



# Building a safe, confident future -

the final report of the  
Social Work Task Force

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# INTRODUCTION

The Social Work Task Force (SWTF) was set up by the government to advise on a programme of reform for social work in England. It was set up in the wake of the tragic death of Baby Peter in Haringey, but its remit was to look at the need for reform across all fields of social work, including children's, adults' and mental health services.

The task force included representatives from directors of children's and adults' services, service user organisations, frontline practitioners, UNISON and the British Association of Social Workers (BASW).

The final report of the SWTF was published in December 2009. It can be viewed at [www.dcsf.gov.uk/swtf](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/swtf) where you will also find details of how to order free copies.

This booklet tries to answer some of the questions social workers are asking about what the task force recommendations might mean for you.

If you are not already a member of UNISON, now is the time to join. To get the best out of the social work reform programme, social workers need to be well organised and active, with a strong voice in their workplace. That means being a member of the union that is speaking up for social workers. UNISON has a network of representatives in every area – and with over 40,000 social worker members we are by far the largest organisation supporting people in this important profession.

The more members we have in social work, the stronger we are. We need a UNISON contact in every social work team. Join now and get active.



## ***So what exactly has the task force recommended?***



There are 15 core recommendations as follows:

1. strengthening the calibre of entrants to the social work profession
2. an overhaul of social work degree courses
3. improving the quality of practice placements and ensuring at least one is in a statutory service
4. an assessed and supported first year in employment – similar to the NQT year for teachers and the Northern Ireland system for social workers
5. better regulation of social work education courses
6. a national standard for employers on the support they must give their social workers to do their job effectively
7. national requirements on the quantity and quality of supervision
8. dedicated programmes of training and support for front-line social work managers
9. a national framework for continuing professional development, moving to an ‘entitlement’ to ongoing learning and development
10. a nationally recognised career structure
11. an independent national college of social work
12. a programme to promote public understanding of social work
13. a license to practise system to replace registration, with stronger requirements on training and development
14. a national system for forecasting demand for social workers and planning supply
15. a national reform programme to implement the recommendations.





**Q *How do we know whether the government will implement the recommendations?***

**A** The government says it has accepted all of the recommendations and is publishing an implementation plan early in 2010. This will tell us what resources it will make available, and plans for any changes to legislation that are needed. The task force has said that the overall reform programme is likely to require 10 years to fully embed.

In the meantime the government has announced that a national social work reform programme will oversee implementation of the recommendations – with a board chaired by Moira Gibb, who chaired the task force. UNISON is also on the board.

In this climate of cuts UNISON will be looking very closely at whether the government puts its money where its mouth is. The SWTF was clear that any meaningful reform would require sustained investment in social work.

If there is a change of government in 2010, members of the SWTF and others will expect the new government to ensure that the process of extensive consultation and evidence gathering that went into the SWTF report is not wasted.

**Q *Will these reforms really make things better where others have failed?***

**A** UNISON is clear that, as with a lot of things, the devil will be in the detail. We will use our involvement in the reform process to push for implementation that delivers genuine improvements to the working lives of social workers. Too many previous reports have failed to deliver for social work – we want this to be the inquiry to end all inquiries.

One of the reasons that previous reforms have failed is because social workers were not consulted. The process that went into the SWTF – widespread engagement and consultation with social workers – must be carried forward into the reform programme. The other main reason has been lack of resources (see above).



***What about the here and now? A 10-year reform programme is all very well but social workers in my team are on their knees.***



UNISON is very clear that these reforms will not be deliverable unless action is taken in the short term to create more capacity within social work services, and to tackle the blight of excessive workload and bureaucracy, poor working conditions and defective IT systems.

The secretaries of state have written to chief executives, lead members and directors in every local authority to tell them that they must get started now – by talking to their social workers and local union reps about how they are going to put in place the support that their social workers need.

The task force did recognise the gap between the vision for social work and the current crisis conditions in many areas. The report calls for immediate action in the short term from both central government and local employers on:

- improving the Integrated Children’s System (ICS)
- reallocating resources to manage high pressures on front-line services
- holding frank and open discussions with frontline practitioners and managers about the reality of practice
- piloting the remodelling of social work services.





**Q** *That's all very well, but who is going to put pressure on my employer to do anything when they've been ignoring the problems up to now?*

**A** UNISON believes that one of the most potentially significant recommendations made in the task force report is that there should be a national standard for the support that employers must provide for their social workers.

