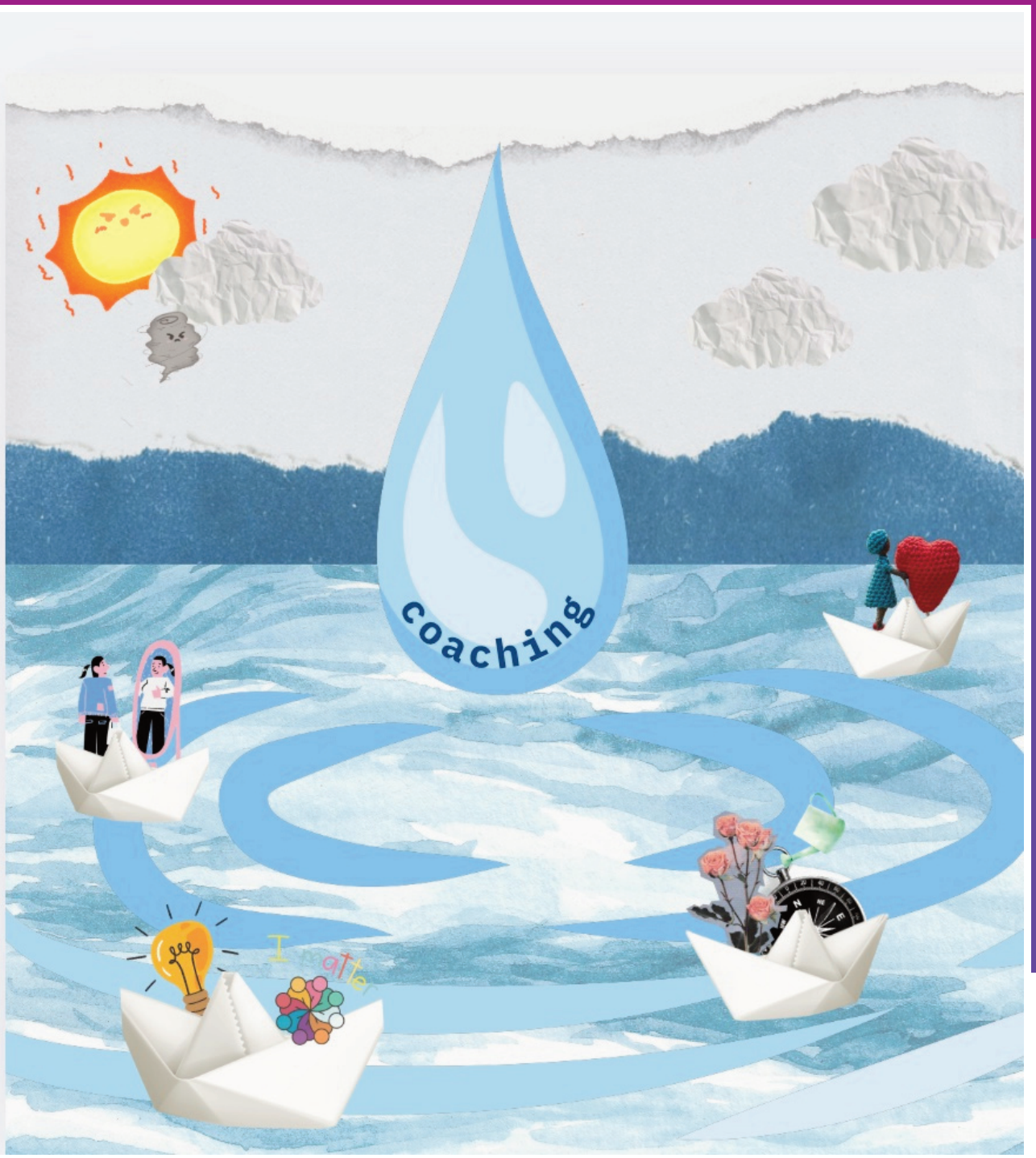
Social Work Professional Support Service (SWPSS):

An Evaluation



BASW
The professional association for social work and social workers

BASW SOCIAL WORK PRACTITIONER RESEARCH NETWORK

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents an evaluation of the Social Work Professional Support Service (SWPSS), a free, confidential coaching service for social workers and students across the United Kingdom (UK). Established by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) in July 2020 in response to the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic, the service has since been rolled out across all UK nations.

Funded by BASW and supported by the Department of Health Northern Ireland, this UK-wide evaluation explores the value of coaching in supporting social workers' wellbeing, development and professional identity. The evaluation draws on a literature review and data collected through 43 survey responses and six anonymised focus groups, using a Collaborative Practice Research in Social Work (CPRSW) approach co-led by Durham University and BASW.

Findings indicate that social workers often turn to coaching during times of crisis, stress or uncertainty, using it as a 'circuit breaker' to interrupt unsustainable working patterns. Notably, 75% of coachees reported being 'very satisfied' with the service. A key strength of the SWPSS lies in its distinctive 'coaching in the context of social work' model, which fosters shared understanding between coach and coachee. This approach helps coachees feel safe, seen and heard while also supporting them to reconnect with their core values and regain a sense of purpose and professional agency. Coaches also described experiencing renewed motivation, viewing the service as a meaningful way to give back to the profession and stay connected to the realities of frontline practice.

Importantly, the service supports the bridging of personal and professional identities, with positive ripple effects on practice, leadership and team culture. It also challenges dominant narratives that place the burden of 'resilience' solely on individuals.

Recommendations include:

- Embedding coaching earlier in social workers' careers, including as part of induction and early professional development
- Increasing access and visibility through enhanced communication, streamlined booking and session flexibility
- Expanding coaching capacity, including specialist pathways and professional development opportunities for coaches
- Protecting time during working hours for coaching sessions

While acknowledging some limitations in sample size and potential self-selection bias, the evaluation offers meaningful evidence of SWPSS's positive and distinctive impact as a service provided by social workers for social workers. Continued investment and targeted research are recommended to support its growth and long-term sustainability.

The Social Work Professional Support Service

INTRODUCTION

The Social Work Professional Support Service (SWPSS) is a free, confidential and independent coaching service available to social workers and social work students across the United Kingdom (UK). Established and managed by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), the service was initially developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic - a time when social workers faced heightened pressures on both personal wellbeing and professional practice. Since its launch in July 2020, more than 1800 social workers have accessed the service (BASW SWPSS, 2025). A dedicated Coaching Supervisor oversees SWPSS coaches, providing guidance and support to maintain high standards of practice and to help both coaches and coachees make the most of the experience.

At the heart of the SWPSS is a team of volunteer coaches, all of whom are qualified social workers with varying professional experience of the sector. It is thought this shared professional background enables coaches to offer meaningful, sector-specific support to coachees through a person-centred coaching model. Coaching sessions provide a safe and reflective space to explore both personal and professional challenges, including the impact of work on wellbeing, navigating organisational change, managing workplace pressures and planning for career development (BASW, 2023).

A previous evaluation completed by Northern Ireland identified burnout and a perceived loss of professional identity and skills as key reasons for engaging with the service (Campbell et al., 2023). These findings have informed the current evaluation, which aims to establish UK-wide evidence and better understand the role of coaching in supporting the social work profession.

The evaluation explores:

- Motivations for accessing coaching;
- The extent to which coachees' expectations were met;
- The perspectives of both coaches and coachees on the value and impact of the service;
- Areas for further improvement.

This report first presents an overview of the service within each nation, highlighting national characteristics, service registration trends and perceived outcomes; followed by an analysis of social workers' experiences with the SWPSS across all four UK nations. Variation in funding and delivery models (the service is nationally funded in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, while operating on a self-funded basis in England) are noted alongside other national differences.

Please note: The images featured in this report were co-created with practitioner researchers using Canva. Further details about this collaborative design process can be found in Appendix 1.3.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review examines the role of coaching in social work. Although coaching is gaining recognition in various professions, academic engagement with its use in social work remains limited. Most available literature focuses on coaching as a method used *by* social workers in practice, rather than as a form of support *for* social workers themselves. This review explores key definitions, the distinctions between coaching and other forms of professional support and how coaching relates to the current context of social work. Potential outcomes of coaching are also considered.

1. (Lack of) definitions

Coaching is commonly defined as a structured, collaborative process focused on achieving personal or professional goals. The International Coaching Federation (2025) describes it as a partnership that 'stirs up creativity, fuels personal growth, and maximizes both professional and personal potential'. Coaching is typically client-led, embracing of the coachee's past, present and future and is action-oriented (Rogers, 2016).

Coaching in the context of professional support

Social workers may engage in professional support systems such as mentoring, consultation, counselling and supervision. These differ from coaching in key ways:

- **Mentoring** in social work is typically a hierarchical, developmental relationship where an experienced practitioner supports a less experienced colleague (Tsui et al., 2017). It often centres on the mentor's expertise and the quality of the relational dynamics (Stokes et al., 2020). While distinctions between coaching and mentoring are frequently drawn, Garvey et al. (2009: 27) argue they are 'essentially similar in nature', sharing values and applications, with differences shaped more by context than function.
- **Consultation** focuses on expert advice to resolve specific problems by assessing and recommending actions contrasting with coaching's emphasis on empowering people to generate their own solutions (Sabatino, 2014; Gray, 2006).
- **Counselling** is primarily therapeutic, aimed at processing past experiences and navigating crises, often over a longer duration (Gray, 2006). While counselling and coaching can overlap, especially where emotional support is involved, coaching is more goal-focused and action-oriented. Hart et al. (2001) emphasise key distinctions, such as the flexibility of coaching and its acceptance of dual relationships, which are typically avoided in counselling.
- **Supervision** is a mandated, formal process of reflective support in social work serving as a mechanism of professional accountability to support practitioners to better navigate the complexities of practice (Karrvinen-Nilnikoski et al., 2019). It helps enhance practice skills, though it is often tied to line management (Beddoe, 2012) and can reflect power dynamics, risk aversion and managerial surveillance (O'Donoghue & Tsui, 2012; Cousins, 2010; Beddoe, 2010). While valued for encouraging reflection, tensions arise when its managerial role overshadows its supportive function.

2. Coaching in the context of social work

There are clear similarities between the values of coaching and social work. Both are grounded in a strengths-based, relational approach, centring reflection and continuous learning (Rondero Hernandez & Douglas, 2022) while respecting one's autonomy and dignity (Edelson, 2010). It is thought that coaching can help reinvigorate social work by reconnecting practitioners to their professional values and motivations (Triggs, 2020, 2021, 2024). Coaching may also support more flexible, empowered communication with service users, potentially disrupting traditional power imbalances.

Coaching as a tool for social workers

Existing literature highlights a range of ways coaching practices have been applied in social work contexts. These uses may also be reflected in the experiences gathered for this evaluation.

- Coaching techniques have been incorporated into supervision structures to promote professional skills and reflective capacities, even in hierarchical frameworks (Harlow, 2013).
- Peer coaching models have been used to enhance reflective abilities and increase resilience of practitioners (Department for Education, 2025a).
- Self-coaching has been used to promote self-awareness and alignment between practice, professional development and career opportunities in virtual learning settings in South Africa (van de Heyde et al., 2017).
- Coaching has helped newly qualified social workers in England navigate transitions into new roles, reportedly improving their knowledge, skills and confidence (Pizzey et al., 2022).
- Blended coaching programmes (being coached, self-coaching and coaching others) have been implemented in Hong Kong to improve practitioner wellbeing and reduce burnout (Chan & Wong, 2024).

However, these examples are generally confined to internal organisational initiatives and/or focus on improving practice with service users. Critically, few examine coaching as an independent form of support for practitioners, particularly when accessed voluntarily and delivered by social workers themselves. There is very little evidence on coaching delivered by qualified social workers to their peers, outside of performance review structures. This absence is significant, given the ongoing pressures faced by practitioners and the increasing need for support of this nature.

3. The current climate of social work practice

Social work in the UK and globally is characterised by high stress levels, burnout and mounting complexity. Practitioners operate in unpredictable, highly pressurised environments shaped by scrutiny and heightened demands for financial accountability. Neoliberal and austerity-driven policies have intensified performance management, imposed budget constraints and fostered risk-averse organisational cultures. These conditions restrict professional autonomy and reduce opportunities for reflective, values-led practice (Ruch, 2007; Beddoe, 2010; Tsui et al., 2017). While supervision remains a formal support structure, it is inevitably shaped by these pressures, limiting its capacity to meaningfully engage with the realities of practice (O'Donoghue & Tsui, 2012).

