the consultation questions, with closed-ended questions generally receiving more consistent engagement. An additional 104 responses were received via email and analysed separately.

All responses received were read by a member of the secretariat team of the review and all responses were included in the analysis across the various respondent demographics. The analysis involved quantitative breakdowns of 121 closed-ended questions and thematic analysis of 14 open-ended questions, including sentiment analysis to assess whether responses expressed positive, neutral or negative sentiments.

Where appropriate, findings have been broken down by respondent type to ensure a balanced representation of perspectives based on information provided in question one. A total of 3,088 identified as a practising social worker or social work manager. An additional 131 responded as a retired or former social worker. A total of 531 respondents identified as adult members of the public, which included 518 with experience of children or adults' social care services via a social worker. The remaining respondents to the call for evidence were made up of social work students or trainees (40), organisations with links to social workers including education, employers and unions (98), and children and young adults who have or had a social worker (6). A group of 81 identified as 'other' when asked in what capacity they were primarily responding.

This document draws on the main points raised by respondents, after grouping responses into categories or themes. The summary is not intended to be an exhaustive record of every point made, and the absence of a particular issue does not imply that it has been ignored or is of lesser importance. The consultation was not designed as a representative survey: respondents were self-selecting, and therefore the findings should not be generalised to the wider population.

Data scientists performed thematic summarisation, the process of iteratively identifying recurring themes in text, and sentiment analysis using large language models in secure environments – specifically, a Llama 3.3 model hosted by Databricks and GPT-4o through Azure OpenAI. These AI models were selected as both perform very well on general language-understanding benchmarks. No personal or identifying information was exposed to the models – all responses were anonymised prior to processing to ensure compliance

⁷⁸ Department for Education, 'Independent review for social work regulation: call for evidence', <https://consult.education.gov.uk/independent-review-of-social-work-regulation/independent-review-for-social-work-regulation/>.

with data protection standards. These models were used to efficiently extract and synthesise recurring themes, assess the sentiment of open-ended responses (positive, neutral and negative), and reclassify responses into appropriate thematic categories. To ensure quality, a human-in-the-loop approach was used. Subject-matter experts performed checks of the model-generated themes and sentiment labels, validating their accuracy and mitigating the risks of over-reliance on automation.

The review team has also conducted six local authority visits across the country to hear directly from those in practice, their managers and people in those areas who have, or have had, a social worker. The local authorities visited were selected to provide a mix of locations, local authority types and referral rates to Social Work England fitness to practise processes within the local authority area. Additionally, the review team met with social work employees and their managers in the NHS. The review team also conducted four in-depth visits to higher education institutions and met with teaching and management teams.

Crucially, the review team has heard not just from social workers at all levels on their day-to-day experience of the regulatory framework, but has included direct input from those who have been part of fitness to practise proceedings both as social workers subject to these, managers of those subject to fitness to practise and individuals who have raised a concern.

Talking to children and adults with lived experience of having a social worker in their lives has been a very crucial aspect of this review. Their voices and perspectives have been critical in keeping the review firmly grounded in the real-world impact of regulation and focused on the overriding purpose of the regulatory system, which is to act in the public interest, to support safe and effective practice, and to ensure that people who rely on social work are appropriately protected. Their perspectives have helped anchor considerations of standards, oversight and decision-making in the outcomes that matter most to those who draw on social work support.

The review heard from those with lived experience through the call for evidence, as well as convening conversations with groups of adults at a national level and with children locally. Finally, the review spoke with two experts by experience supporting higher education institutions.

The review has been supported by an Expert Reference Group made up of individuals with experience of social work practice, education and regulation, and individuals with lived experience of having a social worker (as listed in Annex H). Their guidance has been invaluable in shaping the review's approach and findings.

Taken together, the review team has engaged with more than 490 people across the UK. This has included individuals sharing their own experiences as well as those speaking on behalf of representative groups.

Emerging findings and draft recommendations have been tested with practitioners, leaders, regulators and people with lived experience through engagement visits and direct conversations with key individuals, organisations and the Expert Reference Group. This iterative approach has ensured that recommendations are robust, practical and grounded in real-world experience.

