



UNISON East Midlands

The State of Social Work

October 2022


UNISON
East Midlands

The way we support our social workers needs to change.

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FOREWORD *by* **Rachel Hodson**



Whilst the majority of the public don't see what they do on a day-to-day basis, we know that without them, our societies would suffer. From supporting families in crisis and helping to protect children, to ensuring older people and those with disabilities receive the dignity they deserve – the work they do is invaluable.

UNISON represents around 1,800 social workers across our region, and over this year we have surveyed our members to find out what life is really like for them on the front line. In addition, we have conducted in-depth interviews with a selection of survey respondents to build up a picture of the challenges facing the whole region. This quantitative and qualitative data has been compared to FOI data requested from every local authority to establish a firm foundation of information upon which to build our bargaining and campaigning.

Our findings reveal that the pandemic has intensified what was already a crisis in social work with continued service cuts, rising demand for services and growing caseloads.

This report contains clear messages. Our members are concerned about insufficient funding and resources, staff shortages and workloads that are dangerous both to employees and families.

Our members also want the voices of those needing their help to be heard. If social workers have too much casework, they are just firefighting rather than providing the right support. Staff shortages and the reliance on agency workers mean no consistency for service users, who understandably feel frustrated and lose faith in the care system.

Members' top priorities are better pay, better funding for social work and an improved work-life balance.

UNISON has 6 key asks of employers:

- 1. Improve social workers' working conditions.**
- 2. Promote a positive image of social work and social workers.**
- 3. Invest in social worker professional development.**
- 4. Improve social worker pay, allowances, and benefits.**
- 5. Lobby central government for more investment in social work and social care funding to drastically improve the support services available to children, families, and vulnerable people.**
- 6. Develop a robust programme to insource all health and social care provision within their authorities.**

UNISON East Midlands will support local UNISON branches in working with employers to achieve these 6 asks and help improve life for social workers and service users together.

Working during the pandemic

Numerous surveys have shown the increasing stresses placed on the social work sector since the Westminster government's austerity programme dramatically cut council budgets.

For example, research carried out by UNISON in conjunction with Community Care showed the disastrous effect of budget cuts and staff shortages on workers' caseloads and their emotional distress. UNISON's 2018 survey on the impact of cuts to local authorities and the work carried out by council employees showed that nearly all felt austerity had damaged their ability to do their job well, most had to work unpaid overtime to keep services going, and stress levels were soaring due to "sky-high" caseloads.

But it is clear that life became even tougher for many of those working in the sector during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Changes during the pandemic

This latest survey reveals that 95% of people employed in social work saw their workload increase during the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, this surge in cases has had a negative impact on stress, morale, and retention.

Asked if their workload has increased or decreased during the pandemic, 75% of social workers in the East Midlands had seen a rise in the number of cases they were handed. This has seen a significant rise in stress levels for respondents with 79% admitting to feeling more stressed now than before the pandemic. Morale has also taken a nosedive with 70% reporting a noticeable decrease in confidence and enthusiasm in their work.

More than half of respondents (54%) said it had become harder to take breaks during the day during the pandemic and a substantial minority (45%) had found it more difficult to take leave or time off in lieu (TOIL).

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that 70% said their morale had declined, and more than half (56%) said they were considering leaving the profession.

Despite their incredible work throughout the pandemic, social workers were never presented as heroic key workers in the media.

The full effects of the pandemic are yet to be seen. The long-term impact on children's mental health and the lack of direct contact between newly qualified social workers and more senior colleagues is likely to result in further increases to the demands placed on social workers in the coming years.



Working in Social Work in 2022

There's no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic created new and unexpected strains on the profession, and even though the pandemic appears to be ending, it's important not to fall into the trap of believing the problems and issues social workers face will simply resolve themselves over time.

The pandemic only intensified what was already a crisis in social work and staff clearly have some very serious ongoing concerns about their work, affecting their own personal wellbeing but also service provision.

