

Helping
People change
their lives

Keeping safe in the workplace

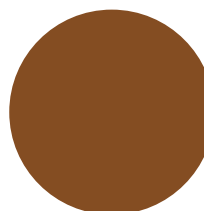
A Guide for Social Work Practitioners

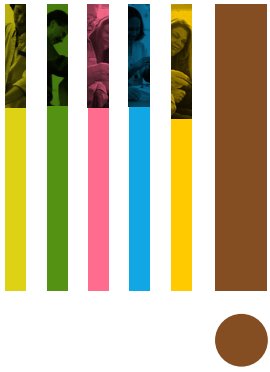


Helping People Change Their Lives - the UNISON and BASW (now SASW) Manifesto for social work members in Scotland recognises that people are essential to the quality of service provided.

There is no doubt that social work staff work in an increasingly difficult climate with rising demands not always matched with an increase in available resources. Staff are constantly overstretched and this can lead to stress, ill-health and burnout.

This Guide aims to help social work practitioners to keep themselves safe in the workplace; to recognise when they are becoming stressed or overloaded and to seek the necessary support from their employer, and where that fails, from their trade union and professional association.





Keeping safe in the workplace

A Guide for Social Work Practitioners

This pamphlet, issued in February 2011, is the second in a series of individual and joint publications building on ***Helping People Change Their Lives*** - the Social Work Manifesto for frontline staff in Scotland - issued jointly in 2009 by UNISON and BASW Scotland (now SASW).

www.unison-scotland.org.uk/socialwork/swmanifesto25june2009.pdf

www.basw.co.uk/Default.aspx?tabid=160&articleID=937

It has been produced by practitioners who are activists in UNISON Scotland's Social Work Issues Group (see page 8) and is also available on line at

www.unison-scotland.org.uk/socialwork/safetyatwork.pdf

UNISON Scotland and SASW are working together to speak up for Social Work in Scotland.

We respect each other's individual role as a trade union and a professional association and are committed to co-operating on that basis.

"supporting the staff who deliver services to ensure that they are trained, supported and resourced to undertake the often difficult and complex tasks required by our service users."

**.UNISON and BASW Scotland (now SASW) Joint Manifesto
June 2009.**

Introduction

"Helping People Change their Lives", the UNISON and BASW (now SASW) Manifesto for social work members in Scotland recognises that people are essential to the quality of service provided. It highlights the importance of "supporting the staff who deliver services to ensure that they are trained, supported and resourced to undertake the often difficult and complex tasks required by our service users."

The Manifesto is clear that staff must be accountable for their professional conduct through the Code of Practice for Social Service Workers. However, it also identifies a clear need for employers to be held to account to fulfil their responsibilities under their Code of Practice. It calls for effective staff support in a non-blame culture to enable the identifying and reporting of problems within workplaces.

There is no doubt that social work staff work in an increasingly difficult climate of rising demands not always matched with appropriate resources. Staff are constantly overstretched and this can lead to stress, ill-health and burnout. This Guide aims to help social work practitioners to keep themselves safe in the workplace; to recognise when they are becoming stressed or overloaded and to seek the necessary support from their employer, and where that fails, from their trade union and professional association.

Self-regulation

Self-regulation is a very important component in public protection. Social work practice is, to a large extent, unobserved, and social work staff need to be self-aware and conscious of their practice; they need to look out for signs of potentially unsafe practice and alert managers to issues which are affecting the quality of their work.

Self-regulation is not about going it alone. It is about recognising the signs of stress and overload in ourselves and our colleagues and taking steps to report it and to get help to deal with it.

Signs of unsafe practice could be skipping or cutting short meetings with service users, not keeping records up to date, carrying out personal care tasks in a hurry, regularly working late to "catch-up" and so on. Social work staff need to be as good at spotting these signs in themselves as they are in others. Whatever the causes, support should be available from the employer to help to address these and support the worker through the difficulties.

Employers need to be reasonable in their expectations and support social work staff in the complex and challenging work required of them. Employers have a duty to encourage and assist their staff to be reflective and self-regulating. These responsibilities are addressed in the Guidance for Chief Social Work Officers, the Guidance for the Role of the Registered Social Worker in Statutory Interventions and in the published Governance Framework bringing the two pieces of Guidance together.

