

Roles and Functions of Social Workers in England

Advice Note

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Roles and Functions of Social Workers in England

Purpose

1. The purpose of this Advice Note is to set out the essential contribution of social workers, both to the lives of the people who need and use their services and to the teams and organisations within which they work. It will help employers, social workers, other professionals and the public understand what social workers are there to do.
2. Our intention is to give core examples of the roles and functions of social workers in the context of the various situations in which they are required, both in adults' and children's services. We aim to promote clarity and consistency in the deployment of social workers across the public, voluntary and private sectors.
3. It is important that social workers' roles and functions, at each stage in their careers, are suited to their level of experience. Therefore the Advice Note also describes how the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) can be used to consider the level of capability required of a social worker prior to taking on specific roles or pieces of work. Employers and social workers themselves can use it to determine the level of social work skill and experience that is necessary.
4. In summary, The College of Social Work is issuing the Advice Note so that:
 - Social workers, employers, government and other stakeholders are clear about the distinctive roles of social work within the broad frame of care provision;
 - Social workers, employers, government and other stakeholders can make appropriate decisions about when a social worker, as a qualified professional, should be the lead or responsible worker in relation to a given situation or task;
 - Individual social workers can draw upon its contents as an authoritative source, for example if they are asked to handle issues beyond their current level of capability;
 - Organisations will be able to assure themselves that the social workers who take on responsibility for the most risky, complex work are those most likely to have the capability of managing it appropriately.
5. The Advice Note has been organised as follows:
 - An introduction summarising the role, expectations and values of social work, taking into account the multi-disciplinary context in which many social workers operate
 - A section setting out the situations in which social workers should be deployed and examples of the roles and functions they are required to perform in those situations [Part One]¹;
 - A section showing how the responsibilities of social workers should be aligned with their capabilities as defined by the PCF [Part Two].

¹ Part One draws partly on work done by the General Social Care Council, the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, and in Scotland and Wales. See *Social Work in Adult Social Services*, ADASS, 2012; *Social Work at its Best: A statement of social work roles and tasks for the 21st century*, GSCC, 2008; *Changing Lives: Report of the 21st century social work review*, Scottish Executive, 2006; *Social Work in Wales: A profession to value*, ADSS Cymru et al, 2005.

Introduction

1. Social work is a regulated profession in which social workers are uniquely educated and qualified to support individuals and families in meeting some of life's biggest challenges. Social workers play a pivotal and often leading role in safeguarding people's rights, building relationships to support and empower children, adults and families to make important choices about the direction of their lives.
2. They must have the knowledge, emotional intelligence, analytical skills and authority to work holistically within these relationships. They will have the confidence to confront challenging and complex social and family situations, drawing on research evidence, community resources and the professional contribution of health, housing and other partner agencies so as to safeguard and promote people's well-being. They intervene, using legal powers when applicable, for the protection of children and adults as necessary.
3. The distinctive role of social workers can be briefly described as follows:
 - A. Social workers use a distinctive range of legal and social work knowledge and skills to help people to make changes in their lives and get the outcomes needed;
 - B. They are uniquely skilled in accessing a wide range of practical and emotional support and services to meet individuals' needs and aspirations;
 - C. They are a collaborative profession, working alongside other professionals but taking the lead in helping children, adults and families improve and gain control of their lives when their safety or ability to participate in their communities is restricted;
 - D. They have a lead role in safeguarding people who may be socially excluded, at risk of abuse or neglect, or who become vulnerable for other reasons. They balance support and protection/ safeguarding roles carefully and in keeping with the specific needs and circumstances of the person or family, taking protective action as needed and within the context of legal roles and frameworks;
 - E. They are educated and trained to engage with people whose age, mental incapacity or ill-health constrains their ability to protect themselves or others;
 - F. In adult social care they endorse and act in accordance with the principles of personalisation, ensuring that care and support are person-centred and as far as possible put the people with whom they work in control of their lives;
 - G. In children's social care they maintain a focus on the child, ensuring that the child is safe and well, that families are helped to change where necessary, and that required outcomes are achieved.

Social work values

4. Social work is an international profession with a set of core values and a diverse knowledge and skills base. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) definition states:

“The social work profession promotes social change, problem-solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.”²

5. The College of Social Work’s own code of ethics enshrines these values. Social work is informed by a range of knowledge, but the promotion of human rights is part of what gives the profession its distinctive character.
6. Social workers are unique in their understanding of the legal importance of proportionality in deciding if and when to intervene in the lives of individuals and families. They balance competing rights and ensure that the actions they take as professionals and employees are evidence-based, robust, transparent and defensible. These decisions about human rights must often be taken in complex and difficult circumstances, e.g. when safeguarding adults or children.

Social work activities

7. Social workers provide help and support to children and adults in need or at risk. They are, among other things, catalysts for change in individuals and families, working with them, their communities and partner agencies to make improvements, achieve goals and keep safe and well.
8. They carry out assessments of need, plan and deliver services, and review outcomes. This three-stage process will often be cyclical rather than a one-off, involving reassessment where initial outcome targets have not been achieved. Assessment is therefore a dynamic process which rests on confident, evidence-based decision-making in the context of a genuine engagement in people’s lives.
9. Good social workers listen well, making sure that the children, adults and families with whom they work are supported as far as possible to participate in decisions affecting them. They help people have control and influence over their lives, recognising when it may be necessary to provide challenge and ensure that they are properly protected and safeguarded. Social workers need to be able and ready to use their powers of intervention, if necessary.
10. Social workers give professional leadership in their work with service users, collaborating and coordinating with a variety of differently qualified practitioners to ensure the provision of sensitive and appropriate services.
11. Advanced and strategic social workers (see Part Two) offer professional leadership by ensuring that services reflect the core values of the profession and promote human rights. They therefore have an important role in protecting their organisations from the legal, reputational and financial risks of human rights violations.