Working Conditions

One of the key issues facing social workers is excessive workloads. At the start of 2022, just under three quarters of respondents in the East Midlands “often feel their workload is excessive” (43% strongly agree and 36% agree). Although a majority of respondents overall (63%) agree to some extent that their manager tends to support them if they struggle with their workload, it is concerning that one in five (20%) disagree with this.

Even more worrying is that one in six respondents (16%) say their manager “tends to blame or criticise me if I struggle with my workload”.

Not surprisingly, then, when respondents were asked to say how worried they are about various aspects of their work, workload was one of the very top concerns, cited by a massive 91%.

Employer FOI data suggests there are over 3,000 unallocated cases across the region as social workers in the East Midlands told us: “The incredible workload means that for many people social work has become putting in a quick fix, putting a plaster on it, and moving on. Social workers aren’t really able to provide what we would wish them to”. The huge workload means that many of the most vulnerable are not receiving the support they desperately need and with 500 vacancies in the region the situation isn’t getting better anytime soon.

Another commented: “Loads of people are putting in loads of extra hours just to stay on top of things, and they’re not getting paid for it”.

There was a widespread concern expressed by respondents about their relationships both at work and outside as a result of their jobs. More than half cited concern over relationships

with more senior staff (59%), with colleagues (67%) and with family and/or friends (63%).

Pay

4 out of 5 social workers (82.4%) feel they are not paid fairly.

Social workers spoke strongly about pay, referring to social workers’ salaries as “derisory”. They stated, “there’s simply not enough incentive there now for the level of stress, workload, and responsibility”.

One social worker commented, “I’ve had numerous arguments over the years about the number of hours I work in a week. I don’t get paid enough to do loads of extra hours. Loads of people are putting in loads of extra hours just to stay on top of things, and they’re not getting paid for it. I bet they’ll be on less than minimum wage if they worked their hours out”.

There are social workers in our region who report working well beyond their contracted hours without any additional pay – working 72-hour weeks, working on weekends, and working during annual leave – just to get the work done.

Pay has declined through years of cuts to local government budgets. Pay settlements have consistently amounted to less than the rate of inflation, which has effectively resulted in year on year pay cuts. This has meant social workers’ pay has declined in real terms by as much as 33.7% over the last 12 years.

The fact that just 4 of the core local authority employers in the East Midlands pay social workers’ registration fees – £90 per year – exemplifies this lack of investment.

On top of this, the pay scales and pay incentives vary widely between local authorities across the region. For example, the average wage for social workers in Derby City and Northamptonshire Children’s Trust is £40,969.63 and £40,511.22, respectively. Whereas the average wage for social workers in Nottingham City Council and Leicester City Council is £37,004.15 and £35,822.17. Leicestershire County Council’s average social worker pay is the lowest in region at £31,384.17, which is reflected in the Council’s reliance on social workers employed via a private agency who are paid at a considerably higher rate.

Similarly, some authorities like Derbyshire County Council offer as much as £4,000 pay incentives, retention bonuses, or market premia, while other councils offer limited or no additional pay incentives.

This means social workers are often forced to move between authorities in search of better pay to support themselves and their families. It creates unhelpful competition between councils and inefficiencies in service provision throughout the region. It increases staff turnover and creates a transient workforce. In turn, this often impacts the quality of the service and can result in inconsistent care and support for service users.

The image of social work and social workers

Social workers help thousands of vulnerable citizens along with their families and carers. Yet the media only seems interested when something goes wrong. This leads to staff demoralisation and a negative image for the profession. This constant negativity drives down the public’s trust in social work and does nothing to stem the flow of sinking morale or the rising numbers of experienced social workers leaving the profession.

“ A client’s family member threatened to look for me and hurt me.

I’ve had families screaming at me down the phone blaming me for the death of their loved ones ”

Unsurprisingly, more than three quarters of the region’s social workers (81%) are hugely concerned with being publicly identified or blamed in the media in connection with cases. Some of the comments from social workers included: “There is never anything good said about social work in the media at all. My husband was talking about me being a social worker to someone and being in a difficult position recently and that person essentially said, ‘serves her right, child snatching social worker’.

Another social worker said: “It has been a difficult time with too many child deaths blamed on social workers. It makes me not want to even say I am a social worker.”

