

MEDIA REPORTING GUIDELINES FOR CASES INVOLVING SOCIAL WORKERS

This document is intended for all journalists reporting on cases involving vulnerable individuals who have had the support of – or were known to – social services, local authorities, charities, or the NHS. To be reviewed in September 2024.

Social workers are on the frontline of helping the most vulnerable in society. In their roles, social workers have to carry out statutory duties. Therefore, it is correct and accepted that these professionals – like their colleagues – are open to public scrutiny.

However, unlike colleagues in nursing, police and social care, social workers tend not to receive balanced coverage in the media.

Indeed, it is often the case that social workers only make headlines when things have gone wrong. To avoid unbalanced reporting on social work and social workers, and to ensure they are covered fairly, on matters of public interest, this document sets out helpful guidance.

It is important that social workers are portrayed fairly and accurately in the media for the following five main reasons:

- To avoid harm to social workers, who are ordinary people trying to go about their jobs just like you and me.
- To protect those in their care, who may be made more vulnerable by negative portrayals of the profession as a whole.
- To ensure media criticism of the social work profession does not undermine trust in the essential role they play or stop people from coming forward for support.
- To avoid the victimisation of innocent individuals.
- To prevent damage to the recruitment and retention of social workers, which is a profession already suffering from staff shortages.

As one social worker commented:

“Recent media coverage puts the onus on social workers failing and blaming the very people who often make a positive difference in many children’s lives.”

On the other hand, balanced and informed reporting about the role of social workers can help build trust in the profession and encourage people to work with social workers to improve our communities.

These guidelines were produced in consultation with social workers, the Social Workers Union (SWU), British Association of Social Workers and individuals with experience of having been helped by social workers, to supplement professional codes of conduct and support the highest standards of reporting in broadcast, print and online media.

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UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF A SOCIAL WORKER

Often the role of the social worker is misunderstood by the media or oversimplified and portrayed as “checking up on children.” In reality, the job of a social work professional is varied, and its frame of reference comes from anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice. The profession aims to improve people’s lives and protect the individual and wider society from harm. Social workers are catalysts for positive change and, due to the nature of their roles, are often in high-risk situations.

The role may involve carrying out assessments of need and risk, and providing support for adults or children:

- With mental health issues
- With learning difficulties
- With differing abilities
- Involved within the criminal justice system
- Who are identified as vulnerable, such as in addiction services
- Deemed to be at significant risk or in need

Social workers may work within safeguarding children and adults, and rights-based environments or protection services, such as Women’s Aid. They may well be approved mental health professionals (AMHPs) responsible for coordinating Mental Health Act assessments or best interest assessors (BIAs) under the Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards.

Whilst working as a social worker, they may come into the purview of several court-based environments and be exposed to media coverage. For example:

- A coroner’s court whereby they may have assessed or been a care coordinator for a person who has died, and they have written a coroner’s report and must give evidence at court.
- They may attend a magistrates or juvenile court with a young person or adult they are working with or be asked for an opinion.
- They may be a witness at a mental health tribunal advising the panel on whether the person meets the statutory criteria, the circumstances leading to admission, family views regarding the person who is detained, any improvements in the person’s

mental health since admission, any risks to self, health or others, and providing a view with regards a community care and crisis and contingency plan and package.

- They may attend the court of protection pertaining to complex deprivation of liberty issues.
- They may also attend family court when children are deemed at risk.

Social workers play a role in protecting children and adults with support needs from harm. From helping keep a family under pressure together to supporting someone with mental health problems, social work is a varied, demanding, often emotional and very rewarding career.

Social workers work with a number of people at any one time. This is often referred to as a caseload. Day-to-day work involves assessing people’s needs, strengths and wishes, working with individuals and families directly to help them make changes and solve problems, safeguarding, organising support, making recommendations or referrals to other services and agencies, and keeping detailed records.

The problems social workers deal with are often rooted in social or emotional disadvantage, discrimination, poverty or trauma. Social workers recognise the bigger picture affecting people’s lives, and work for a more equal and just society where human rights are respected and protected.

Social workers are highly trained and skilled to bring about change. On occasion, they will be trained to use relevant legal powers to protect people’s rights (sometimes balancing the rights of everyone involved).

This combination of skills is unique to the social work profession.

Social workers, having completed their professional qualification, must meet their professional standards to practise. They are regulated by Social Work England – or a devolved organisation – whose central focus is public protection, and they set the standards for knowledge, skills, values and behaviours to become and register as a social worker, which is a protected status. In order to maintain their professional registration, social workers must provide evidence of peer-regulated continued professional development (CPD) and training. For more information see Annex A.

REPORTING CONTEXT: THE CHALLENGE FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

It is all too easy to imagine how difficult the role of a social worker can be – often working in complex environments which have been made worse by systemic societal problems. Indeed, a January 2022 survey by the Social Workers Union laid bare the challenges faced by social workers.