Given the breadth of the areas covered in this review, the nature of the available evidence has varied. Some sections draw primarily on testimony and sector experience, while others focus on performance data and external debate. The report seeks to be transparent about the sources of evidence used in each section.

Annex C: The context of social work regulation

There are a number of historical and contextual factors that have influenced the delivery and understanding of the role of social worker regulation. This annex summarises some of these factors and considers how they have shaped the current environment in which Social Work England operates.

Characteristics of the profession and public understanding

Social work operates across a wide range of settings and services, including children's social care, adult social care, mental health, health services, criminal justice and education (see Annex F). Social workers are employed by a diverse range of organisations, including local authorities, NHS organisations, voluntary sector providers and independent organisations.

Public understanding of social work has historically been mixed. Research has identified persistent misconceptions about the profession, including a tendency to associate social work primarily with child protection and the removal of children from families.⁷⁹ In practice, social workers undertake a much broader range of functions with children and adults, including providing help, support and safeguarding at different life stages, and also with a range of different groups including older people, people with learning disabilities or mental health needs, as well as young people and families.

History of social work regulation

Social work first became regulated under the Care Standards Act 2000. This law introduced legal protection of the title 'social worker' in England and Wales. From then on, only people who were qualified and registered could use the title.

Since regulation was introduced, responsibility for regulating social workers in England has sat with three organisations: first, the General Social Care Council (GSCC), then the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and finally Social Work England. Each has had differences in scope and model.

The first regulator of social workers in England, the GSCC, was established following the Care Standards Act 2000 and was responsible for registration, conduct, education and training.

In 2012, responsibility transferred to the HCPC as part of wider public body reform. HCPC had a reduced remit, excluding the GSCC functions on practice improvement and continuous professional development. It also saw social work join a multi-profession regulator with concerns expressed at the time about the expertise HCPC had of social work.⁸⁰

In 2016, the then government announced plans to establish a dedicated regulator for social work.

⁷⁹ Social Work England, 'Public perceptions of the social work profession' (2024), www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/publications/public-perceptions-of-the-social-work-profession.

⁸⁰ Department for Education, 'Making the education of social workers consistently effective' (2014), www.gov.uk/government/publications/making-the-education-of-social-workers-consistently-effective.

This led to the creation of Social Work England through the Children and Social Work Act 2017. Its scope and status were the subject of debate during the passage of the Bill. While consistently positioned by that government as a regulator without improvement functions, concerns were raised about whether its specific remit might, in practice, lead it to operate differently. It was suggested in the Lords debate that the proposed scope for the regulator, including a strong focus on it using CPD to support skills and improved practice, and on being a specialist body for social workers, combined “representative, improvement and regulatory roles [and would] create an organisation with competing, confused and conflicting responsibilities”.⁸¹

There have been a range of reasons for these shifts in focus between regulators, including ongoing challenges across all regulators with managing fitness to practise volumes. There have also been debates about cost, focus and role. However, what is clear is that these organisational changes have disrupted both the work of regulation and its understanding within the sector.

Government leadership

Responsibility for social work policy has also been the subject of change and is currently split across government departments.

Initially, responsibility for social work sat within the Department of Health. In 2003, responsibility for children's social care moved to the Department for Education and Skills. Since then, adult and children's social work have been overseen by different government departments with broad consensus that DfE plays a larger role in shaping the sector.

- DfE leads policy for children's social work and has played an active role in workforce development through initiatives such as establishing fast-track training programmes, post-qualification standards and early career support arrangements.
- DHSC leads policy for adult social work and adult social care. It leads on the social work bursary and education support grant. While it also supports newly-qualified social workers through the assessed and supported year in employment, its involvement in workforce development has generally been less extensive than in DfE.

The Independent Commission into Adult Social Care, chaired by Baroness Casey, is expected to inform future reforms to adult social care, including workforce policy and arrangements for adult safeguarding.⁸²

Wider professional landscape

Unlike many regulated professions, the regulatory body for social workers does not sit alongside bodies that support and represent members, and speak for the profession and support improvement. Together these complementary roles can provide what may be described as a ‘holy trinity’ of separate yet linked roles about public protection and accountability, representation and advocacy, and professional development and improvement.

