

Building a safe, confident future for social workers: What UNISON members want

UNISON carried out a poll of members during February and March to gauge social workers' priorities for the Social Work Reform Programme. This programme is being developed to implement the 15 Social Work Task Force recommendations. For more information on the Task Force report *Building a safe, confident future* see www.unison.org.uk/socialwork.

We wanted to take a straw poll of how our members are viewing the Task Force recommendations and what areas they think the union should be pursuing on their behalf.

About the sample

A total of 105 members responded with an even distribution across regions. Just over half described themselves as social workers, 15% senior social workers, 7% social work assistants, 7% team managers, 14% 'other'. 95% were employed by councils with the rest either in the NHS or the voluntary sector.

The core Task Force recommendations

Of the 15 core Task Force recommendations, the top five priorities for UNISON members are:

- 1) a national standard for employers on the support they must give their social workers;
- 2) national requirements on the quantity and quality of supervision;
- 3) national training and support programmes for front-line managers
- 4) improving practice placements
- 5) assessed and supported first year in employment

"Employers must 'sign up' to a standard and if they don't shape up there should be a reporting and sanction element, and the person doing this should NOT be victimised."

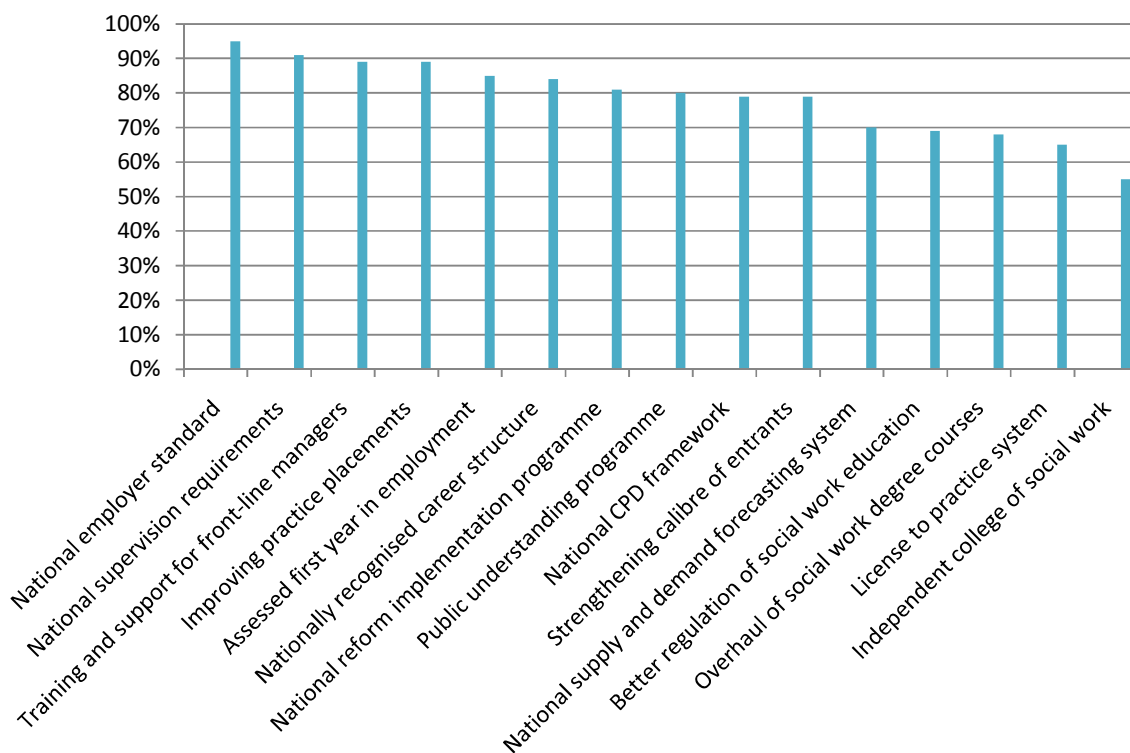
"My experience is that social work operational managers are being pressurised to meet targets so hard by strategic managers that they are boxed into not investing the time in learning how to be good managers. Many I work with see supervision as something that can be allowed to slip and many front-line staff don't get supervision from month to month."

The lowest 3 priorities for UNISON members are:

- 1) independent college of social work
- 2) license to practice system
- 3) overhaul of social work degree courses

“My concern around a Social Work College is will it be yet another club to belong to? What will it give members that UNISON and BASW don’t already provide?”