Finally, one social worker said: “Never heard of social workers being mentioned as public sector employees or key workers, but always hear when a child dies.”

Harassment and abuse

The overwhelmingly negative coverage aimed at social workers is directly connected to the abuse many social work staff receive. In fact, in just the first seven weeks of 2022, more than four in ten social work staff in the East Midlands had experienced one or more forms of harassment, abuse or threats from service users or those around them. In addition to this, 37% had experienced emotional distress. On top of the abuse they receive just for doing their job, Black staff and staff from non-British backgrounds are frequently subject to racist abuse and xenophobia.

In social workers’ own words: “A client’s family member threatened to look for me and hurt me. I’ve had families screaming at me down the phone blaming me for the death of their loved ones to Covid.”

Another social worker added: “Occasionally some service users abuse and harass me verbally on the phone, knowing I am not white British. It’s made worse because my manager does not seem to believe or understand me. It’s frustrating and demotivating. I have severally thought of walking away from my career as a social worker.”

Continuing professional development

Most survey respondents (95%) are required to maintain continuing professional development (CPD) as part of their job. However, there is considerable concern about the amount of time, opportunity, resources and financial support available to carry out and record their CPD.

Just 25% agree their employer gives them sufficient time for this, with just 8% strongly agreeing. And only 10% say their employer gives them enough financial support to carry out their CPD, with only 3% strongly agreeing that they do. Around six in ten say they are not provided with sufficient resources and the same proportion feel they get don’t get enough opportunities.



Chief concerns of social work staff

This section of the research was aimed at assessing how concerned social work staff are about a selection of issues related to both their work and its effects on them personally.

Respondents were invited to indicate their feelings about a range of issues presented and to select whether they were “very concerned”, “a bit concerned”, “not particularly concerned” or “not sure”.

For all topics, a majority indicated that they were very or a bit concerned.

The issue that caused the deepest and most widespread concern in the East Midlands was staff shortages, cited by 95% of respondents. More than eight in ten of all respondents (81%) were “very concerned”, with a further 14% “a bit concerned”. Only a tiny fraction (6%) were “not particularly concerned.”

“Staff shortages mean we all have increased workloads. This is impacting my wellbeing, my marriage, time with my family.”

“Just been off for 14 weeks due to work-related stress, on my return only half the team are still in work. High numbers off sick or vacancies that cannot be recruited. Feels very unsupported.”

There was also widespread concern about a number of linked issues, including workload (91% indicating some level of concern), working beyond contractual hours (88%), work-life balance (80%) and ability to take leave/TOIL (71%).

Over seven in ten staff overall (74%) had worries about their mental health, with one in three respondents (37%) “very concerned”.

It is not just their personal wellbeing that concerns social work staff, but also the service provided. Nine in ten respondents had concerns about the level of social work service that can currently be provided, the majority were very concerned.

An area where almost eight in ten respondents expressed worry is being publicly identified/blamed in the media/social media in connection with cases. Almost half of respondents were very concerned about this and another third a bit concerned. This concern was particularly marked among those working with children and families.

“I am very concerned that social workers can be named in social media, putting themselves and their family at risk from general public and I know that this is something that I couldn't cope with”.

Concerns about staff shortages

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Concerns about mental health

Over seven in ten staff overall (74%) had worries about their mental health, with one in three respondents (37%) “very concerned”.



Concerns about mental health

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Concerns about work life balance



91%
Workload



88%
working beyond contractual hours



80%
work-life balance



71%
ability to take leave/TOIL

Emerging issues facing social work

Survey respondents were also asked to set out what they saw as the most important emerging issue facing social work over the next year or two.

It is abundantly clear that the majority feeling is that the critical issues facing social work in the next year or two fit within a triangle or cycle of interconnected issues. This links insufficient funding/resources, staff shortages and high workloads that are dangerous to both employees and service users.