⁸¹ House of Lords, ‘Hansard, Children and Social Work Bill [HL]’, 14 June 2016, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2016-06-14/debates/58ADA27B-F889-410C-9260-CC1E267615ED/ChildrenAndSocialWorkBill>.

⁸² Casey Commission: <https://caseycommission.co.uk/>.

Currently in England, Social Work England is the only organisation that has a role of relating to all social workers in England. Previous regulatory arrangements for social work had wider professional development functions. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, regulatory bodies also undertake wider workforce development functions. By contrast, Social Work England's statutory role is focused on professional regulation, including registration, standards, education and training, and fitness to practise.

Professional leadership arrangements for social workers in England have developed over time, including through the creation of chief social worker and principal social worker roles. Additionally, the College of Social Work operated between 2012 and 2015 (for the final two years of which, I was Chair) as a professional body for social work before its closure.

Today, organisations including the British Association of Social Workers and UNISON undertake representative and professional leadership functions for parts of the workforce, although no single organisation performs this role for the profession as a whole.

Chapter 4 concluded that Social Work England's focus on regulation is appropriate and right. However, the lack of supporting professional architecture to provide a strong voice about and for the development of social work has resulted in confusion and skewed expectations about what Social Work England can and should do.

Standards landscape

Chapter 1 noted the complex standards landscape in England about social work and social workers. This in part results from some of the history of the profession and regulation outlined here, but it results too from ongoing debates about what social workers should do and how practice should be judged. It also reflects the number of organisations involved in shaping and improving social work. For example, in England, government departments – not the regulator – have created post-qualifying standards. This adds to the complexity about standards and their status.

One consequence of having so many standards is that students and social workers can face mixed messages about what is expected of them. Moreover, what is expected may vary depending on their training route, workplace, role or stage of career.

This also reflects ongoing tension in social work between having clear, shared national standards and allowing due professional autonomy. This tension is not unique to social work. It also exists in other professions such as nursing, teaching and medicine.

Conclusion

These issues have contributed to creating the current context and environment in which Social Work England operates. Changes in regulatory arrangements, and the involvement of multiple organisations, have led to the currently complex and sometimes unclear system. This is not helpful to social workers, their employers, and ultimately the public and people who need social work services. Understanding this context is important when considering the role of the regulator and the wider professional landscape.

Annex D: Principles of good regulation

Regulation exists to keep the public safe. It does this not only by removing people who do not meet the professional standards, but also by ensuring standards are in place so fewer problems reach the point of requiring disciplinary intervention.⁸³

Professional regulation is just one part of a wider system that ensures good-quality services. This system also includes government, employers and other organisations that help define and support good practice.

In simple terms, professional regulation focuses on individual social workers. It makes sure they:

- have appropriate education and training
- meet the required standards to join the register and use the title 'social worker'
- continue to learn and develop their skills
- face fair action if they do not meet standards

When regulation works well, it sets clear expectations. This helps protect the public from unsafe practice. It also supports the many competent, committed and dedicated social workers who do their job well by protecting the value of their professional title.

Regulators must strike a balance in achieving good public protection while not preventing the profession from delivering. They must prevent harm, but without creating such a burdensome system that the profession cannot operate.

Looking at good practice in regulation generally, and professional regulation specifically, and with the view of experts such as the Institute of Regulation and the PSA in mind, it is suggested that good regulation of social workers should follow these principles.⁸⁴

- **Clear purpose, authority and cohort:** The regulator should be clear on their role to protect the public and (often vulnerable) people who have a social worker. It should set standards and enforce them. It must have proper legal authority to carry out this role and be clear who it is and is not regulating – at present, qualified social workers and their initial education and training.
- **Clear and proportionate rules:** The underpinning regulations and agreed rules must help to protect the public and be proportionate so they do not create an overly burdened profession. The rules must be clear and readily available to social workers, educators and the public.

⁸³ Department of Health and Social Care, 'Regulation of health and social care professionals' (2014), www.gov.uk/government/publications/regulation-of-health-and-social-care-professionals.

⁸⁴ Professional Standards Authority, 'Right-touch regulation' (2025), www.professionalstandards.org.uk/publications/right-touch-regulation-2025.