Practitioner wellbeing is further impacted by high caseloads and persistent workforce shortages (Johnson et al., 2023), ethical stress under constrained resources (Fenton, 2015) and the damaging 'public perception myth' - a widespread negative portrayal of social workers that often becomes internalised and harms both individual practitioners and the profession (Hanley, 2024, 2025). Chan and Wong (2024) highlight high rates of depression and anxiety among social workers, linked to administrative overload and unstable socio-political contexts. Their work

identifies compassion, job autonomy, manageable workloads and supportive work environments as key protective factors. In this context, there is growing interest in (and need for) alternative forms of support, such as coaching.

In an increasingly managerial and performance-driven landscape, coaching is emerging in the literature as a valuable form of support that aligns closely with the profession's core values and practices. Caspi (2005) describes coaching as both a method and a movement, suggesting that social workers are particularly well suited to this approach due to their distinctive skill set and perspectives, which contrasts with those of coaches from business backgrounds. Edelson (2010: 3) identifies a 'constellation of core values' intrinsic to social work - including service, social justice, dignity, relationships, integrity, and competence - that are foundational to both social work and coaching. Similarly, Hernandez and Douglas (2022) highlight shared features including a clear purpose, foundational values, ethical guidelines, and defined practice skills. Triggs (2024, 2021, 2020) further argues that coaching not only supports the development of practical skills but also enhances the social work mindset and 'coaching way of being', enabling practitioners access to their personal power and vocational aspirations to 'make a difference'. These themes of professional identities may also emerge in our data and could inform recommendations on the wider integration of the SWPSS.

4. Conclusion

This review identifies coaching as a promising but significantly under-explored form of support for social workers. Although aligned with the profession's core values, its application has largely focussed on service user outcomes and/or ad-hoc organisational use. Given the increasing complexities of practice, coaching offers potential as a reflective tool for those feeling stuck, to better navigate challenges and reconnect with their professional values.

METHODOLOGY

This evaluation is informed by a Collaborative Practice Research in Social Work (CPRSW) approach, designed to enhance social work learning, improve practice and contribute to social justice and change (Kong et al., 2023). CPRSW positions practice wisdom alongside research evidence as equally legitimate forms of knowledge and values their integration in ways that are both ethically sound and practically relevant (Kong, 2016).

The ethos of CPRSW shaped the design and delivery of this project. Co-led by Durham University and BASW, the project was guided by a core group of BASW national and professional development leads. This group helped steer the project, ensuring the process remained focussed on the experiences of practitioners and responsive to national contexts. Later collaboration with the BASW Social Work Practitioner Research Network (SWPRN) ensured analysis was guided by a broader range of practice expertise.

The project outline itself was co-produced, with the Durham and BASW project leads working together from the outset to align the evaluation design with the realities and values of social work practice (Fouché, 2015). These discussions continued during the data collection process, to support data quality. As the project developed, members of the SWPRN were invited to take an active role in data analysis through a series of collaborative workshops. This participatory design ensured that both the evaluation process and findings reflected the priorities, language and lived experiences of practitioners.

BASW led the data collection phase between July and December 2024. A total of 43 survey responses were collected (with both qualitative and quantitative components), alongside six anonymised focus groups, four with coachees (one per nation) and two with cross-national coaches. All data were anonymised by BASW national leads before being securely transferred to Durham University by January 2025. In line with Durham University's ethical guidelines, full ethical approval was not required, as the project involved the analysis of anonymised secondary data only. BASW's ethical standards were adhered to throughout the project.

From January to April 2025, the Durham team conducted an initial thematic review of the data, organising responses into broad thematic clusters. These formed the basis of two collaborative data analysis workshops with SWPRN members. Each workshop was designed to centre practitioner expertise, with breakout groups enabling practitioner-researchers to follow their personal and/or professional interests to offer more nuanced analysis of thematically clustered data. To protect confidentiality, data extracts were only shared during the sessions rather than circulated to the wider network ahead of time. The data was co-analysed in these two workshops, with practitioner-researchers shaping the refinement of themes and identifying connections between areas of practice. This process honoured the CPRSW approach as shared meaning-making was prioritised at all stages of the evaluation. Key milestones in the data processing and analysis are listed in Appendix 1.

BASW SWPSS AND NATION BRIEFINGS

Before exploring the experiences of coaches and coachees, and the dynamics that underpin meaningful coaching, we first consider the distinct national contexts that may influence social workers' engagement with the SWPSS. Although the registration process for coaching is broadly consistent across nations (see Flowchart 1 below), the legislative contexts, practice environments and professional challenges vary significantly.

The nation briefings consistently show that governments across the four nations are fully aware of the impact of workforce shortages, high turnover rates and workload pressures on children's and adult safeguarding, mental health services and health-social care integration. While some governments are introducing legislation to ensure safe staffing levels (e.g., Northern Ireland) and to support social workers' wellbeing, learning and professional identity (e.g., Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales), other rapid 'reforms' across the UK are paradoxically creating further uncertainty and, in some cases, moral compromises for the profession. These differences were first highlighted by BASW national leads and subsequently confirmed by the joint research team, including practitioner researchers. Rather than providing an exhaustive account, each briefing offers a targeted overview of contextual factors, as identified by practitioners themselves.

Data presented in the nation briefings is drawn from the BASW SWPSS data set, with the latest entries as of April 2025. Across the UK, the majority of registrants (82%, n = 1,187) identify as women, 14% (n = 200) as men, and 4% (n = 55) did not report. Two-thirds (66%) are BASW members. In terms of ethnicity, 29% (n = 415) identify as English, 17% (n = 241) as Scottish, 9% (n = 130) as African, 8% (n = 121) as Welsh, and 7% (n = 104) as Northern Irish, with the remaining respondents reporting a range of other ethnic backgrounds.

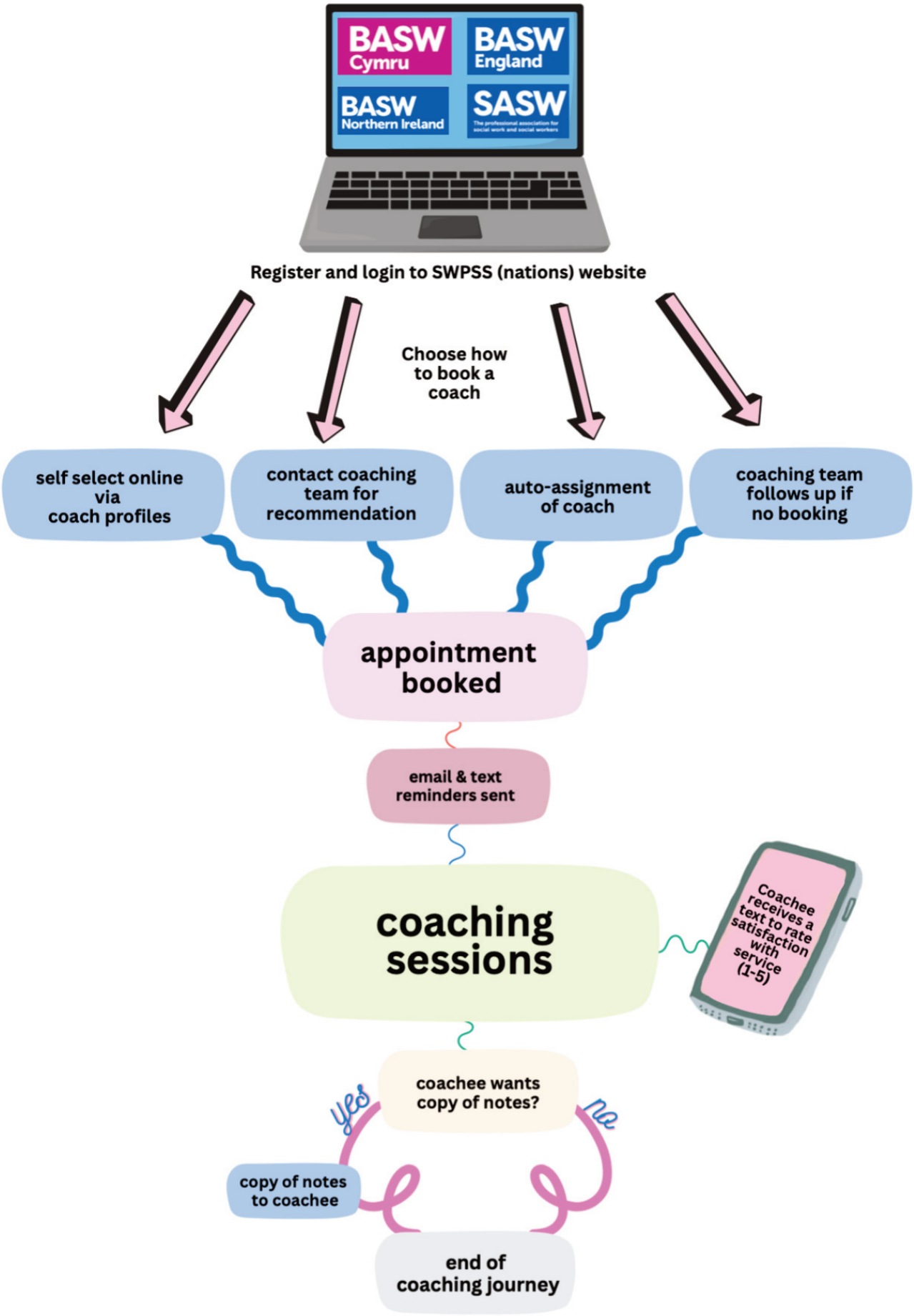
The largest age group is 40 - 49 (29%, n = 415), followed by 30 - 39 (26%) and 50 - 59 (24%). Most registrants (59%, n = 565) are employed by local authorities or Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs), while others work in the independent sector, are self-employed, or are students. 57% (n = 842) have six or more years' experience in the sector, 21% (n = 313) have one to five years, and 11% (n = 165) are newly qualified. The majority work as frontline social workers (58%, n = 552), with 12% in first-line management and 12% in middle or senior leadership roles. The most common practice area is children and families (44%, n = 417), followed by adults (23%, n = 223), mental health (10%, n = 95), and justice (3%, n = 25). Please find a more detailed breakdown of BASW SWPSS data in Appendix 2.

The most common attributes noted here (women aged 40 - 49, identifying as English, BASW members, employed by local authorities, with over six years' experience, working as frontline social workers in children and families) are also reflected in the coachee survey demographics, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Survey data demographics (Majority only)

Category	Coaches (n = 21)	Coachees (n = 22)
Gender	Majority women (n = 12); men (n = 8)	Predominantly women (n = 19); men (n = 1)
Ethnicity	Majority White (n = 12)	Majority White (n = 16)
Age Range	Most aged 40 - 65 (n = 15)	Most aged 40 - 65 (n = 16)
Area of Practice	Children and families (n = 11); Mental health (n = 2)	Children and families (n = 10); Mental health (n = 5)
Career Stage	Primarily middle or senior managers (n = 7)	Primarily frontline social workers (n = 8)
Employer	Mainly self-employed (n = 9)	Mainly local authority/ HSCT/NHS (n = 15)
UK Nation	Predominantly England) (n = 13	Predominantly England (n = 15)

Flowchart 1: A process overview of registration with the SWPSS



1. NORTHERN IRELAND

BASW Northern Ireland
The professional association for social work and social workers

Overview of social work practice in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland operates an integrated health and social care system, with approximately 6,772 social workers registered under the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC), the regulator for the social work and social care workforce across Northern Ireland, as of 31 December 2024 (NISCC, 2024a). Around 72.2% of the social work workforce is employed within Health and Social Care (HSC) settings (NISCC, 2024a). Most of the remaining workforce spread across multiple sectors, such as voluntary sector (6.77%), justice (4.3%), education (3.7%), government (1.93%) and private sector (1.5%) (NISCC, 2024a).