How UNISON MEMBERS PRIORITISED THE 15 CORE TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS*



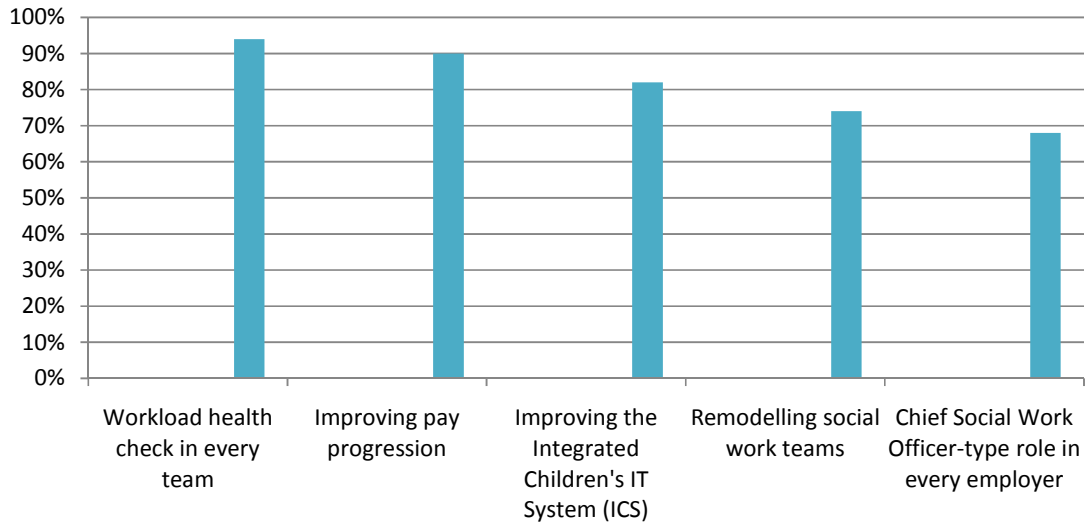
*These graphs show how UNISON members rated the recommendations. Respondents were asked to assess each one and within the survey a score was assigned to their rating: high priority = 3 points; medium priority = 2 points; low priority = 1 point; don’t agree/not necessary = 0 points.

For each recommendation the points awarded by respondents are expressed as percentage of the total points available if all respondents had rated the recommendation ‘high priority’. This allows an overall score to be given to each recommendation.

Associated Task Force recommendations

We also asked members about their views on a number of associated recommendations which appear in the Task Force report. Of these, the recommendation for a workload ‘health-check’ to be carried out in every team, and for improved pay progression, were the most highly regarded.

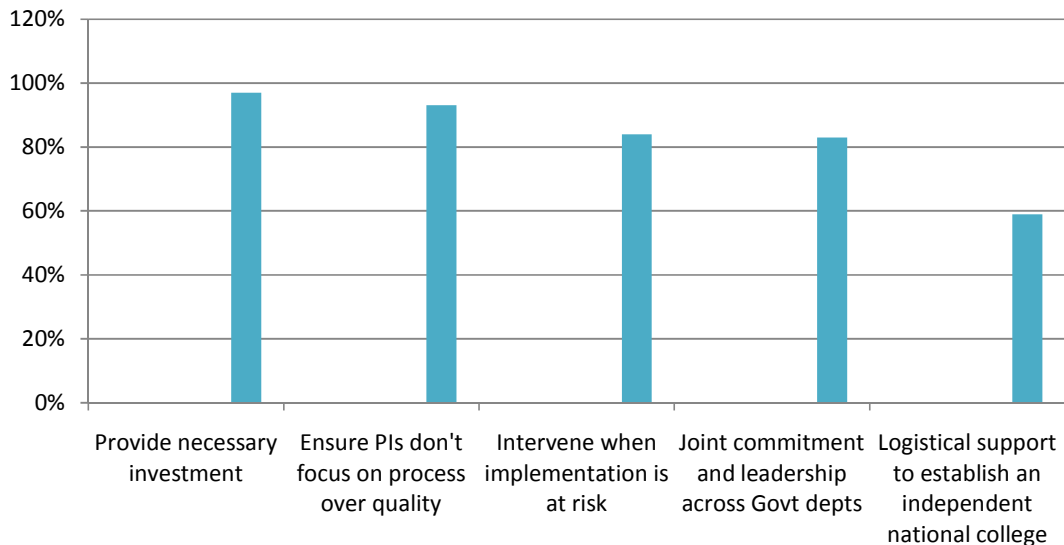
HOW UNISON MEMBERS PRIORITISED ASSOCIATED TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS*



Action from Government

The Task Force report sets out a number of areas where it says action by Government will be necessary to sustain implementation of the recommendations. UNISON members rated provision of the necessary investment and overhauling performance indicators as the top priorities for Government action.