² International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), *Definition of Social Work*, 2000 <http://ifsw.org/policies/definition-of-social-work/>

People who use services

12. Service users, particularly in adult social care, expect social workers to adopt a collaborative attitude to assessments.³ In many cases they see the social worker's role as supporting them to make their own self-assessment, drawing on an independent living and rights-based approach to social work.
13. Among the things service users say they value are information, advice and advocacy; flexible, person-centred practical and emotional support; a holistic approach; and social workers who listen and communicate well while displaying warmth and respect.
14. Looked after children value many of the same qualities and young people often emphasise the importance of relationships with social workers. Both adults and children rate continuity of support from the same social worker particularly highly.
15. Social workers will also be sensitive to diversity, taking due account of all factors which may affect a person's identity and needs.

Social work in different settings

16. Social workers are employed in a variety of settings in the statutory, voluntary and private sectors. The nature and range of social workers' responsibilities varies markedly between and within sectors and it is important to acknowledge that not every situation, role or function is equally applicable to every social worker in every setting.
17. Social workers work collaboratively and appreciate the contribution of other practitioners in multidisciplinary contexts. The intent of this paper is to set out situations in which social workers are particularly well equipped to be the lead professional, while also acknowledging that much is dependent on the specific circumstances.
18. There is a basic principle common to all settings. It is that only social workers with an appropriate level of capability should be expected to agree to take on functions of a particular level of complexity, ambiguity and risk. This should be done in accordance not just with statutory and agency requirements, but with the levels of responsibility set out in the PCF (see Part Two).

³ *The Changing Roles and Tasks of Social Work: From service users' perspectives*, Shaping Our Lives, 2007.

Deciding when to use a social worker

19. The College of Social Work advises that social workers should be used in two sets of circumstances. First, they should be used in situations defined by law where organisations have a legal duty to intervene professionally and social workers are uniquely educated, trained and qualified to undertake the work required. In many of these situations, social workers have clear and unambiguous roles and functions, defined through legal frameworks and national statutory guidance. Social workers **must** be the lead professionals in undertaking these roles and functions.
20. Secondly, they should be used in situations in which risk, ambiguity or complexity is greatest, where organisations and individuals will be best supported and protected by deploying an appropriately experienced social worker, who will have the necessary analytical abilities, the habit of reflective, evidence-informed practice and highly developed relationship and engagement skills. Social workers **should** be the lead professionals in undertaking the roles and functions relevant to such situations.
21. The next sections of this Advice Note describe two sets of considerations which should always be considered in tandem when deciding on the deployment of social workers in given circumstances.
 - **Part One:** Sets out situations in which social workers are required with examples of their roles and functions in these situations. These examples of roles and functions are not intended to be exhaustive and it is entirely possible that there are other social work roles and functions corresponding to the situations elaborated here.
 - **Part Two:** Aligns social workers' roles and functions with their levels of capability. Roles and functions should be assigned in accordance with the capability categories contained in the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF), namely Newly-Qualified Social Worker; Social Worker; Experienced Social Worker; Advanced Social Worker; and Strategic Social Worker. The levels of capability defined in the PCF carry differing levels of responsibility for the roles and functions set out in Part One.

Part One

Understanding the situations in which social workers can provide particular value and expertise.

This part of the Advice Note provides five illustrative situations in which social work skills and knowledge are particularly relevant.

Situation 1: Responding to complex needs

1.1 Social workers are qualified to provide professional leadership in situations where the social (or mix of social and health) needs of individuals and families are complex or ambiguous. The extent of their responsibility should be commensurate with their level of capability under the Professional Capabilities Framework (see Part Two).

1.2 Social workers have the analytical skills to be the lead professional when the complexity of an individual's or a family's circumstances requires assessment, decision-making and intervention that are responsive to a range of interacting factors. These factors may be emotional, psychological or social; they will often be unpredictable and may arise where there is conflict within a family.

1.3 There may be an element of ambiguity: it will often be unclear whether intervention is warranted and what the outcome of an intervention is likely to be. Social workers will know when to turn to experienced or advanced social workers for supervision, advice and support if the specific circumstances are beyond their level of capability. They will expect professional supervision to be provided by another registered social worker.

Reserved roles and functions (children and families)

Examples of roles and functions corresponding to this situation in which social workers **must** be the lead professional:

- a. To assess, review and provide help to a child, family or carer with complex family or social care needs, taking full account of appropriate legal frameworks, policy and guidance. It will involve reference to requirements set out in law or statutory guidance.⁴
- b. When care or custody arrangements for a child in need or at risk require clear assessment, planning and help to avoid potential dispute among family or carers or others with a legitimate interest in these arrangements.⁵
- c. To arrange appropriate alternative care (including, where indicated, a permanent home) in collaboration with children, young people and their parents where the parents cannot care for them. This applies where the family are unable to make such arrangements themselves.⁶
- d. Undertaking comprehensive and holistic assessments as required under legal frameworks, for example:
 - of people's suitability to be foster carers, kinships carers (including Special Guardians), or adopters.⁷
 - in support of an application for a care, adoption or other order as relevant.⁸

⁴ S17/S47 Children Act 1989; S53 Children Act 2004; *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, Department for Education, March 2013. ⁵ S17/S20/S47 Children Act 1989. ⁶ S20 Children Act 1989; S53 Children Act 2004. ⁷ S14/S22 Children Act 1989; Adoption and Children Act 2002. ⁸ S31 Children Act 1989; Adoption and Children Act 2002.

Examples of roles and functions corresponding to this situation in which social workers **should** be the lead professional:

- a. To assess and support family functioning when relationship breakdown or other issues threaten to impair the health, safety or well-being of children with disabilities or other children at risk of abuse, neglect or self-neglect.⁹
- b. To intervene and provide help to an individual or family whose complex family or social care needs or risks indicate that they need ongoing professional support which they might not normally be willing to accept. For example, a child in need or a family subject to a child protection plan.¹⁰
- c. To provide high quality help and support to children and young people looked after, building effective and engaged relationships so that they are safe and succeed in life.¹¹
- d. Helping parents with complex needs develop parenting skills and understanding so that they can be more effective in meeting their children's need for care, development and control.¹²

⁹ S17 Children Act 1989. ¹⁰ S17 Children Act 1989. ¹¹ S17/S22/S23/S24 Children Act 1989. ¹² S17 Children Act 1989.