- Funding/resource problems
 - Increased demand for services/high caseloads/workloads
 - Staffing shortage
 - Need to attract/retain staff
 - Lack of support for staff/burnout/mental health
 - Pay inadequate/staff not valued
 - Loss of experienced staff
 - Management issues/targets/processes/box-ticking
 - Covid legacy
 - Lack of home care/care home capacity/community care
 - Problems with homeworking/virtual meetings/lack of buildings
 - Restructuring/privatisation/reliance on agencies
 - Image of social work/lack of respect from public
 - Vaccine mandate
-

The Impact on Service Users

Several respondents referred to how these critical issues are causing a decline in the quality of the services provided.

“The level of service that can be provided is under serious threat - many non-statutory support services, which were essential in order for us to provide support to families, have downsized, gone online-only or wound up, meaning we have to take on a lot more work ourselves.”

“Without sufficient support services in place we cannot do our jobs effectively, which will inevitably lead to more serious incidents which will inevitably be blamed on social workers rather than the failed structures around them.”

“I often feel like a mechanic with no spanners. I can look at your vehicle with you, assess what needs to happen to get it back on the road, but have no tools to carry out the assessed work. Social work under austerity is a demanding, thankless and quite depressing role.”

Funding and Resourcing Problems

The single most widespread issue raised by social work staff was funding and resource problems. This problem was described as both inadequate funding for social work in general but also to specific areas, such as lack of resources for preventative work/early intervention, the disappearance of external services (such as youth services, care home places, and mental health provision) and the lack of sufficient foster care places.

Increased Demand for Services and Caseloads

Funding problems merge into the next most common theme raised by staff, categorised for this purpose as ‘increased demand for services/caseloads/ workloads’.

Issues covered in this include cases getting more complex with the increase in poverty, substance abuse, debt, and complex disabling conditions, as well as the growing needs of an ageing population. A common concern is increasing mental ill health, especially among children. This group of issues also encompasses high caseloads/ workloads caused by a lack of staff.

Staff Shortages

A lack of adequate staffing is the third point on the ‘issues triangle’ and comprises of three further main themes identified: ‘staffing shortage’, ‘need to attract/retain staff’ and ‘loss of experienced staff’. Together these three issues were sometimes cited even more frequently than funding/resource problems.

While many expressed desperation at the general shortage of staff, another large number specifically identified the problem of people leaving social work altogether and/or the difficulty of attracting new recruits.

A smaller proportion specifically identified the problem of experienced staff leaving social work. In some cases, leaving newly qualified/inexperienced social workers to deal with more difficult cases or having less support available to them.

Many respondents in the East Midlands linked the staffing crisis to unsafe decision making and increased risks to

clients, with many using phrases such as “dangerously high caseloads” and “lack of staff and increasingly dangerous circumstances for families”.

For some councils the shortage of staff has resulted in an overreliance on agency staff. Leicestershire County Council reported that 42% of social workers working with children and families and 25% of social workers in adult social care were employed via a private agency. These agency workers are far more expensive for local councils. A reliance on agency workers can result in inconsistent care and support because agency workers often move between authorities or teams within authorities more frequently. The increase in agency social workers and the reliance on them is the result of years of pay erosion, declining working conditions, a lack of government investment in local communities, and rising social inequality brought on by over a decade of austerity.

Mental Health

Another set of emerging issues linked to staff shortages cited by a substantial number of social work staff was the ‘lack of support for staff/burnout/mental health (of staff)’. 3 in 4 social workers state their employer isn’t doing enough to protect their mental and physical health and wellbeing. This was particularly common among those working with children and families, and many respondents specifically used the word ‘burnout’ to describe what they saw as a key emerging issue.

At typical comment was this one that cited:

“I feel many staff, including myself, are emotionally exhausted and experiencing high levels of burnout. We have had no increase in pay, workload is excessive and there is no work/life balance, the support (if any) has disappeared and the working environment is becoming toxic and impacting on our emotional and physical wellbeing.”

Pay

Respondents specifically referred to staff pay as a key emerging issue, often coupled with the feeling that employees in the sector are not valued.

One social worker said:

“We have had a freeze in our pay for many years and it is time the responsibility and impact of our work needs to be recognised and our wages increased to reflect this.”