HOW UNISON MEMBERS PRIORITISED ACTION NEEDED FROM GOVERNMENT*



Barriers to success

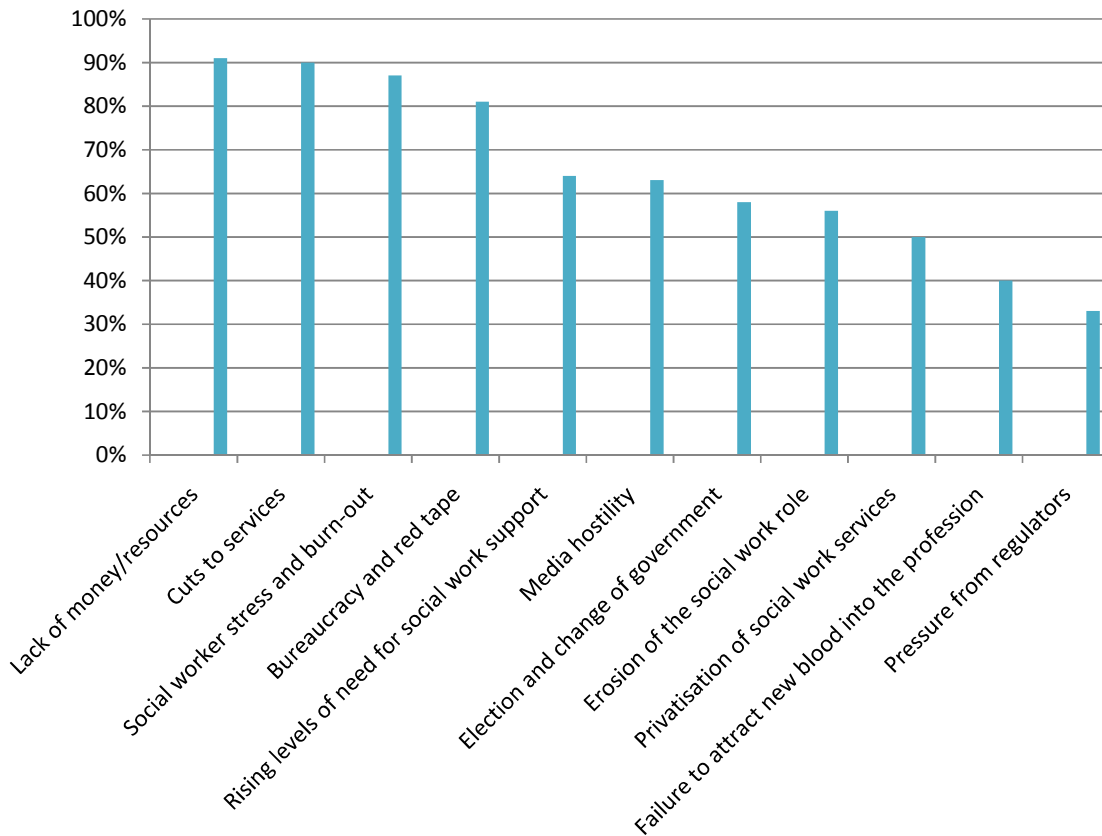
UNISON members identified the biggest potential barriers to successful implementation as lack of money/resources (mentioned by 91% of respondents); cuts to services (90% of respondents); social worker stress and burn-out (87% of respondents); and bureaucracy and red tape (81% of respondents).

“These systems also enable management to ‘hide’ what is happening in reality as they push social workers to complete ‘bits’ of work which affect the indicators and unallocated workloads.”

“The SWTF has not fully understood the level of denial that is displayed where workloads exceed limits set by senior managers themselves. Managers all too often explain away large caseloads with statements like ‘several of the cases are dormant’ or ‘the social worker has had 12 months to close that case and so on.’”

“Far too much time is spent on the computer and not face-to-face contact. Pay admin staff more and let them undertake some computer-based work, update chronologies etc”

WHAT UNISON MEMBERS SEE AS BARRIERS TO SUCCESS



Missing from the Task Force recommendations

UNISON members were asked whether there were areas they felt the Task Force had missed. The most frequently cited areas were:

- erosion of the social work role in adult social care

“The tasks of social work are being passed on to unqualified staff ie support planning officers as they are cheaper to employ and there is the assumption that in adult work at least that social work qualifications are not essential.”