As the first step to developing this standard, the task force says that all employers need to carry out a 'workload health check' to kick-start action to improve the workload problem for all their social work teams. The task force says that the health check is: *"a mechanism to promote debate at all levels of the service... It should be the basis for discussion at each of these levels, with a requirement in place that staff have been involved in the response at each level and a mechanism for recording areas of disagreement."*

The task force has set out 39 areas that employers need to look at. UNISON is calling these 'the 39 steps' and we have produced advice for all our branches to enable them to push your employer to complete the health check by May 2010.

UNISON believes this health-check process is a fundamental requirement for all employers of social workers. The requirement to publish the results will allow monitoring and collation of critical benchmarking information about caseloads, turnover rates and agency staffing. It will allow elected members to hold officers to account about the working conditions in social work teams.

But to be effective the health check has to be a true reflection of conditions on the ground as experienced by social workers. We also believe it is vital that the process is as open and transparent as possible, with local union representatives

involved at every step: to provide independent scrutiny and to give social workers confidence in the process.

So you should expect as a social worker to be actively involved in the health check for your team with a chance to discuss the workload pressures you are experiencing and have these recorded as part of the health-check report.



***The issue of workload is critical – so why didn't the task force set a national limit for the number of cases any social worker should have?***



There was no consensus on what would be the right number to set. For some social workers 12 cases at any one time would be reasonable – for others that could be too many. Too many factors influence what is a reasonable caseload – the type of work and service users involved; the experience of the individual worker; travel times; complexity of cases etc. Any ceiling set would soon become a floor as well with employers thinking it was ok as long as they didn't go over the maximum. The report says: *“Our evidence suggests that it is a lack of a whole system approach to managing all of the pressures on workload – rather than the lack of a single caseload limit – that is having a detrimental effect on social work practice.”*

However the task force does say that the national standard for employers, which will be developed as part of the reform programme, will require employers to publish “local caseload ceilings for different teams and services” or other forms of workload control. This will also be looked at by inspectors from the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and Ofsted.

But the effectiveness of any scheme depends on what happens when a practitioner reaches their maximum workload and there are not enough staff to cope with the volume of work coming in.

UNISON remains concerned that without national benchmarks we will see some areas continuing to breach local workload management systems and guidelines on acceptable caseloads. However, the requirement to publish information on caseload ceilings and action taken to address workload problems will allow us to monitor what different authorities are doing and use the results to argue for national benchmarks.

## **Q** *What will the employer standard cover?*

**A** The task force says that the national standard for employers should cover:

- staffing levels
- case allocation and caseload management supervision
- staff safety and welfare
- tools and working conditions, for example IT, admin support and work environment
- access to research and practice guidance
- knowledge and accountability of managers
- leadership and accountability for strengths and weaknesses of social work practice.

The task force says there should be a senior manager who is a qualified social worker “to oversee the overall health of professional social work in the organisation” and to advise the employer on how the standard can be upheld. This person should also be accessible to frontline staff. This recommendation is based on the post of chief social work officer in Scotland, which provides professional governance and accountability for social work in each local authority.

So in future you should be able to have a clear expectation of the support you should get from your employer. If you don't, you should be able to raise your concerns knowing that you and your union representative have a clear national standard that you can refer to, and that senior managers and



councillors will be accountable to. You should also have a 'chief social worker' with whom you can raise professional practice concerns and get professional advice and guidance.

**Q *That's all very well, but will the employer standard have teeth?***

**A** UNISON is disappointed that the recommendation does not call for a statutory requirement for employers to meet the standard – relying instead on employers being kitemarked against it through the inspection process. However the task force report also holds out the possibility of moving to direct government intervention where employers fall short of the standard. Again, the fact that the information about how each employer is performing against the standard will be published will apply pressure and hold employers to account.

Separately the government has said it will make statutory the code of practice for social care employers. UNISON has long campaigned for this and we could perhaps see the national standards for employers of social workers becoming the means by which employers would demonstrate that they comply with the employers' code.

**Q *I've heard that the task force wants to get tougher about supervision and management. Is this true?***

**A** Yes - the task force report makes a strong recommendation on supervision, saying that there should be clear national requirements for all employers. These should include:

- a clear supervision policy
- effective training and performance management for supervisors



- monitoring of the actual frequency and quality of supervision.

Under the task force proposal, newly qualified social workers should have weekly supervision during the first six weeks and then fortnightly for the first six months. After this the national minimum you should expect is monthly supervision, with each session at least one-and-a-half hours of uninterrupted time. Guidance will also cover requirements for the quality of supervision.

Where your line manager is not a social worker, professional support should be provided by an experienced social worker. This will be particularly important for social workers in multi-agency or multi-disciplinary teams, or those working in the NHS.

UNISON believes this will be an important entitlement for social workers – but again we need to be sure that there will be a clear process for addressing situations where employers are not complying.