The ever-worsening cost-of-living crisis is making the years of pay erosion even more apparent. The consistent decline in pay in real terms has left social workers, and public sector workers across the country, unequipped to deal with this crisis.

The Legacy of the Pandemic

Other issues raised were the legacy of the Covid pandemic, with two main problems raised. One was the isolation felt by many staff with offices being closed and people working from home. Several noted that team working was essential to social work. Also, that there were problems for staff who had qualified during the pandemic and were not having the benefit of working alongside experienced staff.

Another Covid legacy raised was the widespread and potentially long-term mental health impact on children.



Conclusions and the path ahead

The findings presented in this report do not make for pleasant reading. They present a worrying picture of a profession ravaged by cuts and pushed to the limit by rising social inequality. They reflect a workforce in crisis and a public service on the edge of collapse.

Unless things change very soon, the outlook for social work and social workers is bleak. The growing cost-of-living crisis is only going to make things worse. As more and more people fall into poverty and hardship, social workers' already unmanageable caseload will rise further. All the while, they themselves will be struggling to make ends meet due to the insufficient pay they receive.

Change is needed at a national level. However, local authorities across the East Midlands also have the power to address the issues raised in this report. UNISON therefore has 6 key asks of employers and hopes employers will work with us to achieve a new deal for social workers.

1. Improve social workers' working conditions.

Employers must ensure social workers have a decent work-life balance and a safe working environment, free from bullying and harassment. This includes not just from the public but also from unreasonable demands and criticism from managers. To begin to achieve this, UNISON calls on employers to:

- a. Implement caseload management systems which take into account both the number and complexity of cases assigned to a social worker. Strict limits must be applied robustly to social workers' caseloads. Managers must take ultimate responsibility for social workers' caseload, reviewing the complexity of cases, and overseeing any cases that cannot be allocated to a social worker because caseload limits have been reached.
- b. Carry out a root and branch review of health and safety policies to ensure social workers are safe at work. Employers must ensure risk assessments are carried out and reviewed regularly. Appropriate measures must be put in place to protect at-risk staff, and managers must bear responsibility for ensuring these measures remain in place.
- c. Develop robust policies and procedures to protect staff against racist abuse and support staff who have suffered racist abuse.

2. Promote a positive image of social work and social workers.

Social workers help thousands of vulnerable citizens along with their families and carers. Yet the media only seems interested when something goes wrong. This leads to staff demoralisation and a negative image for the profession. As part of this report, UNISON will be releasing stories to local media to spotlight the vital work social workers do in our communities. UNISON calls on employers to:

- a. Use their resources and spokespeople to support UNISON in showcasing the positive work social workers do in our communities.
- b. Develop robust policies and procedures to protect the identities of social workers and shield them from harassment and abuse in the community, online, or via the media.

3. Invest in social worker development.

Employers should provide social workers with dedicated time, resources, and financial support to carry out continuing professional development, better their practice, and, ultimately, improve the service provided to our communities. At the beginning of 2023, UNISON East Midlands will be hosting a continuing professional development seminar for social workers across the region. UNISON calls on employers to:

- a. Provide social workers with sufficient paid time off, resources, and financial support to carry out CPD.
- b. Ensure social workers have time set aside solely for CPD every week/month.

- c. Ensure social workers receive weekly supervision and annual Performance Development Reviews.
- d. Support and publicize the UNISON East Midlands' social worker CPD seminar in early 2023.

4. Improve social worker pay, allowances, and benefits

The remuneration social workers receive is far below what they deserve for the incredible work they do and the sacrifices they make. This is compounded by the fact that public sector pay has been eroded for over a decade. This is becoming increasingly apparent as the cost-of-living crisis begins to bite. It is further compounded by the inconsistencies in pay and recruitment/retention bonuses across the region. This results in unhelpful and inefficient competition for staff between employers, social workers moving between authorities, and, therefore, a decline in the service. Employers must invest in their workers to tackle the recruitment and retention crisis facing social work and protect their employees from steep increases to everyday costs, like energy, fuel, and food. UNISON calls on employers to:

- a. Work together to equalize social worker pay and recruitment/retention bonuses across the region. Pay should be brought in line with the highest paying local authority. This must not be a race to the bottom.
- b. Support UNISON in lobbying central government to fund substantial pay increases for social workers, and their colleagues in local government, to address years of pay erosion.
- c. Increase their mileage rates to 60p per mile to help address rising fuel costs.
- d. Pay for social workers' annual Social Work England registration fees.