- management structures too remote from the front-line

“I think that more work needs to be undertaken on what makes a good first line manager. Good managers in social workers’ eyes (those who support and defend their staff) are bad managers in senior managers’ eyes... Good first line managers need the skills to straddle this conflict.”

- isolation of social workers ‘outposted’ in the NHS
- pressure of inadequate work environment/resources eg hot-desking, lack of car parking, and compensation for car use
- volume of paperwork, bureaucracy

“Not enough emphasis on bureaucracy and the computer system’s ineffectiveness”

- ongoing burden of ICS
- the need for limits on caseloads
- the need for co-working on cases

“I think the SWTF ducked the issue of joint visits/working in pairs with the most vulnerable children or where parents are hostile.”

- need for support around whistleblowing
- safeguards and opportunities for ‘non social work qualified’ staff

“I work as an unqualified Education Welfare Officer. I currently have 40 open cases and do the same work as qualified social workers for less money. I am not an isolated example... although they have started to second one person a year on to the social work course. I was told at my last appraisal that there is no training and career progression and to look outside of the service if I want to progress. This ... produces a demoralised two-tier workforce.”

- defined roles reserved to qualified social workers

- racism against staff
- poverty and inequality

Priorities for UNISON

Respondents gave their views on what UNISON should be prioritising in our work on behalf of social workers.

The 5 most frequently mentioned areas members think UNISON should prioritise are:

1. Workloads

“An agreed way of grading caseloads, which recognises that a small complex caseload can be much busier than a large non-complex caseload, to support workload management and in turn social workers’ stress levels.”

2. Career and pay progression

“Other professions have career grades. I am 57 years old, still working on the front line. I am on the same career grade as I was on in 1989.”

“A career structure for qualified and experienced practitioners on a par with managers’ career path.”

3. Tackling bullying and blame management culture

“We need a review of the ‘top down’ management structure..Managers are too far removed from the reality of day to day practice.”

4. Public image of social work

“Work on creating a much more positive view of social workers. I spoke to a linked professional the other day about being a SW – she felt immediately sorry for me. So that is someone who has some awareness, yet she was blanketing me and my role with what she had picked up from the media.”

5. Access to training and CPD

“Time to undergo further training and development.”

Other areas frequently mentioned as priority areas for the union include: paperwork vs client contact; campaigning for resources; developing employer standards ; the assessed year in employment; role and recognition of social work assistants etc; need for skilled admin support; whistleblowing; working conditions.

- *“An independent support helpline [is needed] for front-line social workers to ‘whistle-blow’ on poor practice... to enable support that does not risk the health, well-being and career of the social worker involved.”*
- *“Recognition of social work assistants – they are taking on client work meant for social workers.. It’s social work on the cheap.”*
- *“Having a structure where admin support and support from assistants to carry out basic tasks is available to social workers in all teams.”*
- *“Provide everyone with a desk, telephone, car parking and compensation if their car is damaged by a service user.”*
- *“Better support for practice teachers: it is very difficult to support a student without a realistic reduction in work load... I’m tired of doing such tasks in my own time and will no longer have students.”*
- *“NQSW courses are again based on portfolios and essays, they should be practice-based and include weekly case reviews with discussions on how to put theory into practice. At the moment the groups are too large to do this.... We spend most of this time talking about the paperwork we have to fill in.”*

What is UNISON already doing around the reform agenda?

- UNISON is represented on the Social Work Reform Board and is heavily involved in the Board’s work on developing the national standard for employers, which will include workload management. UNISON’s representative also chairs the sub-group working on the nationally recognised career framework
- UNISON is leading work within the local government pay negotiating body, the NJC, to develop grading and job evaluation guidance to match the career framework and secure greater pay progression for social workers remaining in front-line practice
- UNISON is represented on the Working Group which is working on proposals for how an independent College of Social Work can be set up. UNISON is also taking part in the panel interviewing to appoint an interim Chair
- UNISON is equipping all our branches with detailed advice to help them work with their employers to conduct the workload health checks recommended by the Task Force for every social work team
- UNISON has recently run an advertising campaign across local papers and Metros promoting the positive achievements of social workers – and we are looking at what else we can do to get that message across

For more information on our work visit www.unison.org.uk/socialwork

“The impetus must be kept going. Unions and other groups should pressure government to keep these reforms in focus and not allow them to be overtaken by party politics.”