- **Clear and proportionate action and consequences:** Social workers should know what happens if standards are not met. Any action taken should be fair and match the level of risk to the public.
- **Effective and efficient enforcement:** The regulator must act effectively and efficiently in fulfilling its functions and enforce standards quickly, consistently, coherently and fairly. This includes collaborating well with other regulators (such as system regulators) and bodies with a role in the process.
- **Transparency and accountability:** The regulator must operate transparently and in a principle of openness at all times. It should use good data and share useful information with the profession, employers and policy-makers to support the drive for continuous improvement. It must also be appropriately accountable, in this case to government, Parliament and the PSA.
- **Supported by those with lived and learned experience:** The regulator should be meaningfully informed and supported by people with lived experience of social work, as well as experts in research, education and practice. This includes ensuring that their voices inform decision-making and quality assurance processes. This helps improve decisions and build trust.
- **Supported by professional experts:** The regulator must have access to good expertise about social work. This includes making sure that social workers are on their staff and that their insight contributes to the operation of key processes. Social work expertise should be reflected in governance arrangements and good use should be made of empirical evidence and research. At the same time, it must be at an appropriate distance to remain independent.
- **Agile and responsive to change:** The regulator must be agile and responsive to different types of change (including demographic, policy, practice, technological and social changes), embedding a culture of innovation where beneficial.

Annex E: Social Work England key facts

Social Work England is an ALB of DfE. It is funded by a combination of registrant fees and grant-in-aid from the department.

Table 2: Expenditure information (year ending 31 March 2025)⁸⁵

Statement of comprehensive net expenditure	2024 to 2025 £000	2023 to 2024 £000
Income	(10,169)	(10,088)
Staff costs	11,542	10,760
Other expenditure	11,695	11,854
Net operating expenditure	13,068	12,526
Net expenditure for the year	13,068	12,526

Table 3: Workforce information (April 2023 to March 2025)

Staff composition analysis	2024 to 2025 total	2023 to 2024 total
Social Work England permanent	226.5 (95.8%)	221.6 (96.3%)
Social Work England fixed term	8.5 (3.6%)	7.9 (3.4%)
Agency/temp	0.7 (0.3%)	0 (0%)
Secondment	0.6 (0.3%)	0.5 (0.2%)
Total	236.3 (100%)	230.0 (100%)

⁸⁵ 2025 to 2026 annual reports are not yet available at time of publication. Social Work England, 'Annual report and accounts 2024 to 2025' (2025), www.socialworkengland.org.uk/news/annual-report-and-accounts-2024-to-2025.

Table 4: List of statutory functions

Maintain a register of social workers	<p>To be able to practise as a social worker in England, individuals must be registered with Social Work England and listed on the public register. Only people on the register may legally call themselves a ‘social worker’ in England.</p> <p>Social workers in England renew their registration every year. When renewing their registration, they must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ record at least two pieces of CPD activity, one of which must include reflections from a peer (meaning that they have discussed it with someone, including what they learned from it and how it impacts their work) ▪ declare any circumstances that may affect their safe and effective practise
Set standards for fitness to practise	Social Work England publishes professional standards which define what it means for social workers to be fit to practise, including in terms of conduct, competence, character and health. ⁸⁶
Operate a fitness to practise system	Social Work England investigates concerns about registered social workers, adjudicates whether their fitness to practise is impaired, and takes action where necessary. This might include sanctions or removing a social worker from the register so they cannot practise any more.
Set and approve education and training standards	Social Work England sets the education standards for all qualifying social work training routes to ensure a social worker who successfully completes a course can meet the social work professional standards. ⁸⁷ It assesses course providers against the education standards, providing reports and recommendations. In extreme cases, it can also close courses that are not meeting the standards.
Approve post-qualifying courses and specialisms	Social Work England also recognises further qualifications or special areas of practice beyond the basic qualification. There are separate standards for the specialist roles of approved mental health professional and best interests assessor. ⁸⁸

Key facts relating to core functions

- As of the end of April 2026, 106,599 social workers are on the register.
- Social Work England currently has 394 approved qualifying social work courses as well as courses for the qualification of BIAs and AMHPs.
- 2,670 concerns were received about the fitness to practise of social workers in 2025 to 2026.