As part of its commitment to supporting the profession, BASW NI facilitates a series of Communities of Practice that bring together social workers across mental health, adult services, children's services, newly qualified and Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) practitioners, and Independent social workers. These groups provide a collaborative space to explore their work, share good practice, and raise issues for BASW NI to address (NISCC, 2020). Additionally, the Social Work Leadership Framework, developed under the Social Work Strategy, was created in recognition of the need to define social work-specific leadership capabilities, as distinct from generic models. The framework stresses the unique leadership role of social workers, aiming to strengthen their contribution to collective leadership across all sectors that employ social workers (Department of Health NI, 2022).

Current challenges

The social work profession in Northern Ireland currently faces significant and interconnected challenges:

- **Recruitment and retention:** High vacancy rates, particularly within HSC Trusts, are undermining workforce stability. While the reported vacancy rate was 3.1% as of December 2024 (Department of Health NI, 2024), it is widely acknowledged that the actual figure is significantly higher. This concern was most recently raised by BASW NI in discussions with the Health Minister in January 2025 (BASW, 2025).
- **Workload and workforce pressures:** The sector is under increasing strain due to rising poverty levels, a growing number of children being looked after by social services and increasingly complex caseloads. These factors collectively place greater pressure on already overstretched services. At the same time, ongoing budget constraints significantly threaten the sustainability of social work provision. Limited funding available to the Health Minister further restricts service capacity, and the number of training places for new social workers has not kept pace with the demand for qualified practitioners (NISCC, 2024b).
- **Newly qualified social workers (NQSW):** To address workforce shortages, all NQSWs are now offered employment within HSC Trusts without the need for interview. While this measure has supported recruitment in children's services, it has had the unintended consequence of reducing applicant numbers in other key sectors, such as the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, Education Welfare Services and the Youth Justice Agency. Additionally, the student incentive scheme provided to students is insufficient to cover the full costs of obtaining a social work degree in Northern Ireland, further discouraging entry into the profession (BASW NI, 2024; BASW, 2025).

Legislative and Policy context

While some progressive reforms are underway in Northern Ireland affecting social services, there have been significant delays in implementation. There was no functioning Executive in the Northern Ireland Assembly from January 2022- January 2024 hindering progress on reform with year-on-year budget constraints and the ongoing workforce pressures (Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2024), as mentioned above (BASW NI, 2024; BASW, 2025). Key developments include:

- Safe and Effective Staffing Legislation: The Department of Health NI is progressing plans to legislate for safe staffing levels in health and social care, which could improve caseload management and staff wellbeing. However, meaningful legislative and policy reform will require significant financial investment.
- Children's Social Care Reform: Following the 2023 Independent Review of Children's Social Care, there are recommendations to refocus on early help and family support and to establish a single, arm's-length body to coordinate children's services across health, education and justice. Of the review's 53 recommendations, only 27 are currently being progressed, raising concerns about the pace and scale of reform.
- Adoption and Children Act (Northern Ireland) 2022: Efforts to modernise adoption legislation, initiated in 2006, have faced repeated delays due to suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Implementation remains incomplete, now primarily stalled by budgetary constraints and insufficient staffing in children's services.
- Adult Protection Bill: This long-awaited Bill is due to be introduced to the Northern Ireland Assembly – five years after initial concerns were raised about the adequacy of existing protections. It seeks to align Northern Ireland with the rest of the UK by establishing specific adult safeguarding legislation.
- Mental Health Reform: Implementation of the Mental Capacity Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, which introduced Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards in 2019, is ongoing. Delays have been driven by political instability and pressures on an overstretched health and social care system. The Northern Ireland Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 also faces major challenges in its implementation, including chronic underfunding, workforce shortages and rising demand for mental health support.

The Social Work Professional Support Service in Northern Ireland

The SWPSS was introduced in Northern Ireland in 2021 with support from the Department of Health NI. The service is available to all registered social workers and social work students.

Profile of coachees practising in Northern Ireland (February 2022 – April 2025)

As of April 2025, 172 social workers were registered with the coaching service in Northern Ireland, with 27% registered BASW members. The majority identify as women (85%, n = 147), with most aged between 40 - 49 (35%, n = 61). Over half (53%, n = 91) identify as Northern Irish, with additional representation from Irish (30%, n = 11), English (6%, n = 9), and a small number from other diverse ethnic backgrounds. Most are experienced practitioners, with 65% (n = 111) having over 6+ years post-qualification experience, and 57% (n = 98) working in frontline social work roles. The primary areas of practice are adults (33%, n = 57) and children and families (31%, n = 54). Most are employed by the Belfast HSC Trust (72%, n = 22), and 3% (n = 6) have declared a disability.

Key contributor to this national briefing:
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2. SCOTLAND

SASW
The professional association for social work and social workers

Overview of social work practice in Scotland

As of April 2025, 10,795 social workers are registered with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC, 2025a). Social work services in Scotland are delivered through integrated Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs), established by the Public Bodies (Scotland) Act 2014 (Scottish Government, 2022). However, the extent to which social work services are delegated to these partnerships varies by locality. Services are either provided directly by Scotland's 32 local authorities or commissioned from private and third sector organisations. Since the 2016 integration of health and social care, Integration Authorities have been responsible for planning and commissioning adult social care and social work services. In some areas, they also oversee children's and criminal justice services, depending on local arrangements. Social work is delivered across a range of settings, from remote island communities to urban communities, each with its own unique social, economic and cultural context (Scottish Government, 2022).

Governance arrangements are generally considered to be effective, often supported by dedicated social work governance boards or similar structures that provide oversight and accountability. The SSSC's Code of Practice plays a central role in guiding ethical practice, promoting continuous improvement and supporting reflection (Care Inspectorate, 2025). The Scottish Association of Social Work (SASW), as part of BASW, contributes to this landscape by working independently and in collaboration with partner organisations to develop resources that support both practitioners in Scotland and the broader social work community (SASW, 2025). In addition, the Cross-Party Group (CPG) on Social Work, comprising Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs), professionals, people with lived experience and representatives from across the sector, with the secretariat held by SASW, aims to raise the profile of social work and strengthen its collective voice in public and political discourse.

Looking ahead, the Care Reform (Scotland) Bill, passed in June 2025, will establish a National Social Work Agency to promote and support the profession in Scotland (Community Care, 2025). The agency will be located within the Scottish Government and will formally support the work of a new national chief social work adviser, a role that will be placed on a statutory footing for the first time. While the specific functions of the agency are not detailed in the legislation, it is expected to lead efforts to strengthen the profession through enhanced collaboration, improved education and professional development and national-level leadership. The National Social Work Agency will form part of a wider Scottish Social Work Partnership, which will also include local government (COSLA), Social Work Scotland and other key stakeholders (Community Care, 2025).

Current challenges

The social work profession in Scotland faces several interconnected challenges impacting workforce wellbeing and service delivery, including:

- **Recruitment and retention:** The sector continues to face persistent workforce challenges, with retirement, ill health and poor terms and conditions cited as leading reasons for staff departure (SSSC, 2025b). High staff turnover places additional pressure on the remaining workforce, contributing to increased workloads, stress and low morale. According to the Scottish Social Services Workforce Wellbeing Survey, social work staff are the group most likely to consider leaving their roles within the next 12 months (SSSC, 2025c).
- **Workload and workforce pressures:** Excessive workloads, lack of recognition, budget constraints and unsupportive

workplace cultures continue to affect staff wellbeing. While improved pay is cited as the most effective way to attract and retain staff, social workers also highlight the need for better management support and more manageable caseloads. 45% of respondents reported experiencing bullying, discrimination or harassment in their role (SSSC, 2025c).

- **Resource and rural challenges**: Tight budgets are limiting the availability and quality of services across the board. These pressures are particularly acute in rural and remote areas, which face higher vacancy rates, fewer specialist services and unique professional challenges as social workers in these settings often carry out a broader range of tasks and cover larger, harder-to-access areas. Professional boundaries are more difficult to maintain in these contexts, as social workers frequently live and work in close-knit communities, where personal and professional lives may overlap (Turbett, 2019).

Legislation and policy changes

Social work services in Scotland operate within a highly complex and challenging environment, navigating a legislative framework that includes 43 pieces of legislation, most of which have been introduced since 2000 (Care Inspectorate, 2025). Key developments (SASW, 2025) include:

- The Care Reform (Scotland) Bill and proposed National Social Work Agency (2026): This initiative intends to improve retention by focusing on social work's professional identity. The enhanced learning pathways and standardised development frameworks proposed will rely on meaningful consultation with frontline social workers during the shadow year starting April 2025.
- Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill: Introduced in the Scottish Parliament on 17 June 2025, the Bill proposes changes to each stage of a child's potential interaction with the care system in Scotland, including an extension of eligibility for aftercare, financial support for care leavers and increased allowances for carers (Scottish Parliament, 2025).
- Health and social care integration: The launch of Single Authority Models in Argyll and Bute, Orkney, and Western Isles and new frailty teams in A&E departments will require social workers to adapt to changing governance systems and shifting accountability frameworks.
- Digital reform: A new personalised digital health and social care app will launch by the end of 2025 as part of wider reforms. These include efforts to streamline services, integrate data systems, and shift toward preventative models, with third sector organisations playing a larger delivery role.

The Social Work Professional Support Service in Scotland

SWPSS has been available to BASW members in Scotland since July 2020. In June 2021, the SWPSS was expanded to include all registered social workers and students across Scotland. The Scottish Government has funded the service for nearly four years.

Profile of coachees practising in Scotland (June 2021 – April 2025)

The majority of those registered with the service identify as women (83%, n = 412), with 13% (n = 66) identifying as men and a small proportion (1%, n = 3) as non-binary. Over a third (37%) are BASW members. Most identify as Scottish (61%, n = 306), and the largest age groups are 40 - 49 (28%, n = 141) and 30 - 39 (27%, n = 137). A significant majority (75%, n = 374) are employed by local authorities, and nearly half (48%, n = 242) are 6+ years qualified. Frontline social workers make up the largest group (57%, n = 284), with 38% (n = 189) working in children and families and 28% (n = 139) in adults. Overall, 10% (n = 51) have declared a disability.

Key contributor to this national briefing:
Karin Heber (SASW Professional Officer)

3. WALES

BASW Cymru
The professional association for social work and social workers

Overview of social work practice in Wales

Wales, a devolved nation with a population of approximately 3.1 million (Stats Wales, 2024), is divided into 22 Local authorities responsible for delivering statutory social services to children, families and adults (Law Wales, 2021). These services operate within a devolved policy context shaped by Welsh legislation and care priorities that reflect the distinct social policy landscape of Wales. Social Care Wales, the national body for workforce regulation and development, oversees the registration of social workers, promotes professional standards and supports continuing professional development. All practising social workers must be registered with Social Care Wales and adhere to the Code of Professional Practice for Social Care, which outlines values and expectations for ethical, rights-based practice (Social Care Wales, 2017). The Welsh Government's emphasis on collaboration, inclusion and wellbeing is reflected in the nation's approach to social work, which aims to deliver holistic, strengths-based support within communities (Social Care Wales, 2023).

As of September 2023 (the most recent published data available) 6,736 social workers were registered with Social Care Wales, representing an increase of 185 (3%) from September 2022. The majority (66%) were employed by local authorities, reinforcing the centrality of statutory roles within the profession (Social Care Wales, 2023). As of March 2022, 22% of all social workers were employed on a part time basis, while the vast majority (90%) were employed on permanent contracts (Social Care Wales, 2023).
BASW Cymru is the Welsh branch of BASW, the professional membership organisation representing social workers across the UK. It serves as the independent voice of social work in Wales, advocating for the profession and supporting practitioners in achieving the highest standards of practice.