Key challenges for the social work & social care role

◆ Balancing Need, Risk And Rights

Social workers and other social care staff are often required to assess and seek to minimise risk - risk to service users, carers and the wider community. Taking emergency action and giving advice to Courts and Tribunals about potential risk of harm to other people is a key part of work in the social work services. This can be very stressful work.

Workers have an individual professional responsibility to act appropriately but also to be accountable to their employer, the service user and outside bodies for their actions. Risk taking has to be well evidenced and supported in terms of the skills, knowledge and practice of the worker and in the structure and organisation provided by the employer. Keeping yourself safe in these circumstances involves good record keeping, reports that are well evidenced and a clear analysis of the key areas of work.



◆ **Training and Continuous Professional Development**

It is expected that workers will exercise their professional training and expertise within a clear set of values. This means that they need to ensure that they maintain their knowledge and training at an appropriate level and know where and when to seek assistance.

Employers have a duty to support workers to do this, but workers themselves also have this responsibility. Keeping up to date with current research and developments in new ways of working is needed to maintain registration with SSSC but also essential in maintaining safe practice.

◆ **Information Sharing and Respecting Confidentiality & Privacy in Family Life**

This is often one of the most difficult balancing acts we have to do in social work and social care. We work with people in some of the most intimate and private areas of their lives but we also have to share information in order to protect people from harm and abuse. Keeping safe at work means achieving the right balance that does not betray trust, the basis of a social work and social care relationship, but respects people's rights to be protected from harm and abuse. This means using supervision and consultation, knowledge, research and practice wisdom to inform decisions, keeping them well recorded and informing those that need to know.

Supervision and workload management

Good quality supervision and an effective workload management scheme are both crucial in supporting staff. Supervision must be a two-way process. Social work staff need to honestly account for their work and identify difficulties and concerns. They should be able to feel confident that they will be supported and provided with guidance and assistance. Workload management must be a tool to prevent overload in staff and for employers to identify and manage the work which cannot be allocated. See UNISON Scotland and SASW's Negotiating Resource at www.unison-scotland.org.uk/socialwork

Health & Safety

The employer has a duty to make sure that the workplace is safe for staff both physically and emotionally. There is an array of Health & Safety legislation which the employer has a responsibility to implement. This section will briefly draw attention to factors in the workplace that can be addressed through the application of Health & Safety legislation.

◆ **The working environment:**

The workplace must be fit for purpose and matters such as lighting, ventilation, space, temperature and rest areas are all subject to minimum standards under the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992. Problems can affect workers' physical and mental health and morale.

◆ **Lone working:**

Most social workers and many social care workers work out in the community. Your employer is still responsible for your health and welfare whenever and wherever you are on duty. All activities carrying potential danger must be subject to risk assessments by the employer under the Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations 1999. This includes home visits. Here are a few pointers:

- ◆ If in doubt, never go alone - this should be prescribed by your employer when no risk assessment has been undertaken eg for new referrals/initial visits
- ◆ Check whether your employer has a lone working policy. Become familiar with it and if it is inadequate or if there is none raise it through your UNISON branch.
- ◆ If you work alone regularly, your employer should provide you with a mobile phone. Some employers utilise systems where the worker can be instantly in touch with a control centre.
- ◆ Particularly, but not only if you are in a remote or rural area, weather, distance and road conditions all present risks and should be considered by the employer.

◆ Stress at Work:

Stress is defined by the Health and Safety Executive as "an adverse reaction to excessive pressure or demands." Employers have a legal duty to assess the risk of work related stress and to take measures to control these risks.

Your employer should have a stress at work policy. Become familiar with it and raise it if it is inadequate or where there is none.

Where workers have been off sick as a result of work related stress, make sure that a risk assessment is completed before they return to work.

Workers also have an individual responsibility to minimise the risk of any kind of harm to themselves and their colleagues and to bring this to the employers' attention. Employers should provide training to enable workers to do this.

If you have any queries about any of these matters, talk to your work Health & Safety representative or your UNISON Branch Health & Safety Officer.

Using the Codes of Practice

Employers are responsible for providing a competent practice and learning environment for social care workers.

Workers need to be responsible and accountable for the quality of their work; their engagement with supervision; and, for seeking guidance and assistance when they need it.