⁸⁶ Social Work England, ‘Professional standards’, www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/professional-standards.

⁸⁷ Social Work England, ‘Education and training standards’, www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/education-and-training-standards

⁸⁸ Social Work England, ‘Education and training approval standards for approved mental health professional (AMHP) courses’ (2024), www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/education-and-training-standards-for-amhp-courses. Social Work England, ‘Education and training approval standards for best interests assessor (BIA) courses’ (2024), www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/education-and-training-standards-for-bia-courses.

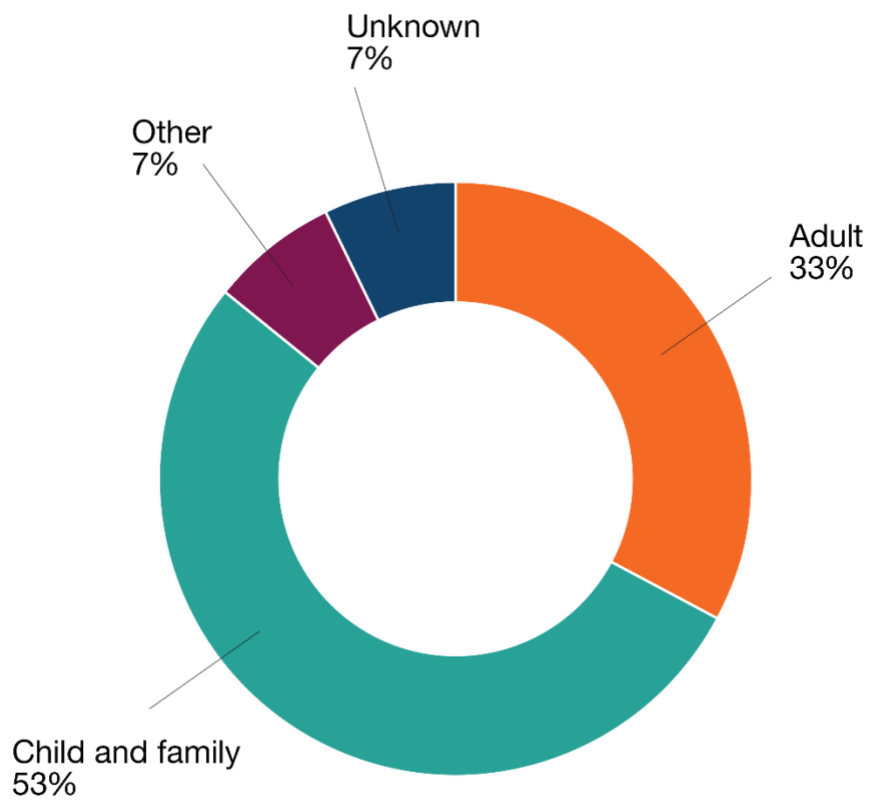
Annex F: Social work workforce information

Figure 19 shows us the spread of social workers across different sectors as reported by Social Work England in November 2025 with the percentage of registered social workers in each sector.

Table 5: Proportion of social workers by practice area

Area of social work practice	Percentage of the register recorded in this sector
Adult – hospital work	3%
Adult – learning disabilities	3%
Adult – mental health	9%
Adult – older people	7%
Adult – other	10%
Adult – physical disabilities	1%
Child in need and child protection	20%
Children and families – other	15%
Children with disabilities	2%
Children’s hospital social work	0%
Children’s mental health	2%
Court services/CAFCASS	2%
Criminal justice	0%
Domestic abuse	0%
Fostering, special guardianship and adoption, residential	10%
Leaving care post 18+	1%
Lecturer or other academic	1%
Other specialist services	5%
Substance misuse	0%
Unaccompanied asylum seekers and refugees	1%
Unknown	7%
Youth justice	1%

Figure 18: Breakdown of the register by adults, child and family specialism, and unknown



Annex G: Summary of lived experience voices: key themes

This annex summarises key themes from our engagement with people with lived experience. Some themes relate to the wider social care system, while others focus more specifically on social work regulation. Where possible, we have used verbatim quotes from those involved and provided a summary where it was not. Many of these accounts relate to cases and experiences that the review has not been able to independently verify, and are presented as they were shared with us. It is also important to note that those who chose to engage are self-selecting. Individuals may be more likely to come forward where they have had particularly strong views or difficult experiences. This may include situations where an individual has sought to raise concerns or resolve issues.