Current challenges

- **Recruitment and retention:** Particularly in statutory children's services, many local authorities report persistent difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, leading to a reliance on agency workers, which can disrupt continuity of care and increase costs (Social Care Wales, 2024). Contributing factors include limited career progression opportunities, inadequate student bursaries, and high administrative burdens. National strategies aim to improve induction, supervision and leadership development to strengthen these recruitment and retention challenges (Social Care Wales, 2024).
- **Workload and workforce pressures:** Local authorities are operating under tight financial constraints due to rising demand, inflation and restricted funding. These pressures limit their ability to invest in workforce development and service innovation, resulting in higher caseloads, reduced support for staff and limited access to training and supervision (Welsh Government, 2025). Social workers in Wales report high levels of stress and emotional exhaustion, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, and increasing case complexity. These conditions have intensified the emotional and psychological demands of the role, making staff wellbeing a core focus of current workforce strategies (Social Care Wales, 2024).
- **Digital capacity and demographic pressures**: An ageing population, increasing poverty levels, and the growing complexity of service users' needs are placing additional strain on social services (Social Care Wales, 2024) while a lack of access to digital tools and training continues to hinder practice. Current workforce strategies include plans to enhance both digital skills and infrastructure (Welsh Government, 2025).

Legislation and policy changes

Recent workforce surveys report high levels of stress and feelings of being undervalued among social workers, largely driven by workload pressures and wider social issues such as poverty and the lasting impacts of COVID-19 (Social Care Wales, 2025; Welsh Government, 2021, 2023). Key legislative changes attempt to address these issues:

- Health and Social Care (Wales) Act 2025 prohibits private profit in the care for looked-after children, shifting provision to public or not-for-profit models, and introducing direct payments for Continuing NHS Healthcare. These changes are expected to increase short-term workload for social workers due to system transitions and new financial responsibilities. However, they may support longer-term retention by better aligning practice with social work values (Welsh Government, 2025).
- Social Care Workforce Delivery Plan 2024 - 2027 focuses on workforce well-being, recruitment, leadership and digital upskilling. It aims to reduce burnout, improve retention, and modernise practice through digital tools and leadership development (Social Care Wales, 2024).

The Social Work Professional Support Service in Wales

The SWPSS has been available to all social workers and social work students across Wales, regardless of BASW membership status since November 2021 (BASW, 2021). The Welsh Government has funded the service for four years.

Profile of coachees practising in Wales (November 2021 – April 2025)

The majority identify as women (80%, n = 179), with 52% being BASW members and half (50%, n = 112) identifying as Welsh. The age profile is relatively balanced, though the largest group is aged 40 - 49 (28%, n = 64), followed by those aged 30 - 39 (26%, n = 59). Most practitioners are employed by local authorities (65%, n = 146) and are experienced practitioners, with 50% (n = 112) having over six years' experience and 16% (n = 35) students. Frontline roles continue to make up the largest position (59%, n = 133), with a strong representation of children and families (39%, n = 87) and adult services (16%, n = 35).

Key contributors to this national briefing:
Ioana Plesa (Social Work Mentor Coach), Steven Crane-Jenkins (Communications and Public Affairs, BASW Cymru)

4. ENGLAND

BASW England
The professional association for social work and social workers

Overview of social work practice in England

As of March 2024, there were approximately 102,861 registered social workers in England (Social Work England, 2024), working in a range of settings:

Adult services: According to Skills for Care (2024), by September 2023, there were an estimated 18, 500 filled qualified social worker posts in local authorities' adult social services in England. While there was an increase of 15.2% social worker filled posts since 2016, the total number of all filled posts within local authorities increased by only a small percentage (4.1%). The turnover rate of social workers in adult social services departments was 14.5% in 2023, meaning that around 2,400 had left their roles in the previous 12 months. The vacancy rate of social worker posts in local authorities, as of September 2023, was 10.5%.

Adult social work in England is commissioned and delivered through 42 Integrated Care Systems (ICSs), introduced in July 2022. ICSs cover populations ranging from 500,000 to 3 million people and facilitate collaboration between Integrated Care Boards (health) and local authorities. All local authority social workers are included in these partnership frameworks.

Children and family services: The Department for Education (2025b) reports that, in 2024, there were 34, 300 child and family social workers in post, up 3.7% (n = 1,200) from 2023. The number of agency social workers in post declined by 9.2% (n = 700), bringing the total to 6, 500 in children's services. The vacancy rate of children and family social workers also dropped by 6.9% (n = 500) and turnover rate improved slightly from 15.9% in 2023 to 13.8% in 2024. These statistics reflects only the social work workforce in local authorities' children's services department or, where services are joined up, those working primarily with children and families.

Other social workers in England work in various settings, including NHS services, or voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) organisations. However, there is no consistent data available to illustrate a detailed breakdown of this segment of the workforce.

Current Challenges

Several significant challenges continue to affect funding and the sustainability of services in England. In children and families' services, the cost of specialist residential provision has risen sharply, with the market's stability threatened by the dominance of private equity-owned providers. Preventative services in this area have also faced over a decade of underinvestment. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care estimated that an additional £2 billion would be needed over five years to restore balance to the system by 2030, yet the previous government committed only £250 million, focusing on a small number of pilot areas (MacAlister, 2022). Meanwhile, in adult social care more broadly, efforts to strengthen the workforce are underway through the Social Care Workforce Pathway, introduced in 2024 by Skills for Care and the Department of Health and Social Care. This initiative is designed to improve recruitment, retention, and training across the social care sector, but is not specific to social work. Ongoing challenges include:

- **Recruitment and retention:** Local authority services continue to face persistent workforce shortages (see statistics above). In 2024, social workers still recorded the highest average number of sickness days (10.8 days) among all regulated professional roles in adult social services (Skills for Care, 2025). In the same year, children and families social work reported 7,200 vacancies, a turnover rate of 13.8%, and a sickness absence rate of 3.4% - an increase from 3.2% in 2023 (Department for Education, 2025b).

- **Workload and workforce pressures:** Social workers have experienced real terms pay cuts and worsening working conditions amidst rising living costs. Several councils have issued Section 114 notices (indicative of bankruptcy), with financial pressures expected to intensify in 2025. Contributing factors include increased employer National Insurance contributions and rising operational costs. In response, the government introduced statutory guidance in 2024 to regulate the use of agency social workers in children's services, with similar non-statutory guidance under consideration for adults.
- **Outsourcing trends:** While the number of agency child and family social workers fell from a peak of 7,200 in 2023 to 6,500 in 2024, the decline in total agency staff outpaced the reduction in those covering vacancies (Department for Education, 2025b). In adult social care, while 84% of social workers were employed on permanent contracts, 12% were indirectly employed as bank, pool, or agency staff (Skills for Care, 2025). Social workers continue to represent the highest proportion of agency staff among all adult social care job roles (Skills for Care, 2024).

Legislation and policy changes

Recent and ongoing legislation and policy changes in England will have a major impact on social work practice:

- Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill: Aims to increase financial transparency, regulate private sector profit margins, and strengthen regulatory oversight. While designed to improve service quality, the Bill may result in additional administrative burdens for practitioners. It also introduces new post-qualifying standards and induction frameworks for newly qualified social workers. Measures to reduce agency staff use are included, though systemic drivers (e.g., pay disparities and racism) remain largely unaddressed. Notably, global majority social workers are disproportionately represented in agency roles and cite discrimination and lack of support as reasons for avoiding permanent positions.
- Mental Health Bill: Proposes removing autistic adults and people with learning disabilities who do not have co-occurring mental health needs from the scope of the Mental Health Act, potentially limiting their rights and access to appropriate care. The Act could also result in significant challenges to day-to-day practice for Approved Mental Health Professionals (AMHPs). BASW is currently working with partners to lobby on these areas.
- Independent Social Care Commission: Announced in April 2024, this commission is expected to report in 2027. The long timeline has drawn criticism, especially as the NHS is simultaneously progressing a 10-year plan with a much faster delivery schedule. The delayed timeline risks perpetuating uncertainty and frustration about the future of adult social care.

The Social Work Professional Support Service in England

Since its launch in July 2020, the SWPSS has been available to all registered BASW members in England. To date, 1,250 social workers have registered with the service – all of whom are BASW members. More recently, the service was extended to include an additional 20 Think Ahead participants, with 8 registered so far, of whom 4 are BASW members.

Profile of coachees practising in England (November 2021 – April 2025)

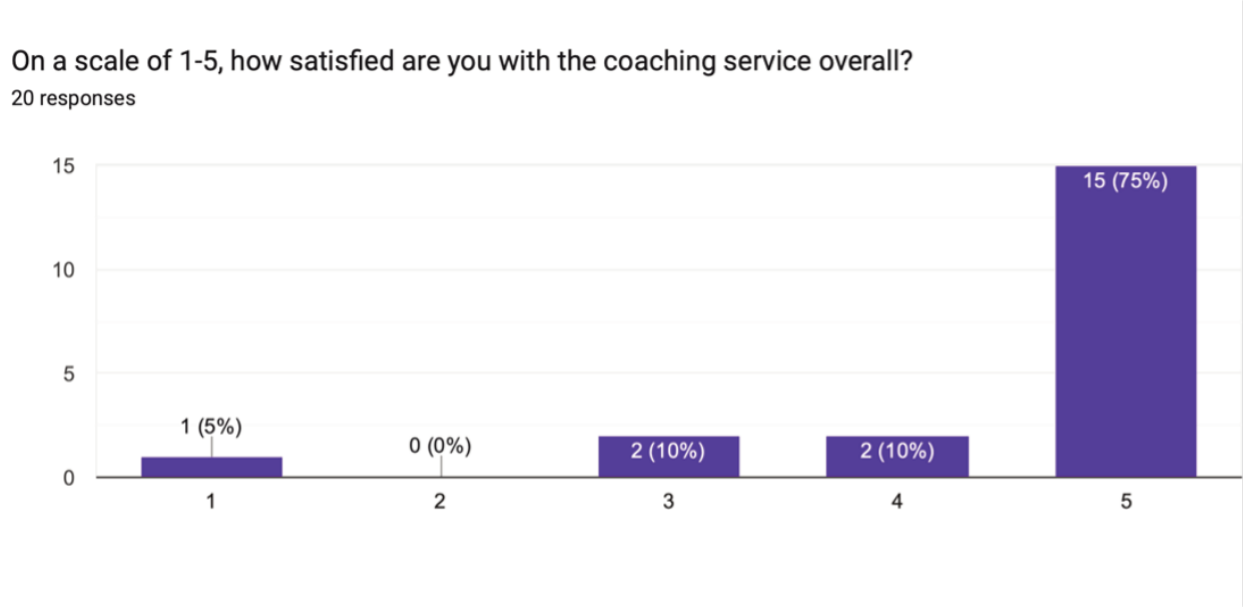
The vast majority of those who have registered with the SWPSS in England identify as women (84%, n = 562). Almost half identify as English (49%, n = 326), with significant representation from African (14%, n = 93), Caribbean (7%, n = 48), and Indian (4%, n = 30) backgrounds. Age distribution is fairly even among mid-career professionals: 28% (n = 188) are aged 50 - 59, 27% (n = 183) are 40 - 49, and 27% (n = 179) are 30 - 39. 57% (n = 378) have 6+ years' experience.

Of the available data from November 2022 most practitioners are employed by local authorities (49%, n = 242), although a notable portion work in other settings (20%, n = 101), or are self-employed (9%, n = 42). Frontline practice is the most common role (60%, n = 298), and the largest area of practice is children and families (50%, n = 247), followed by adults (21%, n = 106) and mental health (12%, n = 60). 26% (n = 175) have declared a disability.

Key contributor to this national briefing:
Denise Monks (BASW England Professional Officer)

FINDINGS

Social workers in the UK are under constant, mounting pressure. The individual nation briefings highlight shared structural challenges, including recruitment and retention difficulties and ongoing budget constraints. These broader issues exacerbate other challenges facing the profession, including rising caseloads, deteriorating pay and working conditions and a lack of support for newly qualified social workers. Importantly, the need for external support to make sense of these harsh professional realities extends beyond those entering the profession. Many experienced social workers also seek a space to consider their professional and personal progress amidst these longstanding problems.



Survey and focus group data from both coaches and coachees highlight that the coaching service provides a crucial space for reflection. Notably, 75% of coachees rated their overall satisfaction with the service as 'very satisfied' (5 out of 5). The majority of these highly satisfied respondents had completed more than 3 sessions, whereas the coachee who reported being highly dissatisfied had attended only 1 session.