The SSSC Codes of Practice set down complementary responsibilities for employers and employees. These can be used by workers to challenge their managers to provide the support they need to fulfil their responsibilities and to do their job.

Complementary responsibilities

Code for Employers:

Giving staff clear information about their roles and responsibilities, relevant legislation and the organisational policies and procedures they must follow in their work.

Managing the performance of staff and the organisation to ensure high quality services and care.

Effectively managing and supervising staff to support effective practice and good conduct and supporting staff to address deficiencies in their performance.

Responding appropriately to social service workers who seek assistance because they do not feel able or adequately prepared to carry out any aspects of their work.

Having systems in place to enable social service workers to report inadequate resources or operational difficulties which might impede the delivery of safe care and working with them and relevant authorities to address those issues.

Whilst ensuring that the care and safety of service users is your priority, providing appropriate assistance to social service workers whose work is affected by ill health or dependency on drugs and alcohol, and giving clear guidance about any limits on their work while they are receiving treatment

Code for Workers:

Meeting relevant standards of practice and working in a lawful, safe and effective way.

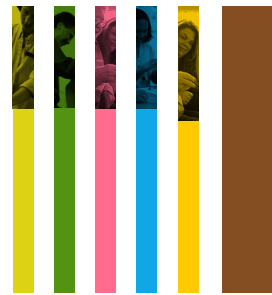
Maintaining clear and accurate records as required by procedures established for your work.

Following risk assessment policies and procedures to assess whether the behaviour of service users presents a risk of harm to themselves or others

Seeking assistance from your employer or the appropriate authority if you do not feel able or adequately prepared to carry out any aspect of your work, or you are not sure about how to proceed in a work matter

Bringing to the attention of your employer or the appropriate authority resource or operational difficulties that might get in the way of the delivery of safe care.

Informing your employer or the appropriate authority about any personal difficulties that might affect your ability to do your job competently and safely.





Enforcing the Codes of Practice

The focus of the SSSC's regulatory work is public protection - it has a role to ensure that only those safe to do so have access to children and vulnerable adults through regulated social service work. The SSSC can take action to enforce the Code of Practice for Social Service Workers and will take account of the standards laid down in the Code in considering issues of misconduct and decisions about de-registration.

The Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act established Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland (SCSWIS) which takes over the responsibilities of the Care Commission and SWIA along with HMIE inspection of services to protect children and inspection of the integration of children's services. It is required take codes of practice into account in exercising its duties.

Where workers believe that their employer is not fulfilling the requirements of their code, UNISON and SASW will raise this and can speak to SCSWIS or the SSSC about these concerns.

Keeping safe at work

There are many reasons why social work staff may find it difficult to fulfil their responsibilities under their Code of Practice.

- ◆ Workloads may be too high
- ◆ Staffing levels may be too low
- ◆ There may not be enough time for reflective supervision and appropriate support from your professional supervisor or line management
- ◆ There may be inadequate support and supervision from your line management
- ◆ You may not have the proper resources to do the job
- ◆ You may be experiencing bullying or harassment
- ◆ You may be facing personal or health problems

The important thing is to recognise that you are under pressure to such an extent that you are not meeting the standards set down by the Code of Practice, so that you can alert your employer to this and seek support. If you do not do this then you will be vulnerable to disciplinary action and misconduct proceedings by the SSSC.

So what should you do to keep yourself safe at work?

If you are in doubt at any stage contact UNISON or SASW for advice (see below)

- ◆ **Inform your line manager as soon as you feel yourself under stress and ask for help to deal with the difficulties. The sooner you identify and take steps to address any problems the better**
 - ◆ Ensure that your concerns and any action to address these are recorded. If necessary put your concerns in an email or memo to your line manager and make sure that any meetings are minuted and that you get a copy of the minutes
 - ◆ Keep copies of all relevant documents - a paper trail
 - ◆ Make sure that any plan to address the difficulties is monitored and reviewed to ensure that it is working
 - ◆ Take care not to agree to a plan that you do not feel is workable.
- ◆ **Sometimes, when workers are most under stress they can be so emotionally low that they are unable to take steps to deal with it themselves. If you see a colleague having difficulties, advise them to talk to their line manager or professional supervisor. If they do not, and you are really concerned for their welfare or for the welfare of the service users they work with, you have a duty to alert the employer on their behalf. (Sec 3.5 of the SSSC Code of Practice for Social Service Workers)**
 - ◆ Ensure that your concerns and any action to address these are recorded.
 - ◆ Keep a copy