Almost two-thirds (58%) of social workers say their caseloads are unmanageable, according to research for the Social Workers Union.

With almost all social workers (97%) saying that the vulnerable would be better protected if caseloads were lighter, the Union has called for urgent action to better support frontline social workers.

In the last 18 months, almost half (48%) of social workers have raised concerns about cases where they do not believe appropriate action was taken. Of these, 29% have highlighted more than five cases in that time.

In addition, most social workers expected to see referrals increase over the next 12 months (94%), with 71% expecting to be inundated.

Increasing caseloads are pushing social workers to the brink. Eight out of ten (82%) social workers suffer from stress at work with two-thirds (65%) saying that their mental health is suffering because of their job.

A quarter (24%) admitted to finding themselves suffering an emotional response to their work (crying / feeling unwell) at least once a week.

This has resulted in half of social workers considering leaving their posts.

One social worker recently told researchers working for SWU:

“Raising concerns about the lack of action on cases is the norm, however with lack of resources it is difficult to take the right action at the right time sometimes. Managers here listen to us but it’s the way the system is and we have had to learn to accept it most of the time.”

Another social worker added:

“We need more staff to bring caseloads down. Stop expecting us to work late and work over our hours. A 60 hour week when you are paid for only 35 means we are practically on minimum wage. We need to be looked after by the services we work for. Our job is unsafe and unhealthy.”

There are additional pressures due to the Covid-19 pandemic which need to be taken into account.

John McGowan, general secretary of SWU:

“Social work intervention can greatly improve the quality of life and opportunities for the children, families, adults and communities we support 24/7. However, it is fair to say that unless the pressures social workers are under are addressed, we will not be able to reach the very people who need our service and support.”

To then attribute any blame for this onto individual social workers is wrong and unethical.”

Two cases reported to the British Association of Social Workers highlight the serious impact poor reporting can have on the lives of social workers. These are real examples of the impact of unnecessary naming and shaming which these guidelines hope to prevent in the future.

- In one case, after the names of social workers were revealed by the media, one social worker had to have police protection after local Facebook groups tracked him down and found out where he lived, making repeated death threats to him and his pregnant wife. Another was harassed whenever she came into work by a group with a megaphone and was followed home after leaving the office. Both social workers have now left the sector.
- In another case, the media criticised the decision-making of social workers, by omitting known and publicly available facts, to suggest political bias on the part of the social worker, when instead decision-making was professional and balanced based on the needs of the child. This led to significant stress and pressure placed on the social workers involved.

FIVE PRINCIPLES OF REPORTING ON CASES WHERE SOCIAL WORKERS HAVE BEEN INVOLVED

Despite the pressure social workers face and the vital work they do, the profession as a whole, and individuals specifically, are often highlighted for the role they have played – or perhaps could have played – in any situation.

However, the reality is that social workers are unable to respond to comments about their work or their caseloads, meaning that their voice and the full extent of the role they have played is often unheard in media coverage.

Negative coverage exacerbates the problems social workers face, destroying trust with the people they seek to help and, in extreme cases, making social workers subject to physical and emotional threats and abuse.

However, more balanced reporting on the role social workers play in any given case can ensure more people know about what social workers can do, or have done, to help the most vulnerable and can build trust in a vital profession.

We consider that best practice reporting on social work and social workers will follow these five key principles:

a) Maintain accuracy

Journalists and editors should take care to report accurately on cases involving vulnerable groups and in accordance with other standards relating to current, or potential future, legal proceedings.

- i) Journalists should consider whether language used generalises social workers unfairly.
- ii) In disciplinary cases involving individual social workers, journalists should take care to ensure they do not associate other individuals or groups with the actions of someone who has acted unlawfully or unethically.
- iii) There should be accurate and balanced reporting of information in court arenas. Legal proceedings should not be sensationalised, and the conduct of social workers/mental health workers should not be equated with any criminal activity unless there is a legal finding to that effect.

For examples, see section 4 below.

b) Assess risk

Journalists should take care to ensure that coverage of issues does not create harm to the public and/or to individuals by:

- i) Ensuring no social workers are individually named or identifiable as working on a particular case (unless authorised to do so by court proceedings).
- ii) Ensuring that coverage does not undermine the trust between vulnerable groups and social workers.
- iii) Ensuring reporting does not encourage the public to “blame” social workers for the actions of perpetrators.
- iv) Ensuring reporting does not prejudice or incite hatred against minority groups.

c) Ensure the right to privacy

Social workers and mental health workers have a right to their own private life being protected. As set out above, social workers should not be individually named or identifiable in any articles or content about specific cases – apart from in exceptional circumstances (e.g. where direct blame or wrongdoing is proven against a named social worker).

d) Recognise social workers are not spokespeople

In almost every case, frontline social workers are not permitted to breach confidentiality so cannot defend themselves against allegations or misrepresentation by responding to or correcting the record. Equally, they are not authorised to be spokespeople for an organisation (e.g. local authority, health body) and should not be approached by journalists for this reason.