Awareness and perception of Social Work England

Awareness of Social Work England among people with lived experience is uneven. For both the adults and children with lived experience who responded to the call for evidence, around half were aware of Social Work England before completing the survey. Among those who were aware, perceptions were mixed, with concerns about visibility, purpose and public understanding of the organisation's role.

- “In the main, I have been happy with Social Work, England [sic], when I have had recourse to ask for help.” (Parent or carer of a child who has a social worker)
- “I am still not sure what [Social Work England] do” (Member of the public, with lived experience of social work)
- “Firstly, public do not know about this institution...how [will they] refer a social worker to it” (Member of the public with lived experience of social work)
- “The review of Social Work England is a rare opportunity – not only to adjust regulatory process, but to restate the moral purpose of regulation within a welfare landscape increasingly shaped by market logics, managerial habits and financial pressures that no child ever chose.” (Member of the public with lived experience)

Raising concerns and the complaints process

People with lived experience had mixed views on raising concerns, including about the accessibility, clarity and effectiveness of the complaints process, both through local processes and to Social Work England.

- “I believe social workers need to held [sic] to account by an independent watchdog and parents are able to complain about unlawful practice without being shut down and made to the [sic] problem when social workers are not following there [sic] own rules.” (Parent or carer of a child who has a social worker)
- “Lots of knowledge needed as member of the public to raise a complaint.” (Member of the public, with lived experience of social work)
- “Complained locally and went to SWE [Social Work England] when that wasn't satisfactory – response from SWE was not caring or compassionate.” (Member of the public, with lived experience of social work)

- “The process takes to [sic] long.” (Member of the public, with lived experience of social work)
- “Complained through every level – DfE, DHSC, MPs etc – no accountability, no apologies, no compensation.” (Member of the public, with lived experience of social work)

CPD and registration

Adults and children with lived experience highlighted how their feedback could be immensely valuable to social workers’ CPD.

- One group of children with a social worker with whom we met noted they had never been asked for feedback by their social worker and that receiving this would help social workers reflect on their practice. They felt capturing this could form part of annual development and CPD.
- Similarly, a forum of adults with lived experience felt that regulatory standards and CPD requirements would benefit from being grounded in what matters to people who draw on care and support, noting the Think Personal Act Local Making it Real statements as an example of good practice.⁸⁹

Co-production and engagement

Views on Social Work England’s approach to co-production were generally positive.

- “SWE convene people with lived experiences – e.g. consultation. They’ve supported some consultations, v positive experience.” (Member of the public, with lived experience of social work)
- “One thing I’d like to add is the importance of ensuring lived experience is genuinely embedded in how Social Work England develops and review [sic] its standards, For many of us who grew up in care, our confidence in the system depends on how well it listens and learns from people who’ve actually been through it....” (Member of the public, with lived experience of social work)

These views align broadly with what we heard from current and former members of the National Advisory Forum (a group convened by Social Work England, but who provide independent views to them).⁹⁰ They told us that they thought Social Work England shows a real interest in the thoughts and experiences of those with lived experience. They felt that Social Work England genuinely seeks their views about any proposals. One individual said that they enjoyed working with Social Work England and that they thought the organisation was open to effecting change.

⁸⁹ Think Local Act Personal, ‘Making It Real’, <https://thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/our-hubs/making-it-real/>.

⁹⁰ Social Work England, ‘Our National Advisory Forum’, www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/our-national-advisory-forum.

Experiences beyond the scope of regulation

A range of other issues were highlighted in our engagement with people with lived and learned experience of social work that fall out outside of the focus and remit of this review. However, we have summarised some of these issues here given that they may be of wider interest to social workers, employers, policy-makers and others.