Reserved roles and functions (adults)

Examples of roles and functions corresponding to this situation in which social workers **should** be the lead professional:

- a. To assess, review and provide help to an individual, family or carer with complex family or social care needs, taking full account of appropriate policy and guidance. This will include taking due account of the principles of personalisation and service eligibility criteria.¹³
- b. To intervene and provide help to an individual or family whose complex family or social care needs or risks indicate that they need ongoing professional support which they might not normally be willing to accept. For example, someone with mental health problems discharged from hospital on a Guardianship Order or a Community Treatment Order.¹⁴
- c. Undertaking comprehensive and holistic assessments as required under legal frameworks, for example:
 - where a court or tribunal requires a formal report on the social circumstances of an accused or convicted person or a mental health patient,¹⁵ or of someone who lacks mental capacity.¹⁶
 - when there is a need to establish the least restrictive care and support options for someone who may lack mental capacity, or who has mental health problems and complex social needs.¹⁷
- d. When care and support arrangements for an adult at risk require clear assessment, planning and help to avoid potential dispute among family or carers or others with a legitimate interest in these arrangements.¹⁸
- e. Where assessment may require considerable input with a person who, due to a lack of confidence or self-esteem, or because of the undue influence of others, may not otherwise realise the options that may be open to them.¹⁹
- f. To arrange appropriate alternative care (including, where indicated, a permanent home) in collaboration with adults where they can no longer manage in their own homes. This applies where the individual or family are unable to make such arrangements themselves.²⁰
- g. When making social, professional and community networks, systems and resources work for individuals and families who might otherwise be socially excluded, not reach their potential, or be at risk in their absence.²¹

¹³ S47 NHS and Community Care Act 1990; Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995; *Prioritising Need in the Context of Putting People First*, Department of Health 2010. ¹⁴ S7 Mental Health Act 1983; S17 Mental Health Act 1983 as amended by Mental Health Act 2007. ¹⁵ Where mental health tribunals require a social circumstances report, this should be completed by the professional who knows the patient best. However, where that person is not a social worker, organisations should ensure that that professional has additional training to understand and be able to articulate a social perspective. ¹⁶ Mental Health Act 1983 part V; Tribunal Procedure (First Tier Tribunal) (Health, Education and Social Care Chamber) Rules 2008; S49 Mental Capacity Act 2005. ¹⁷ S1/S5/S6 Mental Capacity Act 2005; S2/S3/S13 Mental Health Act 1983 as amended by the Mental Health Act 2007; Mental Health Act 1983 *Code of Practice*, e.g. ch.1.3, ch.4, ch.25, ch.26. ¹⁸ No Secrets, Department of Health, 2000. ¹⁹ S47 NHS and Community Care Act 1990; *Prioritising Need in the Context of Putting People First*, Department of Health, 2010. ²⁰ S21 National Assistance Act 1948. ²¹ *Prioritising Need in the Context of Putting People First*, Department of Health, 2010.

Situation 2: Effective safeguarding and risk management

2.1 Social workers are qualified to be the lead professional in inter- agency and inter- professional work when there are significant safeguarding concerns about a child or adult, in keeping with their levels of capability under the Professional Capabilities Framework (see Part Two).

2.2 They assess and manage risk as necessary to ensure that people are protected from serious harm caused by themselves or others, engaging in reflective practice and evidence-based decision-making in order to do so. This includes social workers' statutory duties for child protection.

2.3 Social workers know how to intervene proportionately in such situations, ensuring that people's human rights are effectively protected. They should know when to turn to experienced or advanced social workers for supervision, advice and support if the specific circumstances are beyond their level of capability. They will expect professional supervision to be provided by another registered social worker.

Reserved roles and functions (children and families)

Examples of roles and functions corresponding to this situation in which social workers **must** be the lead professional:

- a. To assess, review and provide help to a child, family or carer with complex family or social care needs, taking full account of appropriate legal frameworks, policy and guidance. It will involve reference to requirements set out in law or statutory guidance.²²
- b. To carry out an assessment or investigation and plan responses to safeguard a child from abuse, neglect or exploitation, building effective relationships with children, adults and families as appropriate.²³
- c. To analyse risks and plan help, support or other intervention when there is a strong possibility that a child at risk of abuse or neglect may cause harm to themselves or other people.²⁴
- d. To assess, investigate or intervene when information or circumstances suggest there may be a need to remove a child from their parents or carers.²⁵
- e. When care or custody arrangements for a child in need or at risk require clear assessment and planning to manage potential dispute among family or carers or others with a legitimate interest in these arrangements.²⁶
- f. To assess family functioning, providing help and support, when relationship breakdown threatens to impair the health or well-being of children at risk of abuse or neglect.²⁷
- g. To carry out an assessment, draw up and oversee a support plan, and provide help and support for a child and family where there is evidence that a child is in need.²⁸

²² S17/S47 Children Act 1989; S53 Children Act 2004; *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, Department for Education, March 2013. ²³ S17/S22/S31/S43/S47 Children Act 1989; S53 Children Act 2004; *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, Department for Education, March 2013. ²⁴ S17/S22/S25/S31/S47 Children Act 1989; S53 Children Act 2004; *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, Department for Education, March 2013. ²⁵ S43/S44/S47 Children Act 1989; S53 Children Act 2004. ²⁶ S17/S20/S47 Children Act 1989; S53 Children Act 2004. ²⁷ S17 Children Act 1989; S53 Children Act 2004. ²⁸ S17 Children Act 1989; S53 Children Act 2004.