The findings suggest that coaching plays a transformative role, helping practitioners reimagine their professional identity in a context otherwise marked by disillusionment and the sense of being 'stuck' (see Theme I: coaching as a circuit breaker). The data also sheds light on the key characteristics of this particular coaching model, which provides social workers a uniquely affirming space to feel heard, seen and understood (see Theme II: The dynamics of the coaching space). Insights from both coaches and coachees help us to understand how coaching *by* social workers *for* social workers can rebuild the fractured connection between personal and professional identities in a profession marked by stress and pressure (see Theme III: Bridging the personal and professional self).

Table 2: Motivations and experiences by career stage

Career stage	Coaches	Coachees	Motivations and experiences	Expectations met (1 - 5)
Student/NQSW	0	2	• Building confidence and supporting professional growth • Enhancing self-awareness	4
Frontline Social Worker	2	8	• Seeking reassurance and emotional support • Learning to balance demands • Enhancing self-awareness	4
First Line Manager	0	2	• A safe space for dialogue • Building confidence	4
Middle or Senior Manager	7	6	• A safe space for dialogue • Seeking clarity and direction • Building confidence and supporting professional growth • Enhancing self-awareness	5
Retired	5	2	• Exploring and understanding practice challenges • Seeking clarity and direction • 1:1 contact with someone who understands • Validating experiences and responses	4

Please note:

- Table 2 highlights the motivations and experiences of both coaches taking on the coaching role and coachees accessing the service for the first time. Notably, coaches and coachees at middle or senior manager levels reported very high levels of satisfaction, with the majority stating that their expectations were fully met. These respondents also tended to articulate more specific goals and outcomes they hoped to achieve through the service.
- The following quotes are drawn from both survey responses and focus group discussions. Quotes from coaches during focus groups are not attributed to a specific nation, as these sessions included a cross-national mixture of coaches.

1. Coaching as a circuit breaker

The first theme emerging from the data is that coaching acts as a circuit breaker – a conscious but responsive choice from social workers to disrupt unsustainable working patterns. While motivations for seeking coaching vary across career stages (see table 2), there is a shared recognition that existing forms of support (e.g., supervision or mentoring) often fall short. The metaphor of a 'circuit', emerging from coachee focus group discussions reflecting upon experience in practice as a 'gerbil going round the wheel' captures aspects of the cumulative, systemic pressures that many practitioners experience across the UK. It is the coaching service itself that is positioned as the 'circuit breaker', without which practitioners feel there is no opportunity to meaningfully pause.

'Coaching is a level of self-care ... it is about looking after yourself, giving yourself that bit of a break from the gerbil going round the wheel continuously, that - day in day out - giving that real protected time for me...where I'm at, what's happening, what I need to change and that I think is what I found so essential with the sessions - it was that breakout, it was almost a bit of .... a circuit breaker...just going round and round everything was taking place, and this was a stop, almost and then I can reset ... that probing of making me think and look at that bigger picture and having that level of reflection.'
(Coachee, Focus Group, Northern Ireland)

'What I hear from conversations [is] everyone is feeling more pressure, the pressures are the same, every team I would say are crying out re: capacity.'
(Coachee, Focus Group, Northern Ireland)

It describes a loop of unresolved challenges, reactive practice and persistent stressors. Importantly, coaching tends to be accessed at the tipping point, when the sense of feeling stuck has already set in, rather than as a pre-emptive or routine form of professional support and development.

'They've often tried a number of things to try and resolve the issues and they feel stuck ... things like burnout or just being fed up and whenever we're fed up, we just say, oh, we'll need to make a change. So, there's a lot of people contemplating major changes as well.'
(Coach, Focus Group)

Professional climates

While motivations for accessing coaching vary by career stage – Frontline Social Workers appear to seek reassurance and emotional support while those in Managerial roles look for a safe space for reflection - the broader context remains consistent. Across roles, social workers face mounting pressure, a lack of recognition and a decline in opportunities for reflective practice. Many report feeling lost when their professional values are compromised; and frustrated and overwhelmed when their professional autonomy is restricted or undermined; and stuck when career progression feels either unattainable or undesirable.

> 'As professionals, we social workers can become as lost, frustrated, overwhelmed and stuck as all other people.' Coach, Survey Data, Scotland)

> 'As a very experienced social worker and leader with almost 25 years' experience, it's never too late to reach out for some extra support... I was feeling "stuck"' (Coachee, Survey Data, England)

> '[I] was able to be completely open unlike supervision or support received from my line manager or colleagues' (Coachee, Survey Data, England)

As highlighted by the coachees, having a safe and regular reflective space embedded into the working day is invaluable for social workers. These spaces can support professional growth, enhance self-awareness and help to realign the personal and professional self, which ultimately improves practice (Ferguson, 2018). At a time when reflective practice is more important than ever, given the increasing complexity and emotional demands of the profession, many practitioners report a noticeable decline in its availability and a dilution in quality. Supervision, once central for reflective practice, is now often described as largely managerial, with limited time or scope for meaningful reflective dialogue. This concern was echoed by practitioner-researchers during the co-analysis workshops, who stressed the importance of distinguishing reflective supervision from managerial supervision. Crucially, this was not an argument for replacing supervision with coaching. Rather, coaching was viewed as a necessary, additional space that serves a different but equally important function.

> 'It's not someone monitoring what you're doing. It's not an organisational driven space. It's very much about you... but equally, I don't think it should ever be seen as a replacement for supervision, which it doesn't profess to be.' (Coachee, Focus Group, England)

> 'Being a social worker and that might be stating the obvious, but it really is a difficult, difficult job... and because supervision is about work targets ... We pay a price individually as social workers... it does leave its mark.' (Coachee, Focus Group, England)

> 'I'd had very poor supervision ... I was feeling very let down and disillusioned about things and very isolated.' (Coachee, Focus Group, England)

The professional self

In the coaching space, practitioners are not necessarily seeking solutions to specific problems but rather looking for alternative spaces in which to reflect on their practice and make informed, meaningful decisions about their future - whether that involves staying in their current role, changing teams, or leaving the profession altogether.

> 'They just ... needed a space to kind of process all of that and help them find a way forward... if they wanted to stay in social work or not... they're just looking at, you know, finding some direction and a supplementation to supervision... just a space that's external from their organisations to really think about ... how they're managing their own stress, you know what's important to them and you know how to move forward from places where they feel stuck.' (Coach, Focus Group)

The professional values and practices of social work can sometimes conflict with the organisational priorities and practices of social services. In such instances, practitioners particularly benefit from access to reflective spaces outside the workplace, where they can explore these tensions in a professional but non-managerial environment.

> 'It helped me to process some really challenging situations at work in a safe, confidential space where the coach was looking out for my interests' (Coachee, Survey Data, England)

Social workers with protected characteristics may find external support to be a safer and more comforting space in which to reflect and be heard.

> 'The coaching was to help me [with] the challenges and difficulties I had with my employer and within employment and managing myself with neurodiversity.' Coachee, Focus Group, Scotland)

These conversations provide opportunities to openly explore challenges related to workplace culture and leadership, supporting practitioners to plot their way through complex professional environments. For many, coaching provides a space to focus on themselves and their journey - which itself can be related or unrelated to their professional development. In this sense, the circuit breaker allows for contemplation and reconfiguration of the professional self, taking into account their personal circumstances, values and life aspirations.

> 'It's not something that should be seen as you need it if you are struggling, it is something you should uptake at any point in your career... like going back to look at your leadership qualities, looking at that leading by example and also for that personal and professional development for myself in my new role, and giving me that bit of time out.' (Coachee, Focus Group, Northern Ireland)

> 'See if that can help me think about where I go next. So that was my reason really.' (Coachee, Focus Group, Wales)

2. The dynamics of the coaching space

This theme focuses on the experiences of coaching. The data highlights the distinct characteristics that make coaching not only effective but, in many cases, deeply meaningful, even transformative, for both coachees and coaches. Two core sub-themes emerged: coaching in the context of social work and relational dynamics within the coaching relationship.

Coaching in the context of social work: Shared professional identity

A defining feature of the SWPSS coaching service is that it is delivered by social workers for social workers. This shared professional identity creates a space of mutual understanding, where coaches and coachees speak the same language - professionally and emotionally.

> 'We're social workers with social work issues... it's not general coaching, it's coaching in the context of social work'.(Coachee, Focus Group, Wales)

The empathy and insight developed in SWPSS is a result of lived experience, as social work professionals, while the diverse perspectives emerge can help build critical reflection and sometimes challenge taken-for-granted ideas and perceptions. Coachees consistently highlighted the value of this professional proximity. It enabled them to feel understood without needing to explain the intricacies of their roles or justify the emotional weight of their work.

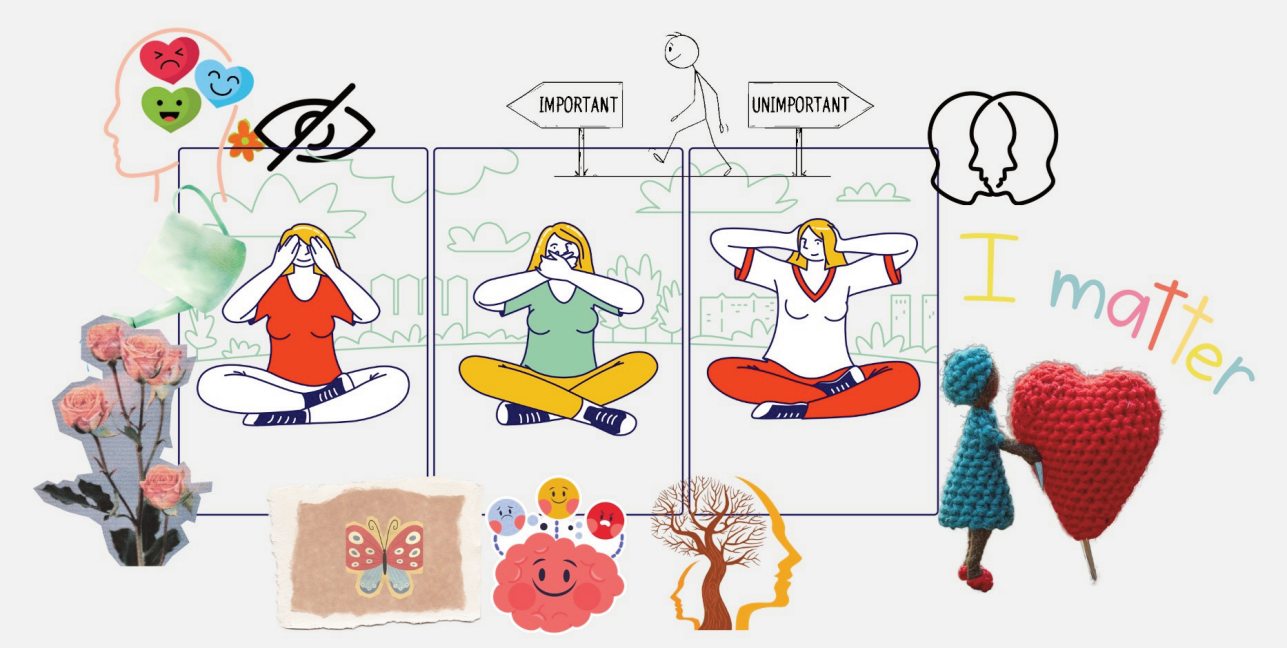
> 'She would just say 'yes, of course, that's really insightful' and 'yes, absolutely - I understand exactly what you're saying'. And it was like ... she knew the language. She knew... how it felt actually, so those things have been amazingly important in the service, and I think it's micro and macro as well that the society doesn't value social work as a profession.'
> (Coachee, Focus Group, England)

'To have a social worker who understands... the requirements, even though she was based in another nation, she still has, you know, her own codes of conduct. She has her own kind of responsibility. She has her own kind of understanding what it's like in the front line to speak to a social worker. And again, that training that she's gone through made a difference to why I chose her as opposed to someone else. That's, I guess because I'm a social worker myself.' (Coachee, Focus Group, Scotland).