5. Lobby central government for more investment in social work and social care funding to drastically improve the support services available to children, families, and vulnerable adults.

Reductions in central government funding for local authorities over the past decade have forced councils to cut or close many essential support services, which has meant many people are struggling to get help when they need it. Social workers are seeing people at breaking point, rather than at an early stage when they can implement lower-level interventions to avert oncoming crises. This needs to change and UNISON calls on local councils to support its campaign to rebuild the network of social services that social workers rely on to do their job effectively.

6. Develop a robust programme to insource all health and social care provision within their authority.

UNISON supports the role of local government as planners and major providers of personal and community based social services and rejects privatization. Numerous studies show that health and social care services provided by private companies are inadequate and costly and often fail to meet the needs of service users. Studies show that insourcing is often cheaper, results in cost-savings for local authorities, and greatly improves the services and associated services provided by the authority. Children, families, and vulnerable adults deserve the very best. Post-pandemic, employers should be looking to level-up the services they provide to our communities. One of the most effective ways to achieve this is through a coordinated campaign of insourcing.

Appendix A

Survey respondents were also asked to set out what they saw as the most important emerging issue facing social work over the next year or two.

It is abundantly clear that the majority feeling is that the critical issues facing social work in the next year or two fit within a triangle or cycle of interconnected issues. This links insufficient funding/resources, staff shortages and high workloads that are dangerous to both employees and service users.

Respondents' jobs

Job title	Employer	How employed	Time worked in social work	How do you describe your gender?	How would you describe your ethnic origin?
<p>Social worker - 51%</p> <p>Senior social worker - 20%</p> <p>Team manager - 9%</p> <p>Advanced social worker - 7%</p> <p>Social work assistants/support worker - 5%</p> <p>Newly qualified social worker - 4%</p> <p>Principal social worker - 2%</p> <p>Social work student - 1%</p> <p>Care manager - 1%</p> <p>Administrative worker in social work team - 1%</p>	<p>Local authority - 94%</p> <p>Private sector - 3%</p> <p>NHS - 2%</p> <p>CAFCASS - 1%</p> <p>Voluntary sector organisation - 1%</p> <p>Broad work area</p> <p>Children and families services - 53%</p> <p>Adult social care - 45%</p> <p>Both children and families and adult social care - 1%</p> <p>Emergency Duty Team (Out of Hours) - 1%</p>	<p>Directly, on a permanent contract - 99%</p> <p>Directly, on a temporary contract - 1%</p> <p>Through an agency - 1%</p> <p>Full/part time</p> <p>Full time (30+ contractual hours) - 83%</p> <p>Part time (15-30 contractual hours) - 17%</p> <p>Part time (less than 15 contractual hours) - 1%</p>	<p>More than twenty years - 30%</p> <p>Between ten and twenty years - 25%</p> <p>Between five and 10 years - 21%</p> <p>One to five years - 20%</p> <p>Less than a year - 3%</p>	<p>Female - 82%</p> <p>Male - 16%</p> <p>Prefer not to say - 2%</p> <p>Which age band are you in?</p> <p>46-55 – 31%</p> <p>56-65 – 26%</p> <p>26-35 – 20%</p> <p>36-45 – 18%</p> <p>19-25 – 5%</p> <p>66 or over – 1%</p>	<p>White UK – 66%</p> <p>Prefer not to say – 7%</p> <p>Asian UK – 5%</p> <p>Black African – 5%</p> <p>White other – 5%</p> <p>Other mixed heritage – 3%</p> <p>Indian – 3%</p> <p>Black mixed heritage – 3%</p> <p>Irish – 2%</p> <p>Pakistani – 1%</p> <p>Black UK – 1%</p> <p>Black Caribbean – 1%</p> <p>Black other – 1%</p>



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