- h. To carry out age and human rights assessments of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, ensuring that the right care and support are put in place as appropriate.²⁹
- i. To write court reports and give evidence in relation to children at risk during legal proceedings.³⁰
- j. To assess people's suitability as foster carers, kinship carers (including Special Guardians), or adopters.³¹
- k. To make a report to support an application for a care, adoption or other order as relevant.³²

Examples of roles and functions corresponding to this situation in which social workers **should** be the lead professional:

- a. To act as Practice Educators for social work qualifying course students on practice placements.³³
- b. To give system leadership on safeguarding issues and represent employing organisations at a strategic level.³⁴

Reserved roles and functions (adults)

Examples of roles and functions corresponding to this situation in which social workers **should** be the lead professional:

- a. To carry out an assessment or enquiry and plan responses with an adult, or their representative or advocate if they lack capacity, to safeguard them from abuse, neglect or exploitation, building effective relationships with individuals and families as appropriate.³⁵
- b. To enable an adult who has been abused or neglected to improve their circumstances, where it is unclear whether the person lacks mental capacity to make decisions, or where it is unclear whether their decisions are compromised by the undue influence of others.³⁶
- c. To enable an adult who has been abused or neglected to improve their circumstances, where there may be a range of legally-based interventions or social work methods available.³⁷
- d. To analyse risks and plan responses when there is a strong possibility that an adult at risk of abuse or neglect may cause harm to themselves or other people.³⁸
- e. When care and support arrangements for an adult at risk require clear assessment and planning to manage potential disputes among family or carers or others with a legitimate interest in these arrangements.³⁹

²⁹ R(B) v London borough of Merton [2003] EWHC 1689 ("Merton compliance") and Schedule 3, Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002. ³⁰ S7/S31 Children Act 1989. ³¹ S14/S22 Children Act 1989; Adoption and Children Act 2002. ³² S31 Children Act 1989; Adoption and Children Act 2002. ³³ *Practice Educator Professional Standards for Social Work*, TCSW, 2013 ³⁴ *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, Department for Education, March 2013 ³⁵ S47 NHS and Community Care Act 1990; *Prioritising Need in the Context of Putting People First*, Department of Health, 2010; *No Secrets*, Department of Health, 2000. ³⁶ *No Secrets*, Department of Health, 2000; DL v A Local Authority [2012] EWCA Civ 253. ³⁷ *No Secrets*, Department of Health, 2000; DL v A Local Authority [2012] EWCA Civ 253. ³⁸ *No Secrets*, Department of Health, 2000; S2/S3/S13 Mental Health Act 1983 as amended by Mental Health Act 2007. ³⁹ *No Secrets*, Department of Health, 2000; DL v A Local Authority [2012] EWCA Civ 253.

- f. To assess and support family functioning when relationship breakdown threatens to impair the health or well-being of adults with disabilities or adults at risk of abuse or neglect. ⁴⁰
- g. To write court reports and give evidence in relation to adults at risk during legal proceedings. ⁴¹
- h. To give system leadership on safeguarding issues and represent employing organisations at a strategic level, eg on local safeguarding adults boards. ⁴²
- i. To act as Practice Educators for social work qualifying course students on practice placements. ⁴³

Situation 3: Addressing adversity and social exclusion

3.1 Social workers are qualified to be the lead professional in inter-agency and inter-professional work, in keeping with their levels of capability under the Professional Capabilities Framework (see Part Two), when a child or adult at risk of social exclusion needs help and support.

3.2 This will include assisting people to deal with a variety of adverse circumstances such as poor health, poverty and inadequate living conditions, which may well otherwise result in serious harm or disadvantage. Frequently these factors will cluster together, giving rise to multiple disadvantage.

3.3 For example, in adults' services social workers may have a community development role, identifying and maximising the strengths of individuals, their families and their communities. In children's services, social workers may work with care leavers or disabled young people to help them live independently and improve their life chances.

3.4 Practitioners will know when to turn to experienced or advanced social workers for supervision, advice and support if the specific circumstances are beyond their level of capability. They will expect professional supervision to be provided by another registered social worker.

⁴⁰ S47 NHS and Community Care Act 1990; *Prioritising Need in the Context of Putting People First*, Department of Health, 2010; *No Secrets*, Department of Health, 2000. ⁴¹ Mental Health Act 1983 part V; Tribunal Procedure (First Tier Tribunal) (Health, Education and Social Care Chamber) Rules 2008 and S49 Mental Capacity Act 2005. ⁴² *No Secrets*, Department of Health, 2000; ⁴³ *Practice Educator Professional Standards for Social Work*, The College of Social Work, 2013.

Reserved roles and functions (children and families)

Examples of roles and functions corresponding to this situation in which social workers **should** be the lead professional:

- a. To be the lead professional in collaborative work in situations where a social work perspective is needed to inform or drive decision-making, ensuring that a legally based, human rights perspective is applied to when and how interventions are made in the lives of individuals, families and communities experiencing complex social and family problems. ⁴⁴
- b. To carry out an assessment where a child with complex social care needs may need admission to hospital for treatment for mental health problems – either formally or informally – under the Mental Health Act 1983. ⁴⁵
- c. To support the physical, intellectual and emotional development of children and young people where their social situations are complex and outcomes uncertain. ⁴⁶
- d. To help disabled children and their families address issues arising from their impairments, including overcome the problems of disability, negotiate the transition to adulthood and achieve independent living. ⁴⁷

Reserved roles and functions (adults)

Examples of roles and functions corresponding to this situation in which social workers **should** be the lead professional:

- a. To seek to promote social justice and rights by challenging neglect, discrimination and exclusion, and helping to build safe, strong and caring social networks and communities. ⁴⁸
- b. To be the lead professional in collaborative work in situations where a social work perspective is needed to inform or drive decision-making, ensuring that a legally based, human rights perspective is applied to when and how interventions are made in the lives of individuals, families and communities experiencing complex social and family problems. ⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Human Rights Act 1998; European Convention on Human Rights. ⁴⁵ S2/S3/S4/S13/S131 Mental Health Act 1983; Mental Health Act 1983 *Code of Practice* ch.4, ch.36 [This reserved role and function applies where the social worker has undertaken the required additional training, qualification and ongoing approval processes as an Approved Mental Health Professional]. ⁴⁶ S17 Children Act 1989. ⁴⁷ Equality Act 2010; Part IV Education Act 1996. ⁴⁸ Human Rights Act 1998; Equality Act 2010. ⁴⁹ Human Rights Act 1998; European Convention on Human Rights