Public confidence in social workers and practice consistency

Some individuals raised concerns about their confidence in social workers to work effectively and well. These concerns were primarily related to their experience of inconsistency in practice, poor communication, and what were seen to be limited efforts to work in a sensitive and positive way with children, adults and families.

- Some children and young people expressed concerns about being seen through the lens of their experience rather than who they are now. One young person said, “I am not the same person at 18 as I was at 12.”
- Some children also felt that social workers relied too much on what other people had said about them rather than understanding how they saw themselves.
- Some children and young people said they felt social workers did not know how to communicate with them and that this was a barrier to establishing a good relationship.
- Some children (especially those who were or had been looked after) talked about problems they had had in dealing with practical aspects of their lives and which had an important impact. For example, they spoke of delays and perceived lack of priority from their social workers on requests for passports, ID documents and national insurance numbers, which limited their access to going on holiday or applying for jobs.
- Adults and children also articulated what, from their perspective, good practice looks like, citing examples of situations where they had valued the input of social workers. One adult with lived experience noted: “From my experience, having social workers who know the rules, understand what’s expected of them, and are accountable really matters it can make a huge difference to how safe and supported a young person or child feels.”
- Children described to the review team the good social work they had experienced. This included when social workers “stick around” and demonstrate they want to help by “getting stuff done”, are kind, and listen to the children and young people they work with.

Frequent changes in social workers

A major theme in feedback from both adults and children related to the frequent changes in social workers and placements that many of them had experienced and how this affected them.

- Many children described very frequent changes in social worker. One child who previously had a social worker told us: “I got moved four days before Christmas. From city X to city Y. Four foster carers in seven months!”

- One child spoke about how constant change meant they had to retell their story and how they disliked repeating their problems and preferences over and over again. Children also raised concerns about having not been told why their social worker had changed, often quite suddenly.
- In contrast, those children who had one social worker for a long period of time spoke about the very positive impact this relationship had had on them. Another child who had had the same social worker for three years spoke about how it helped her feel “cared about”.

Equality, inclusion and trauma-informed practice in social work

People with lived experience emphasised the need for trauma-informed practice and raised concerns about discrimination and lack of reasonable adjustments, particularly for disabled and neurodivergent people. Some parents raised concerns about how they felt that they had been treated differently because of their race, socio-economic status and/or gender.

- “I know that those who are on a lower income, from different cultures/countries are not treated the same across the board.” (Member of the public with lived experience)
- “Shocked when did work with SWs [social workers] – lack of knowledge about deaf person who draws on care and support. So lack of knowledge about things available for those people. E.g. charities.” (Member of the public with lived experience)
- “I have worked with extremely knowledgeable and fantastic social workers ... Many however are not adequately trauma informed” (Member of the public with lived experience)

Other personal experiences of social workers

We also heard from individuals about their personal experiences of social work involvement through fostering, adoption and other forms of support. Again, many of these testimonies related to issues which were outside the scope of the review and reflected broader concerns that respondents felt important to highlight. We are grateful to those who shared their experiences. Where responses were not anonymised, we have shared details of who they can contact to discuss these issues further.

Annex H: Expert Reference Group membership

The Expert Reference Group was a group convened to support Dame Annie Hudson to conduct the review. The role of the reference group was to offer expertise on social work education, practice and regulation. The group was not a decision-making body but provided input into the report and its recommendations as it developed, at the request of the Chair. The final content of the report and its recommendations were at the discretion of the Chair.

The objectives of the group were:

- to support the Chair to develop and prioritise lines of enquiry
- to provide expert advice and input to the Chair on matters set out in the scope of the review as needed
- to test and advise on emerging recommendations as needed

Table 6: Expert Reference Group members

Name	Role / Organisation	Sector
Sarah McClinton	Chief Social Worker for Adults, DHSC	Adults' social care
Isabelle Trowler	Chief Social Worker for Children and Families, DfE	Children's social care
Peter Hay	Chair, Turning Point, The Honeycomb Group and Think Ahead	Voluntary sector – adults
Brenda Farrell	Barnardo's UK Director Fostering, Adoption and Children In Care	Voluntary sector – children
James Thomas	Chief Executive, Birmingham Children's Trust	Local authority – children
Georgia Chimbani	Corporate Director, Health and Adult Social Care	Local authority – adults
Shaun Gallagher	Director of Strategy and Policy, General Medical Council	Professional regulation
Professor Janet Melville-Wiseman	Emerita Professor in Social Work, Canterbury Christ Church University	Higher education
Clenton Farquharson	Associate Director, Think Local Act Personal	Lived experience