Matching coaches and coachees seems to be at the core of a successful coaching experience, but this is not always an intentional process. As can be seen in Flowchart 1, coachees might deign to be allocated any available coach, while others actively review profiles and select who they feel would be the best fit. Similarly, coaches do not necessarily offer the same information on their profiles. While some choose to list their training and qualifications, others might use the space to detail their practice experiences. Mismatches between a coach's expertise and a coachee's needs can lead to disappointment and, in some cases (n = 1), leave the coachee feeling unsupported.

'I have only had one coaching session, so it is hard to evaluate. I was expecting several sessions to assist me to manage a disciplinary that I have been experiencing for over 4 years and the coach did not really have relevant experience for this. I also have to write several hours of CPD around assessments and the coach whilst very personable, they did not really have the facility to help me in my situation. The advice they gave whilst sound did not really meet my needs'. (Coachee, Survey Data, England)

Relational dynamics: Feeling seen, heard and safe



The second sub-theme centres on the relational qualities of the coaching space - described by many coachees as an opportunity to 'breathe'. In contrast to other formal professional spaces, coaching was seen as safe, non-judgmental and attuned to their needs.

'I think my coach was very adaptable, very perceptive...I was able to vocalise some things quite clearly ... she reflected back, she listened ... its very person centred. 'What do you see your story becoming?' or 'what questions do you need to ask for this to happen?' She would pose certain questions.' (Coachee, Focus Group, England)

Coachees frequently described their coaches as perceptive and adaptable. Where there were shared identities, such as neurodiversity, gender or ethnicity, this appeared to further deepen the resonance and trust built. These relationships enabled a level of honesty, reflection and clarity that many felt was unavailable elsewhere.

> 'Hearing a social worker ... practice and in a busy, frontline practice how they were dealing with their [neurodiversity], how they were faced with some of the difficulties that they had. And I'm like, yes, I hear that! ... To hear another social worker echoing ... it felt good because ... I've not been able to be part of many social work groups that actually have helped me understand myself and the difficulties that I face along with others.'
> (Coachee, Focus Group, Scotland)

For most coachees who reported positive experiences, coaching provided a space that felt free from organisational constraints and managerial pressures - allowing them to reconnect with the core values of social work. Coaches similarly described the coaching relationship as fostering empathy, compassion and deeper understanding of the personal and systemic challenges faced by practitioners:

> 'The impact on me as the listener and responder is to have increased empathy, compassion, understanding, respect, and validation of both the human challenges, and organisational challenges that social workers are faced with in their roles.'
> (Coach, Survey Data, Scotland)

> 'It offers hope that we are supporting each other within a community of social workers.'
> (Coach, Survey Data, England)

Several coaches reported that the service reactivated their core social work skills and attributes, particularly active listening - something arguably deprioritised in managerial roles. One coach noted that shifting from a directive management style to a more reflective coaching approach was particularly powerful:

> 'You know, when I was a manager... I was mostly kind of you know directive. So, I would just focus more on giving directions and that's how I functioned, and I was feeling a big lacuna. I was not satisfied working, functioning as a manager like that, so I wanted to learn. When I came in, along with being in management to being a coach, and that in particular has worked out very, very well for me.' (Coach, Focus Group)

Coaches reflected on the meaning and depth of their role, often contrasting it with their experiences in management. Coaching offered a clearer connection to values-based, relationship-based practice, with protected space and time to engage meaningfully. It also provided opportunities for peer learning, connection with other coaches, and a powerful sense of giving back to the profession:

> 'I never kind of take it for granted about, I guess, being privileged to kind of sit in that space with social workers, because it's such a difficult job'. (Coach, Focus Group)

3. Bridging the personal and professional self

This theme explores how coaching appeared to help social workers reconnect their professional identity back with their personal values during a challenging professional climate. Rather than focusing on performance improvement or resilience-building, practitioners described coaching as a process of personal and professional realignment - returning to the foundational values that first drew them to the profession. Through this process, coaching supported a clearer sense of purpose, increased agency and a renewed capacity to navigate complexity.

While satisfaction with the service was consistently high, its impact was described in more relational terms: as a space for grounding, reorientation and even restoration. Insights from practitioner-researchers during analysis further contextualised these findings. They noted that the coaching space disrupts the otherwise linear, bureaucratic progression of a typical social work career - where reflective practice is too often sidelined. In this sense, coaching offered a rare and much-needed opportunity to pause and reconnect with purpose.

Practice during times of professional turbulence

During moments of professional turbulence - whether feeling burnout, overwhelmed or adjusting to change - coaching provided a dedicated space to think, feel and recalibrate. Practitioners did not frame this experience as 'coping better', but rather as an opportunity for recovering their professional voice and values. For many, this included developing new skills, finding renewed confidence and embracing a clearer sense of professional identity. Coaching appeared to enable practitioners to reflect meaningfully on their professional roles during times of chaos. Rather than merely better coping with pressure, practitioners described gaining new skills, perspectives and confidence - often identifying this as a return to their practice values. During times of professional disruption, social workers were able to reorient themselves in a meaningful way.

'I wouldn't have known what form that support was going to be and how...I suppose it would have ... helped me on my new journey, to develop new skills, new ways of thinking and suppose it had actually helped my knowledge probably more than I initially thought... it certainly exceeded expectations in relation to that.'
(Coachee, Focus Group, Northern Ireland)

'Supporting my social work career and balancing my personal life through challenges, with opportunity for reflection. The outstanding support and advice provided by the Coach has been a great source of reassurance and provided a safe space to discuss and share issues, also providing me the opportunity to build my confidence.'
(Coachee, Survey Data, Wales)

'Feel more grounded and more able to deal with the challenges at work.'
(Coachee, Survey Data, Scotland)

The value of having experienced social workers as coaches becomes especially clear when managers are less able to provide personalised reflective support for practitioners struggling at the frontline. As most coaches are experienced social workers themselves, their validation can strengthen coachees' self-belief and reaffirm their commitment to the social work profession.

'Coaching has created a safe, supportive, and empowering space and time to talk and be listened to'.
(Coach, Survey Data, Scotland)

'The validation of us as ... professionals and people can't be underestimated. I think it's incredibly important and I don't know where else it happens. I think so many people burn out in social work and so many managers are inundated and can't keep giving ... I think that's why they don't care for the workers as well as they could do, because I think they're just overwhelmed'.
(Coachee, Focus Group, England)

Synergy: Personal growth, collective impact

Beyond individual-level development, many coachees described a ripple effect - where insights from coaching translated into more reflective, empathetic leadership and/or relational practice, suggesting coaching helped reaffirm their identity and model healthier ways of working.

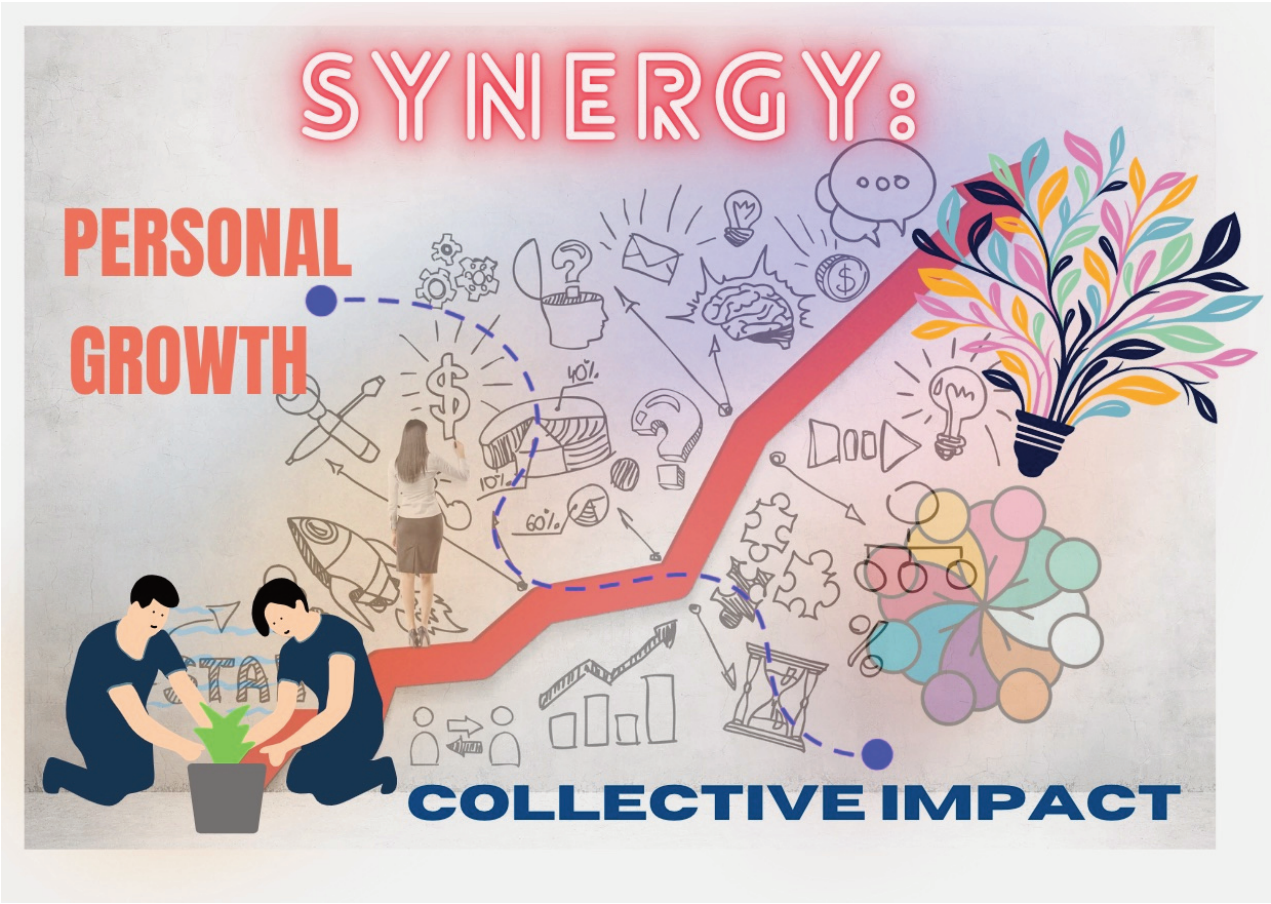
> 'I have gained a lot of self-awareness and skills to help others explore challenges and ways to move forward. I have learnt how to use motivational and reflective approaches within a coaching role as well as coaching methods.' (Coach, Survey Data, England)

> 'I have become more self-aware and working toward having a work/life balance'
> (Coachee, Survey Data, England)

The synergy between coach and coachee reinforces the understanding that coaching is not a contained event, but a process of change. Many coachees carried forward their insights - whether through formal leadership roles, offering informal mentorship, or by approaching team dynamics with a renewed perspective.

> 'My ability to share some of that knowledge and pass that on, it enabled me almost with a coaching style and ... it helped me potentially in some of my conversations that I would be having with managers where I would have used more of that coach approach and even when you are talking to your band 7's, 6's, saying you need to be coaching more rather than having that narrative of telling someone what to do.'
> (Coachee, Focus Group, Northern Ireland)

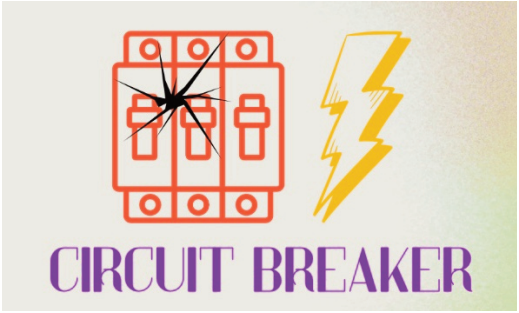
> 'Being able to utilise my coaching and mentoring skills to support others within the profession. Also learning from the individuals that I have coached'.
> (Coach, Survey Data, Wales)



DISCUSSION

This discussion interprets the findings presented above and situates them within broader practice contexts, with a particular focus on the structural challenges facing the social work profession. It explores how coaching can serve as a distinct, much-needed reflective and developmental space in practice. The implications for professional identity, organisational culture and the future integration of coaching into social work are considered.