- c. To carry out an assessment where an adult with complex social care needs may require admission to hospital for treatment for mental health problems – either formally or informally – under the Mental Health Act 1983.⁵⁰
- d. To assess a person in a complex social or family situation and who is in need of social care and support, and make sure their voice is heard, where there are questions about their mental capacity and concerns about what might be in their best interests. The least restrictive care and support arrangements compatible with their best interests will need to be found.⁵¹
- e. To support and engage with individuals in crisis who need support to manage complex social and family issues. For example, palliative care social workers will work alongside people with cancer and other life limiting medical disorders.⁵²
- f. To help disabled adults address issues resulting from their impairments, to have choice and control and to achieve independent living.⁵³
- g. To take a lead on community development to assess, identify and maximise the strengths or assets of individuals, their families and their communities. For example, repairing, constructing and reinforcing networks of support for individuals in their own communities who would otherwise require admission to institutional care.⁵⁴
- h. To help people in poverty to improve their personal and social circumstances, eg by informing them of their welfare rights, their financial and housing entitlements, and supporting them to access training, work opportunities and benefits.⁵⁵
- i. To help people facing significant personal adversity to improve their health, well-being and social engagement.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ S2/S3/S4/S13/S131 Mental Health Act 1983; Mental Health Act 1983 Code of Practice ch.4 [Where the social worker has undertaken the required additional training, qualification and ongoing approval processes as an Approved Mental Health Professional]. ⁵¹ S47 NHS and Community Care Act 1990; *Prioritising Need in the Context of Putting People First*, Department of Health, 2010; S5 Mental Capacity Act 2005; Mental Capacity Act Code of Practice ch.6. ⁵² Sch. 20(2) NHS Act 2006. ⁵³ S2 Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970; Equality Act 2010. ⁵⁴ S29 National Assistance Act 1948. ⁵⁵ S29 National Assistance Act 1948. ⁵⁶ S47 NHS and Community Act 1990; *Prioritising Need in the Context of Putting People First*, Department of Health, 2010.

Situation 4: Promoting independence and autonomy

4.1 Social workers are qualified to be the lead professional in collaborative work where a person is severely constrained by social or family circumstance and requires skilled support to achieve at least a reasonable degree of independence and autonomy, wherever possible. The extent of their responsibility should be commensurate with their level of capability under the Professional Capabilities Framework (see Part Two).

4.2 They will work in a person-centred way to help people overcome social and practical obstacles and challenges to manage their lives. A person's problems may be episodic or long-term, but in either case, creative, personalised solutions are likely to be required.

4.3 Social workers will know when to turn to experienced or advanced social workers for supervision, advice and support if the specific circumstances are beyond their level of capability. They will expect professional supervision to be provided by another registered social worker.

Reserved roles and functions (children and families)

Examples of roles and functions corresponding to this situation in which social workers **should** be the lead professional:

- a. To support the physical, intellectual and emotional development of children and young people, and build their resilience, where their social situations are complex and outcomes uncertain.⁵⁷
- b. To help children in complex social or family situations to address issues arising from their impairments, to negotiate the transition to adulthood, and achieve and maintain independent living.⁵⁸
- c. To support a looked after child or a care leaver and, as appropriate, to help them to meet their potential, and prepare for and achieve greater independence and autonomy.⁵⁹

Reserved roles and functions (adults)

Examples of roles and functions corresponding to this situation in which social workers **should** be the lead professional:

- a. To assess a person in a complex social or family situation and who is in need of social care and support, and make sure their voice is heard, where there are questions about their mental capacity and concerns about what might be in their best interests. The least restrictive care and support arrangements compatible with their best interests will need to be found.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ S17 Children Act 1989. ⁵⁸ Equality Act 2010; Part IV Education Act 1996. ⁵⁹ S22-24 Children Act 1989; Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000; Children and Young Persons Act 2008. ⁶⁰ S5 Mental Capacity Act 2005; Mental Capacity Act *Code of Practice*, ch.6.

- b. To act as a Best Interests Assessor when it is proposed to deprive a person of their liberty under the Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS), where the reason for it principally derives from the person's complex social circumstances.⁶¹
- c. To carry out an assessment and, if necessary, draw up and oversee a support plan, where there are complex family dynamics, social circumstances or issues of risk which make it difficult for an individual to exercise informed consent or decision-making.⁶²
- d. To build relationships with individuals and families who find it difficult to engage with services but need support to develop or maintain independence or autonomy. For example, families with children at the edge of care or older people with social care needs who wish to remain at home.⁶³
- e. To help people facing significant personal adversity to improve their health, well-being and social engagement.⁶⁴
- f. To help disabled adults address issues resulting from their impairments, to have choice and control, and to achieve independent living.⁶⁵

Situation 5: Prevention and early intervention

5.1 Social workers are qualified to be the lead professional in collaborative work when the child's or adult's health or capacity to manage their lives is deteriorating and is likely to deteriorate further in the absence of a social work intervention.

5.2 They will intervene, for example, where the alternative may be premature admission to institutional forms of care or a legal intervention by the state in the lives of a family. In situations of uncertainty about the best form of intervention, social workers are well equipped to work with people to live as independently as possible for as long as can be achieved.

5.3 Social workers will know when to turn to experienced or advanced social workers for supervision, advice and support if the specific circumstances are beyond their level of capability. They will expect professional supervision to be provided by another registered social worker.