Annex I: Regulator performance against PSA standards 2024 to 2025

Table 7: Regulator performance against PSA standards

	Number of registrants	Area of regulation	Number of PSA standards met (out of a total of 18)	Standard(s) not met
Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland (PSNI)	3,040	Northern Ireland	14	2, 3, 7 and 15
Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC)	86,7265	United Kingdom	9	2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 15, 16 and 18
Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC)	35,6104	United Kingdom	17	15
General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC)	92,989	Great Britain	17	15
General Osteopathic Council (GOsC)	5,597	United Kingdom	18	Not applicable
General Optical Council (GOC)	32,535	United Kingdom	18	Not applicable
General Medical Council (GMC)	409,768	United Kingdom	18	Not applicable
General Dental Council (GDC)	129,578	United Kingdom	16	3 and 15
General Chiropractic Council (GCC)	3,993	United Kingdom	17	15
Social Work England (SWE)	105590	England	16	13 and 15

Full list of PSA standards

General standards

1. The regulator provides accurate, fully accessible information about its registrants, regulatory requirements, guidance, processes and decisions.
2. The regulator is clear about its purpose and ensures that its policies are applied appropriately across all its functions and that relevant learning from one area is applied to others.

3. The regulator understands the diversity of its registrants and their patients and service users and of others who interact with the regulator, and ensures that its processes do not impose inappropriate barriers or otherwise disadvantage people with protected characteristics.
4. The regulator reports on its performance and addresses concerns identified about it and considers the implications for it of findings of public inquiries and other relevant reports about healthcare regulatory issues.
5. The regulator consults and works with all relevant stakeholders across all its functions to identify and manage risks to the public in respect of its registrants.

Guidance and standards

6. The regulator maintains up-to-date standards for registrants which are kept under review and prioritise patient and service user-centred care and safety.
7. The regulator provides guidance to help registrants apply the standards and ensures this guidance is up to date, addresses emerging areas of risk, and prioritises patient and service user-centred care and safety.

Education and training

8. The regulator maintains up-to-date standards for education and training which are kept under review, and prioritise patient and service user care and safety.
9. The regulator has a proportionate and transparent mechanism for assuring itself that the educational providers and programmes it oversees are delivering students and trainees that meet the regulator's requirements for registration, and takes action where its assurance activities identify concerns either about training or wider patient safety concerns.

Registration

10. The regulator maintains and publishes an accurate register of those who meet its requirements including any restrictions on their practice.
11. The process for registration, including appeals, operates proportionately, fairly and efficiently, with decisions clearly explained.
12. Risk of harm to the public and of damage to public confidence in the profession related to non-registrants using a protected title or undertaking a protected act is managed in a proportionate and risk-based manner.
13. The regulator has proportionate requirements to satisfy itself that registrants continue to be fit to practise.

Fitness to practise

14. The regulator enables anyone to raise a concern about a registrant.
15. The regulator's process for examining and investigating cases is fair, proportionate, deals with cases as quickly as is consistent with a fair resolution of the case, and

ensures that appropriate evidence is available to support decision-makers to reach a fair decision that protects the public at each stage of the process.

16. The regulator ensures that all decisions are made in accordance with its processes, are proportionate, consistent and fair, take account of the statutory objectives, the regulator's standards and the relevant case law, and prioritise patient and service user safety.
17. The regulator identifies and prioritises all cases which suggest a serious risk to the safety of patients or service users and seeks interim orders where appropriate.
18. All parties to a complaint are supported to participate effectively in the process.

New standards will come into effect on 1 July 2026.⁹¹

⁹¹ Professional Standards Authority, 'Standards for regulators and accredited registers (2026)', www.professionalstandards.org.uk/publications/standards-regulators-and-accredited-registers-2026.



Department for Education

© Crown copyright 2026

E03644201

ISBN 978-1-5286-6730-2