It also comes back to the question of resources – team managers and senior practitioners are often overstretched and given responsibility for supervision for far too many practitioners to be able to do it effectively. We believe that the supervision requirements will also need to address what is a reasonable ‘span of control’.

The task force also recommends a structured programme of training and support for frontline managers at three levels: aspiring managers, newly appointed managers and established managers.

We believe this will be important to build better and more consistent management practice and again we need to see it resourced properly so that all employers can take part.

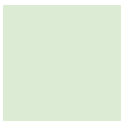
**Q** *I'm an experienced social worker but I don't want to be a manager – there's nowhere for me to go. Is there anything in the task force report to convince me to stay in social work?*

**A** The task force made some very strong findings about lack of consistency and variable standards for professional development and career opportunities, particularly for those wishing to stay in frontline practice. The position for social workers was found to compare unfavourably with that of nurses and teachers – which offer advanced and consultant levels.

The task force recommendation for a more coherent and effective national framework for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is to: build on the best parts of the current PQ framework; incorporate a masters in social work practice; include diverse and less formal activities which can be properly accredited within the framework.

The second task force recommendation of interest to you is that there should be a single nationally recognised career structure for social work. This should offer hope for those of you who work for employers that have not developed career structures for social work that offer opportunities for progression.

The task force recommends a career structure which allows social workers to progress once they have passed their assessed first year to become senior social workers and after that choose from three clear career routes: advanced practice; practice education; management.





## ***What about pay? When we lead case conferences we are often the lowest paid professionals in the room***



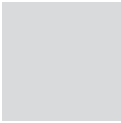
The task force found that while starting salaries for social workers compared well with other groups such as teachers, nurses and police officers, pay progression opportunities were worse as experience is gained.

The local government employers and the trade unions have been asked to come up with clearly defined levels of skills and responsibility so that employers can put in grading structures to match the new national career structure – you should then be able to see more opportunities for your career and pay to progress. The task force also says that employers need to review their job evaluation outcomes for social workers to make sure that knowledge and skills have been properly measured.

UNISON is already talking to the employers about this – we want to get moving on this quickly so we can deliver results. The task force did not recommend that a completely new national pay body for social workers should be set up because this could take years, would be complex and might not deliver improvements to pay where they are needed.

Progress in this area could make a big difference to recruitment and retention especially in areas where employers are using lots of short-term add-ons to try and poach social workers from their neighbours. Once again though, it will need extra resources – at a time when public sector pay is being squeezed again.





**Q *There's a shortage of social workers, so why does the task force seem to want to make it more difficult to get into social work?***

**A** Yes this is a worry but the task force was concerned about the high numbers of people either dropping out of social work courses or dropping out of social work after their first or second year. We do have some concerns about the parts of the recommendation that refer to raising requirements around A-level or equivalent scores because we are not convinced that A-level scores are a good predictor of who will be the best social workers.

However the task force is right to say that there should be more consistency in how higher education institutions (HEIs) select candidates. It is also right to say that there should be proper evaluation of life and work experience, communication skills, creativity and emotional resilience alongside academic measures.

We are also pleased that the task force has endorsed 'grow your own' schemes such as the UNISON and Open University partnership, which helps support workers to reach the standards required by the degree course while in employment. People who qualify in this way tend to have better retention rates.

**Q *Yes but the task force is also saying that people will now have to do a probationary year – isn't that another hurdle to jump through?***

**A** It is true that the assessed and supported year in employment will involve an assessment before social workers become fully qualified to practice. But this is designed to bridge the gap between getting your qualification and coping with the full range



of responsibilities and accountabilities that practice throws at you.

Employers have been saying that newly qualified social workers are not equipped to hit the ground running and HEIs have been saying that employers expect too much and are not realistic.

UNISON's view is that employers should not be throwing newly qualified staff in at the deep end and that we need a system which forces them to put in place structured support and strict protections around caseload and types of responsibility.

We believe that the assessed and supported year can achieve this if it is designed and implemented in the right way with all the necessary safeguards. This is because it creates a statutory distinction between the status of someone in their first year who is only provisionally registered, and a fully registered social worker. Employers who overload or do not support social workers during this year can be held to account for clearly breaching their duties – one method under discussion is a training contract for the worker, which would give them clear contractual entitlements during this year.

UNISON has been clear though that issues such as consistency in assessment processes and a full right of appeal will be crucial.



***Social work has been a fully regulated profession since 2005, so why did the press make out that the task force was calling for social workers to be 'licensed'?***



Yes it was another example of misleading portrayal of social work in the press. The task force came up with a recommendation to develop a 'license to practice' system in response to two main issues: the very lax nature of the current

requirements on post-registration training and learning (PRTL) operated by the General Social Care Council (GSCC); and the call for greater requirements for specialisation within social work.