⁶¹ S2/S3/S4 Mental Capacity Act 2005; Mental Capacity Act Code of Practice ch.4, ch.5; MCA Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards. ⁶² S47 NHS and Community Care Act 1990; *Prioritising Need in the Context of Putting People First*, Department of Health, 2010. ⁶³ S29 National Assistance Act 1948. ⁶⁴ S47 NHS and Community Care Act 1990; *Prioritising Need in the Context of Putting People First*, Department of Health, 2010. ⁶⁵ S2 Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970.

Reserved roles and functions (children and families)

Example of roles and functions corresponding to this situation in which social workers **must** be the lead professional:

- a. To arrange appropriate alternative care (including, where indicated, a permanent home) in collaboration with children, young people and their parents where the parents cannot care for them. This applies where the individual or family are unable to make such arrangements themselves. ⁶⁶

Examples of roles and functions corresponding to this situation in which social workers **should** be the lead professional:

- a. To assess and support family functioning when relationship breakdown threatens to impair health and wellbeing of children. ⁶⁷
- b. To carry out an assessment when there is evidence leading to concern that parents or carers are unable to look after their children. ⁶⁸
- c. To carry out an assessment, draw up and oversee a support plan and provide help for a child and family where there is evidence that a child is in need. ⁶⁹
- d. To provide specialist advice to agencies such as schools, children's centres and GPs on potential safeguarding concerns about a vulnerable child. ⁷⁰
- e. To support the physical, intellectual and emotional development of children and young people where their social situations are complex and outcomes uncertain. ⁷¹

⁶⁶ S17/S20 Children Act 1989; S53 Children Act 2004. ⁶⁷ S17 Children Act 1989. ⁶⁸ S17 Children Act 1989; Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995. ⁶⁹ S17 Children Act 1989. ⁷⁰ S17 Children Act 1989. ⁷¹ S17 Children Act 1989.

Reserved roles and functions (adults)

Examples of roles and functions corresponding to this situation in which social workers **should** be the lead professional:

- a. To assess and support family functioning when relationship breakdown threatens to impair health and wellbeing of adults with disabilities or adults at risk of abuse or neglect.⁷²
- b. To provide assessment and support when there is a serious likelihood of family disintegration or relationship breakdown with consequent risks to social functioning for a person with serious mental health, drug or alcohol problems.⁷³
- c. To provide specialist advice to agencies such as schools, children's centres, care providers, voluntary and private sector organisations, and GPs on potential safeguarding concerns about a vulnerable adult.⁷⁴
- d. To arrange appropriate alternative care (including, where indicated, a permanent home) in collaboration with adults where they can no longer manage in their own homes. This applies where the individual or family are unable to make such arrangements themselves.⁷⁵
- e. To take a lead on community development to assess, identify and maximise the strengths or assets of individuals, their families and their communities. For example, repairing, constructing and reinforcing networks of support for individuals in their own communities who would otherwise require admission to institutional care.⁷⁶
- f. To help people in poverty to improve their personal and social circumstances, eg by informing them of their welfare rights, their financial and housing entitlements, and supporting them to access training, work opportunities and benefits.⁷⁷
- g. To help to ensure that public resources are allocated fairly and any changes applied fairly, and informing commissioners of any evidence that the type, scale or quality of services is not matching needs.⁷⁸
- h. To encourage, lead and support integrated working across social care agencies, with other professions and agencies, with networks run by people who use services, and with community support groups, to improve the way services are coordinated and to better understand one another's roles.⁷⁹
- i. To help people facing significant personal adversity to improve their health, well-being and social engagement.⁸⁰

⁷² *Prioritising Need in the Context of Putting People First*, Department of Health, 2010; *No Secrets*, Department of Health, 2000. ⁷³ S47 NHS and Community Care Act 1990. ⁷⁴ *No Secrets*, Department of Health, 2000. ⁷⁵ S21 National Assistance Act 1948. ⁷⁶ S29 National Assistance Act 1948. ⁷⁷ S29 National Assistance Act 1948. ⁷⁸ *Prioritising Need in the Context of Putting People First*, Department of Health, 2010. ⁷⁹ Part 3 NHS Act 2006. ⁸⁰ S47 NHS and Community Care Act 1990; *Prioritising Need in the Context of Putting People First*, Department of Health, 2010.

Part Two

Aligning levels of responsibility and complexity to different levels of capability.

Using the level descriptors within the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF), this summary aims to provide an overview of the roles and functions which could reasonably be expected of social workers with different levels of capability. A social worker's level of capability will depend on their ability to manage issues such as risk, complexity, ambiguity and autonomous decision-making with confidence and professional leadership.

Level of Capability: Newly-qualified Social Worker

[undertaking Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE)]

Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) descriptor

By the **end** of the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) [newly-qualified] social workers should have consistently demonstrated practice in a wider range of tasks and roles, and have become more effective in their interventions, thus building their own confidence, and earning the confidence of others. They will have more experience and skills in relation to a particular setting and user group, and have demonstrated ability to work effectively on more complex situations. They will seek support in supervision appropriately, while starting to exercise initiative and evaluate their own practice.

Degree of responsibility at this level

1. During this first year following qualification, newly qualified social workers should be expected to take overall responsibility for cases they work on, but should regularly seek feedback and support, especially in relation to decision-making.
2. They should not be expected to take responsibility alone for cases involving complex risk or high levels of ambiguity – for example, cases that involve taking court/legal action, or deciding if a case meets the threshold for statutory intervention in safeguarding and child protection cases.

Decision-making

- Generally, a newly qualified social worker should expect to make recommendations about action to social workers with an experienced or advanced level of capability.
- However, professional decisions on straight forward issues should be within the capability of this group of social workers, especially as their confidence and experience grows towards the end of the 12 months of the ASYE programme.
- Newly qualified social workers should start to demonstrate the analytical skills, reflective thinking and holistic approach in their work with individuals and families that should be the hallmark of their professional life.

Level of Capability: Social Worker

Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) descriptor

In the social work role [practitioners] progress to practise effectively, exercising higher quality judgements in situations of increasing complexity, risk, uncertainty and challenge. Through growing understanding they expect and anticipate, but do not pre-judge, the issues that may develop. They have greater confidence and independence, while accessing support when needed, and use their initiative to broaden their repertoire of responses. They have expertise in one or more areas of practice, are familiar with local resource networks and are recognised by peers as a reliable source of knowledge and advice.