1. Coaching as a circuit breaker



The findings suggest that the social work profession is increasingly characterised by a reactive, performance-driven culture. Supervision, once a central site for reflective practice, has become largely managerial and constrained in scope. While supervision remains a critical form of support, the intensifying demands of the profession have eroded its potential as a space for deep reflection. In the face of mounting pressures, partly attributed to the UK-wide challenges in recruitment, retention and resources, meaningful opportunities for reflection are becoming increasingly scarce. Within this context, the coaching service emerged as a 'circuit breaker', a space that interrupts the performance-driven rhythm sometimes felt in daily practice, offering practitioners a moment to pause, process and reconnect. Coaching should not be seen solely as a remedial intervention however, but as a proactive, preventive resource. Especially when embedded earlier in a practitioner's career, coaching could prove invaluable to the workforce and align with a developmental approach to workforce wellbeing and retention.

Drawing on Wenger's (2000) concept of social learning systems, the coaching relationship between social worker coaches and coachees can foster belonging, identity formation and professional learning. Through the interconnected modes of engagement and imagination, coaching helps practitioners navigate shifting boundaries and role ambiguities (e.g., stepping into overlapping roles to compensate for workforce gaps, or adapting to the complexities of remote and hybrid working arrangements) that are increasingly common in today's pressured work environments.

The data also suggest that practitioners approach coaching with different motivations depending on their stage of career. For newly qualified social workers, coaching can prompt existential questions about their fit within the profession. For those more experienced, it offers a space to reconnect with lost aspects of practice, make sense of practice concerns, or rekindle a sense of professional purpose. These patterns resonate with insights shared during the collaborative analysis workshops - particularly regarding common (mis)conceptions of career progression as a strictly upward, linear journey. Here, practitioner researchers challenged the assumption, as well as the career progression narrative, that advancement in social work must involve assuming more senior roles. Instead, they stressed the value of horizontal development - including diverse roles, learning opportunities, and areas of growth that unfold *across* rather than *up* a hierarchy. Coaching was seen as a unique, professionally engaged space that remains distinct from the day-to-day pressures of practice. It creates room to reimagine career journeys not just as a path upward (toward seniority) or outward (into alternative careers), but as varied, meaningful routes that truly reflect personal values, development, and purpose within the profession. In this way, coaching disrupts linear career narratives and instead enables lateral and transformational development.

2. Dynamics of the coaching space

The distinctive value of coaching lies in its relational dynamics, in contrast to internal organisational dynamics often felt elsewhere in practice (Tsui & Cheung, 2004). Practitioners consistently described the coaching space as one of authenticity, a place where they felt truly seen, heard and validated. This was frequently linked to the shared professional identity between coach and coachee. The ability to speak with someone who understands the unique pressures of social work created what many described as a space to 'breathe'. The matching of coaches and coachees was also highlighted as a key component in enhancing trust and the quality of the experience more generally.

The importance of coaches being qualified social workers themselves cannot be overstated. Many practitioners noted during the collaborative analysis workshops that they were not supervised by a fellow social worker in their regular supervision but instead by professionals from other disciplines, such as nursing or care management, creating a disconnect in practice-based reflection. Shoukry and Cox (2018) offer a useful theoretical framing here, describing coaching as a social process of change, rather than a prescribed intervention - particularly when contextualised within the social work profession. They argue that neutrality in coaching may be less desirable or even unrealistic in certain contexts, and that a coach's awareness of organisational politics, socio-historical processes and power dynamics can enhance the relevance and impact of the coaching relationship. This echoes what many practitioners valued: the sense that their coach understood the system they were operating in and was not an outsider to their experiences. Indeed, Caspi (2005) argues that coaching is both a method and a movement, noting that social workers bring a depth of relational skills and reflective insight that is often lacking in coaches from corporate or business backgrounds.

Coaching was also noted as a rare opportunity to exercise choice and agency. While most mandatory training within social work is experienced as a reoccurring procedural requirement, coaching represents an active decision to invest in oneself. Being able to choose one's coach and set the agenda offered a rare sense of control in an otherwise tightly regulated profession.

3. Reaffirming the professional self

Coaching played a pivotal role in helping practitioners reconnect with their core values and sense of professional identity. Many described a renewed commitment to relationship-based practice and a reawakening of the motivations that led them to enter social work in the first place. This was especially true for those in leadership roles, who reported feeling distant from direct practice. Coaching offered them an opportunity to revisit suppressed or forgotten aspects of their social work identity and challenge dominant managerial narratives. As Triggs (2024) notes, coaching not only develops transferable skills but also extends the social work mindset and behaviour. Triggs (2021) further argues that enabling people to access their personal power is fundamental to transforming social work encounters, linking coaching to the recovery of vocational aspirations to 'make a difference' (Triggs, 2020).

Beyond individual wellbeing, practitioners reported broader ripple effects, including improved boundary-setting, self-awareness and work-life balance - outcomes that can positively influence social work team culture and the broader organisational climate. Findings here challenge dominant narratives around 'resilience' in social work, which often frame individual responsibility as the solution to systemic problems. Instead, coaching should be positioned as a reflective intervention that supports ethical practice, wellbeing and leadership development, based on positive, non-judgmental and empathetic peer relationships. In doing so, it may also contribute to organisational learning and cultural change.

4. Areas for further inquiry and improvement

Several important questions emerge about the sustainability, resourcing, and scalability of the SWPSS. A consistent theme throughout the evaluation was the need for protected time for coaching and reflective development. Currently, many practitioners must seek managerial approval and fit coaching around already demanding schedules. Embedding coaching into induction programmes, particularly for newly qualified social workers, could promote early engagement with reflective practice, potentially improve retention and promote wider engagement with professional bodies such as BASW.

Improving access and awareness

While experiences were overwhelmingly positive, both coaches and coachees identified areas for improvement in the SWPSS. Suggestions included broader promotion strategies beyond email communications and a more streamlined, simplified booking process. Many also recommended using clear, relatable language, the use of 'buzzwords' and 'examples of the types of issues' that coachees may bring to the coaching space, to help prospective coachees understand what coaching could offer. Additionally, there were calls for 'more than 6 sessions' to be made available:

'By increasing the number of coaching delivery hours and enhancing the employability of coaches, we can make a significant contribution to social work practice across the UK... Coaches possess unique transformational capabilities that no other role in the social work field can provide... I suggest that ... we explore the possibility of establishing coach employment as a niche role within social work and safeguarding. This would enable coaches to help transform professional achievements, enhance productivity, and foster growth in various areas and sectors of social work, allowing them to be a transformative force throughout the country.' (Coach, Survey Data, England)

Building coaching capacities and specialisations

The need for ongoing professional development for coaches was a repeated recommendation. Suggestions included 'more CPD training offers' and offering 'mentoring for both new and existing coaches', suggesting a demand for formalising the coaching role:

'Professional qualifications for coaches to enhance our knowledge and experience.'
(Coach, Survey Data, England)

There were also calls to develop specialist coaching pathways tailored to the different needs of the workforce.

'A more individual way to choose your coach.'
(Coachee, Survey Data, England)

For example, overseas-qualified social workers may benefit from more specialised, longer-term coaching to support professional integration while those approaching retirement may benefit from shorter-term support, perhaps transitioning into peer mentoring or coaching roles themselves. One coach (Survey Data, England) suggested small group coaching could serve these needs well.

Greater flexibility in delivery, along with improved awareness of the availability of weekend sessions, was also recommended to accommodate practitioners with non-standard working patterns or caring responsibilities. One coachee proposed a localised peer mentoring extension to the current model:

'An extension of your coaching service where you have peer mentors in each area where they offer a face-to-face session with somebody and then can refer them on to the coaches if that extra bit is needed... It's such a good service.'
(Coachee, Focus Group, Wales)

Coaching conversations commonly included navigating ethical tensions, managing burnout, rebuilding confidence and developing leadership skills. These themes reflect the broad relevance of coaching across career stages and underscore its potential contribution to workforce retention and satisfaction efforts. As Triggs (2024) observed, a 'coaching way of being' can mirror the very ethos that social workers aim to bring to their practice with others.

Reimagining professional identity and purpose

Perhaps most strikingly, coaching was deeply meaningful for coaches themselves. Many reflected on experiences of burnout, feeling stuck and the limiting assumption that career progression must lead to management or exit from the profession. Coaching offered an alternative journey - one rooted in purpose, reflection and renewed connection with practice. For experienced practitioners who do not wish to pursue managerial roles, coaching provides a pathway to re-engage meaningfully with social work. Positioned close to practice but distanced from organisational pressures, it holds potential not only for individual development but also for cultivating new forms of professional identity. In this sense, becoming a coach may be understood as an alternative form of career progression- one that is grounded in learning and reflective dialogue. It can act as a form of professional resistance to the dominant neoliberal and managerial culture shaping contemporary practice.

This aligns with Shoukry and Cox's (2018) critique of coaching as a possible conduit for neoliberal agendas - centring self-improvement, individual responsibility and institutional compliance. However, when viewed as part of a wider, transformative eco-system within social work and approached as a relational, reflective process, coaching can resist these tendencies. Rather than reinforcing dominant narratives, it can instead act as a space of resistance - supporting change, fostering critical reflection and enabling social work as a collective to reimagine roles and professional futures within the broader context of practice.

5. Conclusion

Coaching has emerged from this evaluation as a critical space for reflection and the (re)development of professional identity. It has also outlined the significant gaps in the literature on coaching for social workers. Despite ongoing challenges such as high caseloads, excessive demands, overwork and stress social workers remain committed to delivering safe, good quality services to children and adults. The coaching service evaluated here occupies a distinctive space: one not defined by predetermined outcomes or organisational agendas but shaped within the coaching relationship itself. In an era defined by complexity, managerialism and reduced reflective spaces, coaching provides a rare opportunity for social workers to be heard, to think differently, and to reengage with their values. As the profession seeks to sustain and support its workforce, embedding coaching more fully into professional development pathways should be considered as a priority.

LIMITATIONS

While this evaluation offers valuable insights into the perceived value of coaching in social work, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the findings are based on a relatively small sample size, particularly within the coachee focus groups. This limits the generalisability of the results, as the views captured may not represent the full range of experiences across the wider cohort of social workers who engaged with the service. Second, there is a potential self-selection bias in the data. Participants who chose to respond to the survey or take part in focus groups may have done so because they had particularly positive or impactful experiences with coaching, potentially underrepresenting critical or neutral perspectives. These limitations do not diminish the significance of the findings however, but they do suggest that further research with more diverse samples would be valuable to deepen understanding and inform future service development.

CONCLUSIONS

This evaluation highlights the significant and positive impact of the SWPSS for both coachees and coaches. In the context of an increasingly pressured and complex social work landscape, the service has emerged as a vital space for reflection and reconnection with the professional self. Situated at the intersection of social work and coaching, the SWPSS represents a distinctive and underexplored model. Unlike much of the existing literature, this service is unique in its use of coaching *by* social workers *for* social workers - anchoring the process in shared understanding and lived experience.

While coaching complements other forms of support, such as supervision, it offers something distinct. The SWPSS creates a space that feels emotionally close to the realities of practice whilst maintaining a safe and containing distance from the organisations and contexts of social work practice. This balance allows for meaningful exploration of identity, purpose and wellbeing in a way that standard supervision often cannot provide. The findings make clear that coaching is not a quick fix, but a proactive and powerful tool for prioritising professional identity and well-being. Although the evaluation was limited in scale, the richness and consistency of responses strongly support continued investment in the service across the BASW nations. Given the emerging themes around identity and relational dynamics, a more targeted and in-depth study would be valuable. Future research should explore the long-term impact of coaching for social workers at different career stages to understand how it can be scaled or adapted to meet evolving needs in the profession.