UNISON members tell us that they are very unclear about what is expected in terms of the type of PRTL they have to demonstrate when they come up for re-registration. They also do not feel that the quality of the training and development they get from employers is good enough, but employers are saying it is good enough for the GSCC.

So we do support moves to make requirements for CPD more coherent and meaningful in order to drive up the standard of what employers offer and enable their social workers to access. However this could have been done by strengthening the current PRTL regime rather than inventing a new system.

The other area to be looked at under this recommendation is whether there should be additional standards in order to be licensed to practice in particular specialisms – for example extending the current approach for becoming approved as an approved mental health professional (AMHP) to other areas such as child protection. We believe there may be merit in this approach as long as it does not restrict social workers' future job options.

UNISON's biggest concerns are that the implications for social workers of a move to a licensing system remain unclear. We do not believe that this was addressed by the task force. We do not want to see a system which involves a lot of bureaucracy and hoops that social workers have to jump through every three years to remain in practice – this will destabilise an already fraught staffing situation and tie up precious resources.

We will also resist any attempts to construct a licensing system which attempts to shift liability for service provision away from

employers and on to practitioners.

Finally we will only accept more onerous requirements on demonstrating CPD if it is underpinned by an individual enforceable entitlement as a social worker to meaningful CPD. This mirrors the stance of the teaching unions who are facing similar moves around licensing.

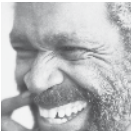
### **Q *Why do we need a college of social work – won't it be just another quango?***

**A** The task force has been very clear that a college of social work should be independent, accountable and should be a professional leadership body tasked with promoting the profession and setting standards. It is about representing social work rather than social workers, which is the job of UNISON.

In order not to become a remote quango the college would need to be financially independent which means primarily funding itself through membership subscriptions. However to get off the ground it will need some time-limited government funding.

A survey of 1100 practitioners carried out for the task force illustrated the issues: 99% believed a stronger professional voice for social work is needed; 76% believed a national college would help establish a stronger voice; but only 41% said they would be willing to pay a subscription fee to join a college.

Nobody can be forced to join a college so it will need to be attractive enough to make people want to. Most social workers have to pay for their professional registration fee themselves and there is the threat of a significant hike to fees following the inquiry into the GSCC's difficulties. By contrast the government pays for teachers' registration fees. Like teachers, most social workers see belonging to a trade union as essential given their line of work.



UNISON believes there is a role for a college to play in promoting the profession of social work, raising public awareness and understanding of its importance, promoting good practice, setting professional standards and seeking to influence policy and legislation.

However we have warned that the existence of a college (royal or otherwise) would not be a magic bullet and we remain concerned that it could distract from the pressing workplace issues and the need to put resources and investment out into the field.

UNISON will want to work with any college that emerges as we do with a range of professional bodies – for example with the College of Occupational Therapists, where we have a deal which gives automatic UNISON membership to those who join it.

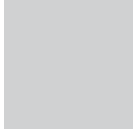


### ***Why didn't the task force say more about the blight of bureaucracy in social work?***



We agree that in this area the task force report is likely to disappoint a lot of social workers. The task force received a large volume of evidence about the pernicious effects of bureaucracy – particularly the performance target regime which prioritises crude measures such as timescales for completing reports over the quality of social work achieved; and the horrendous problems with ICS.

This issue does come through strongly in the interim report. The final report says ICS must be reformed and under recommendation 15 it clearly lays down a challenge to government to ensure that performance indicators do not prioritise process over service quality and outcomes, and to reverse the de-skilling of social work that has resulted. There is work underway to simplify ICS and remove exemplars and forms from it. There are also some moves afoot to review



performance indicators but these appear so far to be tinkering rather than radical. So this is one of the priority areas UNISON wants to focus on in the reform programme and one where social workers will need to continue to be vocal.

**Q** ***So much of this is still to come – how can I keep up-to-date with what actually happens?***

**A** Keep in touch with your local UNISON representatives, and look out for updates on the national website at **[unison.org.uk/socialwork](https://unison.org.uk/socialwork)**. Just as importantly, get involved in your workplace and have your say.







If you are already a member of UNISON, get involved by becoming a contact or a rep. We need people on the ground who can oversee the workload health check and help us to make sure that social workers get a good deal as the social work reform programme gets underway.

If you are not a member, join UNISON online at **[unison.org.uk/join](http://unison.org.uk/join)** or call **0845 355 0845**