Degree of responsibility at this level

For example:

1. Undertaking assessments of risk involving safeguarding vulnerable adults and children.
2. Taking responsibility and working with individuals facing complex social and family crisis, such as in safeguarding work, youth offending, hospital social work, and mental health.
3. Promoting autonomy and development with individuals who have complex social needs and are more vulnerable as a result of disability, exclusion, or diminished capacity, for example, working with people with learning disabilities, physical disabilities or diminished capacity.
4. Working with communities, families and individuals to maximise or promote their personal strengths, social networks and resources.

Decision-making

- Decisions involving complex risk in well known cases should be within the capability of a social worker at this PCF level, but where situations are less clear or information is limited the involvement of someone at experienced social worker PCF level would be advisable.
- Social workers at this level should be making recommendations about whether a case has reached the threshold for statutory intervention, but the decision itself should be made by someone with an experienced or advanced level of capability.

Level of Capability: Experienced Social Worker

Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) descriptor

Experienced social workers are more autonomous in their role than social workers. They demonstrate expert and effective practice in complex situations, assessing and managing higher levels of risk, striking a balance between support and control, liaising with a wide range of professionals, including more senior levels. They manage complex caseloads, and offer expert opinion within the organisation and to others. They chair a range of meetings, offer expert support to case conferences, and produce high quality assessments and reports for a range of functions. They model good practice, setting expectations for others. They start to take responsibility and be accountable for the practice of others, mentoring newly qualified social workers, and supervising the work of junior staff. They undertake capacity-building with individuals, families, communities, user groups and voluntary organisations, and contribute their views on service provision to commissioners.

Degree of responsibility at this level

For example:

1. Undertaking assessments of risk involving safeguarding vulnerable adults and children, where there are complex or ambiguous issues involved.
2. Taking on roles that require autonomous professional decision-making, concerning the restriction of personal liberty and/or involving significant infringements of private and family life⁸¹. For example, when working as an Approved Mental Health Professional (AMHP) or Best Interests Assessor (BIA); when making decisions that a child or adult safeguarding case has reached the threshold for statutory intervention; or when making a recommendation to a court to remove a child from the care of their birth parents.
3. Taking responsibility for the learning, development and practice of others, including through local leadership of practice, or supervision of colleagues and students. For example, making recommendations about whether a social work student has reached the necessary level of capability to pass their placement, or making a decision about a section 47 child protection enquiry under the Children Act 1989 that has been recommended by a less experienced social worker (while also encouraging that worker to develop such skills themselves.)
4. Providing professional leadership and opinion within multidisciplinary contexts.

⁸¹ Such decisions may require an additional level of capability and additional training, eg in the case of the AMHP and BIA roles.

Decision-making

- Social workers at the experienced level of capability are able to argue their case confidently and persuasively in multidisciplinary discussions, or other situations involving conflicting views, such as with family members in court proceedings.
- Experienced social workers are able to make defensible, autonomous professional decisions in specific situations involving interventions in people's lives that significantly impact on their human rights. For example, these decisions could involve infringements on personal autonomy, family life or the deprivation of a person's liberty.
- Such decisions often involve balancing a number of different perspectives. In this way experienced level social workers are able to work in complex family and social situations with issues of ambiguity and risk where outcomes are not always clear.
- Where situations are particularly complex or uncertain – or where the risks regarding outcomes for the service user are significant – experienced social workers should consider involving an advanced level social worker.

Level of Capability: Advanced Social Worker

Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) descriptor

At the advanced level, it is expected that all social workers will provide practice and/or professional leadership, through the development of research-informed practice, quality assurance, staff development, knowledge development or management, and will also help to influence and contribute to strategic development in the organisation. Social workers at this level make a difference by working either directly with people in highly complex situations, or by supporting and/or developing staff or knowledge, to provide better outcomes for people who use services, families, carers and communities.

There are three developmental pathways: **Professional Social Work Educator**, **Advanced Social Work Practitioner** and **Social Work Manager**. The three pathways, or areas of expertise, whilst distinctive, will not necessarily be mutually exclusive, and many social workers will wish to develop capabilities across the pathways, reflecting their expected career progression.

Professional Social Work Educators: facilitate the learning and development of others (for example managing a number of students on qualifying programmes, NQSWs undertaking ASYE, undertaking direct research or professionals undertaking CPD) to develop their knowledge, skills, values and practice. They positively manage the interface between providers of education and training and workplace situations, by contributing to arrangements for selection, curriculum delivery, assessment and evaluation. They draw on and contribute to contemporary research and educational practice. They contribute to workforce development strategies in the agency and/or in a university setting.

Advanced Social Work Practitioners: have their practice recognised as exemplary, and provide leadership and professional wisdom to their colleagues and other professionals for work in situations of high complexity. They continue to work directly with people who use services, and those who care for them, as well as families and communities. They provide constructive challenge to enhance practice, procedures and policies, promote innovation, and introduce new ways of working from recognised sites of excellence. They contribute to the development of knowledge and promotion of excellence in their field using evidence-informed practice. They make use of sophisticated, critical reasoning and both model and facilitate reflective and evidence-informed practice.

Social Work Managers: lead, motivate, nurture and manage a team (social workers and others), ensuring the service provided is effective, and delivering positive outcomes. They do so by managing performance and quality assurance, resources and budgets, in collaboration with others and key stakeholders. They are knowledgeable about managing social workers and others within single or multi-professional teams. They contribute and support the development of practice, procedures and policy and specifically the professional development of the team they lead. They are accountable for the practice of social workers within the team they manage, and provide or ensure effective professional and practice supervision, as well as performance appraisals, takes place. They support mentoring and coaching to enhance the quality of practice. They investigate complaints as needed. They seek to ensure team experience influences and informs the work of the organisation and that of other service providers, supporting and managing change as needed within their area of responsibility.