- ◆ **If you are a line manager or professional supervisor, you will have a role to monitor the well-being of your staff; to recognise when they may be experiencing stress at work; and to help them to identify the causes of this stress and to take steps to address the difficulties.**
- ◆ **You can contact UNISON or SASW for advice and support at any stage in this process but should do so immediately if**
 - ◆ You do not have a relationship of trust with your line manager or professional supervisor and do not believe (s)he will support you or your colleague
 - ◆ Your line manager or professional supervisor does not take any steps to support you once you have alerted him/her to the difficulties you are experiencing
 - ◆ You become the subject of Work Performance or Disciplinary procedures
 - ◆ You are being bullied or harassed
 - ◆ Your health is suffering
- ◆ **Ensure that your employer has proper systems in place for good quality supervision and workload management. If not, get involved in the union and ask UNISON and/or SASW to support you and your colleagues to negotiate these.**
- ◆ **Ensure that your employer has Health & Safety policies to ensure the health and welfare of staff. Familiarise yourself with these and use them for your own protection and the protection of colleagues. If they are inadequate ask UNISON to support you and your colleagues to negotiate improvements.**



REMEMBER, THE EMPLOYER HAS A DUTY OF CARE TO ITS EMPLOYEES. They must provide effective management and supervision and must have systems in place to support staff to practice effectively and respond appropriately to staff who seek assistance.

However, social workers and other social care staff are accountable to their employer, the SSSC and sometimes to a court of law. Therefore it is crucial that social care workers strive to maintain the standards set down by their codes of practice. The best advice that UNISON and SASW can give to any worker is "keep yourself safe."

And remember, UNISON and SASW are here to help you keep safe in your practice - don't leave seeking advice until it is too late.

Other publications

Supervision and Workload Management for Social Work - A negotiating resource
www.unison-scotland.org.uk/socialwork/workloadmanagement.pdf

Helping People Change Their Lives - A Social Work manifesto for UNISON and BASW (now SASW) members in Scotland
www.unison-scotland.org.uk/socialwork/swmanifesto25june2009.pdf
www.basw.co.uk/Default.aspx?tabid=160&articleID=937

YOUR RIGHTS AT WORK - a guide for Personal Assistants and their Employers - SPAEN and UNISONScotland 2009
www.unison-scotland.org.uk/socialwork/rightsdoc.pdf

Creating and supporting an informed employer and employee relationship within the self-directed support sector - SPAEN and UNISONScotland 2009
www.unison-scotland.org.uk/socialwork/PAreportfinal.pdf

Direct Payments in Scotland: A Joint Position Statement - Joint statement agreed between UNISONScotland and key Scottish disabled people's organisations on direct payments in Scotland 2007
www.unison-scotland.org.uk/socialwork/glossyagr.pdf

Asylum in Scotland - child's welfare paramount?: A guide for members from BASW (now SASW) and UNISONScotland
www.unison-scotland.org.uk/socialwork/asylumbooklet

For a range of other reports, submissions and responses on Social Work issues see
www.unison-scotland.org.uk/socialwork



**Local Government Service Group
Social Work Issues Group**

The UNISONScotland Social Work Issues Group comprises practitioners in social work, social care and community occupational therapy, delegated from Scotland's 32 local government branches and the community and voluntary sector.

Supporting Scotland's Social Work Services Workforce

UNISON is by far the largest union representing most Social Work and Social Care staff in Scotland. We represent social workers in all specialisms, residential workers, social care workers, OTs, home care staff and professional, admin and clerical support staff.

**To join UNISON, contact your local branch
or visit www.unison-scotland.org.uk and click on 'Join'
or call 0845 355 0845**



The Scottish Association of Social Workers is the professional association representing social work and social workers in Scotland.

**www.basw.co.uk/scotland
0131 221 9445**

Pamphlet written and edited for UNISONScotland by UNISON Social Work Issues Group member Kate Ramsden with contributions from Stephen Smellie, Colin Turbett, John Stevenson and Ruth Stark, Manager SASW.

UNISON Scotland and SASW are working together to
speak up for Social Work in Scotland.

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