Social workers should be given agency over what is written, if journalists are going to write about them. Journalists should write a balanced account of the evidence and not victimise those involved.

Journalists should take care to approach only authorised spokespeople or those in leadership roles for comment – this applies both “on the record” and “off the record.” However, social workers and mental health workers should also be consulted and be able to verify the accuracy of media reporting – this is the responsibility of the employer to organise, not the journalist.

e) Avoid portraying law-breaking as acceptable or perpetrators as victims.

The faults of an individual convicted of an offence against another person are theirs alone. Social services, social workers or other authorities are in no way to blame for the actions of those breaking the law, or indeed in other arenas such as in the coroner’s court, as to do so is neither justifiable nor proportionate.

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BEST PRACTICE QUICK GUIDE

Reporting on social work and the sector can be done in a way that is fair and balanced, and can even have a positive impact on the sector and communities. The following guide shows some simple ways to improve reporting on social work and workers.

INSTEAD OF	CONSIDER	REASONING
Naming the social worker or health worker	Anonymising the worker's name	Protects social workers and health workers from potential harm, and upholds rights to private and family life.
Focusing specifically on the social worker's evidence in court when there are also other witnesses giving evidence	Giving a clear, balanced account from the evidence of all witnesses, not just the social worker's evidence	Ensures justifiable, proportionate and balanced reporting. Negatively focusing on one social worker may prevent members of the public from coming forward for help, as they may think social workers will cause them or their families damage. This may result in significant harm or death that is preventable.
Sensationalism and vilification	Representing social workers as you would other professions (e.g. rank and file police) in a fair manner. Remember that cases reported on will affect a large number of people directly and indirectly.	Reduces harm and distress. After dealing with such cases, families and social workers / health workers are often going through a range of emotions and reflection. Sensationalism and vilification can prolong the recovery process for them and their families.
Leaving positive comments out of the article and writing it in a negative manner	Including any positive comments in the article. For example, if the coroner states, "They went above and beyond in their role with this person," include it.	Ensures accurate, fair and balanced reporting and not just a negative narrative. This in turn may encourage people to come forward for help if needed and may go some distance in putting forward positive examples of social work in practice.

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SUPPORTERS

The organisations below have been involved in the development of these guidelines and are happy to be contacted by the media to discuss the issues raised or if media are looking for comment on social work:

Social Workers Union

Contact: Dr Shawn Major
shawn.major@swu-union.org.uk

British Association of Social Workers UK

Contact: Anthony Dhadwal
anthony.dhadwal@basw.co.uk

These guidelines are also supported by Age UK and the Cooperative Guild of Social and Community Workers.

The Chief Social Workers in England have also been consulted, they recognise the importance of fair representation of social workers in the media, and will continue to work with Government Departments to support the social work profession on this vital issue.

ANNEX A

FURTHER BACKGROUND ON SOCIAL WORKERS' ROLES IN INTEGRATED TEAMS AND WITH OTHER PROFESSIONALS

Within different environments, the social worker may have a statutory role, for example, safeguarding under the Care Act; coordinating assessments as approved mental health professionals under the Mental Health Act or as best interest assessors under the Mental Capacity Act. In child protection, a social worker has a range of duties and responsibilities to ensure the needs of the child are considered paramount and they are protected from significant harm.

Different roles and inherent responsibilities may mean that social workers may have to work well over and above their contractual hours, e.g., whilst waiting for an ambulance to take a detained person into hospital, subject to the provisions of the Mental Health Act, or indeed whilst waiting for a bed to become available, to complete their application for detention.

Social workers may be placed in multi-disciplinary settings such as in intensive home-based treatment teams and single point of access teams for mental or physical health which can be both health or local authority-based. They may also be placed in mental health teams, GP surgeries, local authority teams, perinatal services, hospices, schools, hospitals, courts, police stations, children and families teams, youth offending teams, rape and sexual violence centres, domestic abuse services and, more recently, in airports.

Social workers work in partnership with other agencies depending on the particular setting and circumstances, such as with the police, probation services, nurses, support workers, health visitors, hospital personnel, schools, psychiatrists, occupational therapists, psychologists and GPs.

They also contribute to many public protection processes, such as multi agency public protection panels (MAPPAs) to formulate risk management plans and manage people who are at high risk of offending, multi agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs) to protect victims that are identified as being at the highest risk of domestic abuse and to identify and try to reduce the risk of potentially dangerous persons (PDPs).