Degree of responsibility at this level

For example:

1. Acting as social work managers within specific and multidisciplinary teams.
2. Providing specialist professional leadership, across services or organisations, in areas such as personalisation, safeguarding, child protection, mental health/AMHP work, and the Mental Capacity Act including the Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS).
3. Taking responsibility and providing professional leadership around training and development of groups of staff and students, including supporting less experienced professionals to develop defensible, autonomous decision-making skills.

Decision-making

- Advanced social workers make professional decisions, and provide high level professional advice, involving complex practice and organisational risk.
- They are able to maintain their point of view in challenging and hostile situations, articulating their position and decision-making with confidence.
- They work effectively with ambiguity, and the anxiety it often engenders in others, managing this to ensure that the needs of the person using services (be they vulnerable adults or children) are clearly in focus even in situations of uncertainty.
- In complex situations of risk and uncertainty, they are able to articulate and defend the decisions they make, as well as the decisions of other social workers supported by them.
- They recognise when they need to intervene to make an autonomous professional decision, but also when to support and enable less confident or less experienced social workers or other professionals to take the lead in decision-making.
- Where decisions involve significant organisational or reputational risks, advanced social workers should consider whether to consult social workers with a strategic level of capability.

Level of Capability: Strategic Social Worker

Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) descriptor

Social workers at a strategic level work to ensure that organisations are aware of and respond to the views of people who use services, families and carers, as well as the political context within which social work is delivered locally, regionally and nationally. They take responsibility for the implementation of the Standards for Employers of Social Workers. They manage and are accountable for using available resources effectively. Using a human rights and ethical framework, they support complex decision-making at a strategic level, balancing the needs of different interests. They ensure that professional social work counsel and experience are available and inform decision-making at a strategic level, supporting the organisation to do things right and also to do the 'right thing'.

They aim to ensure that the services provided promote positive outcomes and experiences for people, families, carers, and communities. They pro-actively seek feedback from a range of sources to inform strategic decision-making. They provide strategic leadership to ensure effective risk management practice, through the development of excellent inter-agency collaboration and communication. Strategic leaders work across organisations with partners, at local, regional and national levels seeking out best evidence-informed or emerging practice. They support the development of social work knowledge and skills, influencing the development of the profession. They lead and initiate change within and across organisations to improve quality and outcomes.

As with the advanced level, there are three developmental pathways: **Strategic Social Work Educator, Principal Social Worker and Strategic Social Work Manager**. The three pathways, or areas of expertise, whilst distinctive, will not necessarily be mutually exclusive, and many social workers will wish to develop capabilities across the pathways, reflecting their expected career progression.

Strategic Social Work Educators: take the responsibility for responding to professional development needs, including those from initiatives and policy, liaising locally, regionally and nationally to seek out best practice. They respond to learning needs that emerge from audit, analysis and serious case reviews locally and nationally. They are involved in and initiate research. They will use this information to plan change across the organisation ensuring developments dovetail with other organisational developments and priorities. They ensure that a workforce and/or academic development strategy is in place within the organisation to ensure that staff and students are equipped to deliver quality outcomes for people who use services, families and carers. This will include collating, analysing and reporting on information to measure the impact and outcomes for the workforce, organisation and the service provided. They will lead on ensuring that partnership arrangements are in place to deliver workforce or academic development requirements. They will take a pro-active stance on developing the body of social work knowledge within and outside of the organisation; they will champion research and evidence-informed practice.

Principal Social Workers: take a professional lead across an organisation, and have a responsibility for supporting and advising on the quality of practice. They provide professional leadership for social work practice, and continue to directly engage and work with people who use services, families and carers. They draw on this professional experience to influence strategic decision-making across the organisation. They use their knowledge and skills to inform the wider functions of the organisation, beyond social work and 'social care' boundaries. They take the responsibility for identifying and responding to new initiatives and changes in legislation and government policy. They will liaise and develop professional networks locally, regionally and nationally to identify and influence practice improvements. Principal Social Workers ensure that organisational change takes account of professional social work issues. They develop and sustain

partnership arrangements with stakeholders within and across organisations. They promote and take part in developing the body of social work knowledge and research within and outside of the organisation, working in partnership to ensure that developments reflect the needs of front line practice.

Strategic Social Work Managers: are skilled managers and leaders. They work with stakeholders, including service users, carers, families and communities to deliver change and quality improvements. Professional leaders at this level are responsible for ensuring social work practice and values deliver positive outcomes. They promote local and national research and evaluation to influence and develop social work evidence-informed practice. They lead, motivate and inspire social workers and others across organisations ensuring the services provided are effective and responsive. They are knowledgeable about the communities and the political context in which they work. They promote equalities, inclusion and diversity within strategic decision-making. They advise on the impact of policy and practice for people in more excluded groups or communities. They use their influence within and across organisations working pro-actively to initiate, manage and support change within and across organisations to meet the needs of their whole community.

Degree of responsibility at this level

For example:

1. Providing strategic professional leadership for social work in senior roles such as director, assistant director, principal social worker or strategic professional development and workforce lead.
2. Working and leading across and between organisations; exercising strategic influence and articulating and promoting the social work agenda; and demonstrating professional leadership.
3. Managing high levels of organisational risk relating to social work, making decisions in the most prominent and complex cases.
4. Taking responsibility for implementing the Standards for Employers of Social Workers, held by the Local Government Association, which set out the conditions of good social work practice at organisational level.

Decision-making

Exercising capability at this level is often interlinked with specific job roles or functions. However, in order to operate effectively at this level, strategic social workers must have the capability to make decisions in the following circumstances:

- Strategic social workers operate with confidence in highly political environments, articulating social work positions with authority and clarity.
- They provide leadership and authoritative direction within and outside of their organisations, managing the anxiety and ambiguity inherent in the decisions they need to make.
- They make autonomous, professionally informed decisions on a regular basis, and ensure the organisation and those within it are also able to make autonomous professional decisions appropriate to their level of capability.