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APPENDIX I

1.1 Key milestones in data processing and analysis

- Anonymised data was transferred by BASW to the Durham University research team. All data was securely stored in an encrypted, password-protected folder (13 January 2025).
- Anonymised focus group transcripts (4 coachee groups, one per nation, and 2 coach groups) were reviewed in MS Word by the Durham team. Any remaining identifiable details were removed, and data was cleaned. Relevant extracts were compiled into a master document and organised under broad, initial themes.
- The DU research team conducted initial thematic coding of the focus group data, which formed the basis of the first collaborative analysis workshop with the Social Work Practitioner Research Network (SWPRN) via MS Teams (7 April 2025). Three breakout sessions were held using separate documents of themes. Each group included at least three practitioner-researchers and one facilitator from the project team. Discussions refined the themes and explored sub-theme connections, guided by members' practice knowledge and expertise. Facilitators captured insights in real time using Mural, which were then shared with the wider group at the end of the session.
- Breakout group transcripts were reviewed to ensure all contributions were incorporated. The project team updated the thematic mind map accordingly and used it to refine the overarching themes across all data, including survey responses.
- Anonymised survey responses (n=42) were reviewed in both Microsoft Forms and Excel formats. Data was cleaned (e.g., assigning participant numbers, correcting integer responses) and uploaded into NVivo. Thematic analysis of the survey data was aligned with the themes from the first workshop.
- The final collaborative data analysis workshop included further thematic refinement using updated focus group and survey data. Again, three breakout documents guided discussions, with each group comprising at least three practitioner-researchers and a project team facilitator (7 May 2025).
- Practitioner-researchers were invited to join the report writing team. Several contributed to national briefings.
- A full draft of the report was shared with the network for feedback on 2 June 2025 and finalised by the project team on 16 June 2025.

1.2 Enhancing co-analysis through digital collaboration: Digital whiteboard

Please note - individual comments on the whiteboards above are not intended to be visible. Instead, they are included to give the reader a sense of the overall process of sense-making and the breadth of ideas generated.

1.3 Enhancing co-analysis through digital collaboration: Collaborative Collaging as a participatory visual method for engaging with evaluation findings

As part of the collaborative ethos of this evaluation, we facilitated a small-scale, time-limited collaborative digital collaging project to visually explore, reflect upon, and communicate key themes and findings related to coaching in social work. At its core, this creative process centred on collaborative image-making as a reflective and participatory tool, using Canva as a shared digital workspace.

Collage is inherently a collaborative practice, drawing together diverse materials, images, and fragments to create something new (Knezovich, 2018). In this project, we extended this ethos by bringing together multiple contributors to co-create visual representations of the layered experiences captured in the evaluation. Collaging is particularly valuable when working with complex, sensitive, or emotionally rich material that may be difficult to express in words. Visual methods like collage can make these experiences more tangible, offering participants a way to reflect, communicate, and develop new insights (Barron, 2023).

Digital formats enabled flexible collaboration across different locations and time zones. Collage also offers an aesthetic alternative to conventional qualitative reporting, moving beyond 'monochrome' or formal outputs (Balmer, 2021). Through colour, abstraction, layering, and multimodal meaning-making, collages deepen engagement and open new ways of understanding.

In this project, collage was positioned not as a polished product but as a process of reflective exploration. Practitioners' choices - regarding images, layering, colour, and arrangement – became meaningful acts of sense - making that enriched the evaluation.

An invitation to participate was shared at the BASW Social Work Practitioner Research Network, with follow-up materials including a session plan, a Canva guide, and a word cloud from the evaluation to prompt reflection. The one-hour session, facilitated over Microsoft Teams, brought together seven participants from the research team and practitioner forum. All were signed into a shared Canva project space, enabling real-time collaboration. Working in two breakout groups, participants reflected on selected words, quotes, and themes. Some added their own images, while others contributed through dialogue, with one person leading the image placement. Both groups worked in conversation simultaneously whilst creating the collages.

References

Balmer, A. (2021). Painting with data: Alternative aesthetics of qualitative research. *The Sociological Review*, 69(6) 1143 –1161.

Barron, A. (2023). Collage as Method. *Methods for change*, 2, 1-10.

Knezovich, S. (2018). *Collage as collaboration: A working theory*. Available at: https://stphn-knzvch.com/blog/2018/5/16/collaborative-collage

APPENDIX 2: BASW SWPSS DATA BY NATION

Disclaimer: The following breakdown of BASW SWPSS by nation is based on administrative data collected from varying start points. As a result, totals may differ across data points, and caution is advised when making direct comparisons.

2.1 United Kingdom

Please note: the following overview includes data points with varying total counts

- Total number registered = 1, 856
- 82% (n = 1187) identify as women, 14% (n = 200) men, and 4% (n = 176) not reported
- 66% are BASW members (Average)
- 29% (n = 415) identify as English, 17% (n = 241) Scottish, 9% (n = 130) African, 8% (n = 121) Welsh, 7% (n = 104) Northern Irish, 7% (n = 96) did not report, 6% (n = 82) selected other, 5% (n = 66) Irish, 4% (n = 53) Caribbean, 3% (n = 45) Indian, 2% (n = 29) European, 1% (n = 18) Asian Pakistani, 1% (n = 14) Mixed Ethnicity, 1% (n = 10) Chinese, 1%, and (n = 9) Bangladeshi. Total = 1, 445
- 29% (n = 415) are aged between 40-49, 26% (n = 382) are 30-39, 24% (n = 350) are 50-59, 11% (n = 165) are 18-29, 5% (n = 73) are 60+, and 4% (n = 60) did not report. Total = 1, 445.
- 59% (n = 565) are employed by the local authority or HSCT, 14% (n = 136) selected 'other', 11% (n = 102) are students, 6% (n = 55) are in the Independent Sector, 5% (n = 48) are Self-Employed, and 5% (n = 45) did not report. Total = 951
- 57% (n = 842) are 6+ years qualified, 21% (n = 313) are 1-5 years qualified, 11% (n = 165) are less than 1 year qualified, 11% (n = 158) are students, and 1% (n = 12) did not report. Total = 1, 490
- 58% (n = 552) are Frontline Social Workers, 12% (n = 117) are First Line Managers, 12% (n = 113) are Middle or Senior Managers, 11% (n = 106) are students, and 6% (n = 60) did not report. Total = 951
- 44% (n = 417) work in Children & Families, 23% (n = 223) work in Adults, 11% (n = 102) are students, 10% (n = 95) work in Mental Health, 6% (n = 53) work in other, 4% (n = 36) did not report, and 3% (n = 25) work in Justice. Total = 951

2.2 Northern Ireland

- Total number registered = 172
- 85% (n = 147) identify as women, 12% (n = 20) men, 1% (n = 1) non-binary and 2% (n = 4) not reported
- 27% are BASW members
- 53% (n = 91) identify as Northern Irish, 30% (n = 51) Irish, 6% (n = 11) English, 5% (n = 9) did not report, 2% (n = 3) selected other, 1% (n = 2) White British, 1% (n = 1) White European, 1% (n = 1) Chinese, 1% (n = 1) Asian Pakistani and 1% (n = 1) African
- 35% (n = 61) are aged between 40-49, 26% (n =45) are 30 – 39, 19% (n = 33) are 50-59, 12% (n = 21) are 18-29, 4% (n = 7) are 60+ and 3% (n = 5) did not report
- 72% (n = 123) are employed by the Belfast HSC Trust, 13% (n = 22) selected 'other', 6% (n = 11) are in the Independent Sector, 6% (n = 10) are Students, 2% (n = 3) are Self-Employed and 2% (n = 3) did not report
- 65% (n = 111) are 6+ years qualified, 17% (n = 29) are 1-5 years qualified, 10% (n = 18) are less than 1 year qualified, 6% (n = 11) are students and 2% (n = 3) did not report
- 57% (n = 98) are Frontline Social Workers, 18% (n = 31) are Middle or Senior Managers, 15% (n = 26) are First Line Managers, 6% (n = 10) are students and 3% (n = 7) did not report
- 33% (n = 57) work in Adults, 31% (n = 54) work in Children & Families, 15% (n = 25) work in Mental Health, 7% (n = 12) other, 6% (n = 11) did not report, 6% (n = 10) are students and 2% (n = 3) work in Justice
- 3% (n = 6) of those registered have declared a disability

2.3 Scotland

- Total number registered = 499
- 83% (n = 412) identify as women, 13% (n = 66) men, 1% (n = 3) non-binary and 4% (n = 18) not reported
- 37% are BASW members
- 61% (n = 306) identify as Scottish, 10% (n = 50) English, 6% (n = 31) African, 7% (n = 33) did not report, 6% (n = 31) selected other, 2% (n = 9) Indian, 2% (n = 8) Irish, 1% (n = 7) Northern Irish, 1% (n = 7), 1% (n = 5) Chinese, White European, 1% (n = 3) Pakistani, 1% (n = 3) Bangladeshi, 1% (n = 3) Welsh, 0% (n = 2) British and 0% (n = 1) Caribbean
- 28% (n = 141) are aged between 40-49, 27% (n = 137) are 30-39, 21% (n = 103) are 50-59, 16% (n = 79) are 18-29, 5% (n = 23) did not report, and 3% (n = 16) are 60+
- 75% (n = 374) are employed by the local authority, 13% (n = 63) are students, 4% (n = 18) selected 'other', 3% (n = 17) are in the Independent Sector, 3% (n = 17) did not report, 2% (n = 8) are Self-Employed and 0% (n = 2) are in the Third Sector
- 48% (n = 242) are 6+ years qualified, 19% (n = 96) are 1-5 years qualified, 18% (n = 92) are less than 1 year qualified, 13% (n = 66) are students, and 1% (n = 3) did not report
- 57% (n = 284) are Frontline Social Workers, 14% (n = 71) are First Line Managers, 13% (n = 65) are students, 12% (n = 62) are Middle or Senior Managers, and 3% (n = 16) did not report
- 38% (n = 189) work in Children & Families, 28% (n = 139) work in Adults, 13% (n = 65) are students, 9% (n = 44) work in Justice, 9% (n = 45) work in other, and 3% (n = 17) did not report
- 10% (n = 51) of those registered have declared a disability

2.4 Wales

- Total number registered = 225
- 80% (n = 179) identify as women, 16% (n = 35) men, 4% (n = 10) not reported and 1% (n = 1) non binary
- 52% are BASW members
- 50% (n = 112) identify as Welsh, 18% (n = 41) English, 10% (n = 23) did not report, 7% (n = 15) selected other, 5% (n = 11) African , 3% (n = 7) Indian, 2% (n = 5) Asian, 2% (n = 4) Caribbean, 2% (n = 4) Scottish, and 1% (n = 3) British
- 28% (n = 64) are aged between 40-49, 26% (n = 59) are 30-39, 21% (n = 48) are 50-59, 14% (n = 31) are 18-29, 5% (n = 12) did not report, and 5% (n = 11) are 60+
- 65% (n = 146) are employed by the local authority, 16% (n = 36) are students, 8% (n = 18) selected 'other', 5% (n = 12) did not report, 4% (n = 8) are in the Independent Sector, and 2% (n = 5) are Self-Employed
- 50% (n = 112) are 6+ years qualified, 22% (n = 49) are 1-5 years qualified, 16% (n = 35) are students, 12% (n = 26) are less than 1 year qualified, and 1% (n = 3) did not report
- 59% (n = 133) are Frontline Social Workers, 16% (n = 35) are students, 9% (n = 21) are First Line Managers, 8% (n = 19) did not report, and 8% (n = 17) Middle or Senior Managers
- 39% (n = 87) work in Children & Families, 25% (n = 57) work in Adults, 16% (n = 35) are students, 9% (n = 20) work in Mental Health, 7% (n = 15) work in other, 4% (n = 8) did not report, and 1% (n = 3) work in Justice
- 10% (n = 23) of those registered have declared a disability

2.5 England

- Total number registered = 667
- 84% (n = 562) identify as women, 14% (n = 92) men, and 2% (n = 13) not reported
- 100% are BASW members
- 49% (n = 242) are employed by the local authority, 20% (n = 101) selected 'other', 9% (n = 42) are Self-Employed, 8% (n = 40) are in the Independent Sector, 7% (n = 36) are Students, and 7% (n = 33) did not report. Total = 494
- 28% (n = 188) are aged between 50-59, 27% (n = 183) are 40-49, 27% (n = 179) are 30-39, 8% (n = 51) are 18-29, 7% (n = 45) are 60+, and 3% (n = 21) did not report
- 49% (n = 242) are employed by the local authority, 20% (n = 101) selected 'other', 9% (n = 42) are Self-Employed, 8% (n = 40) are in the Independent Sector, 7% (n = 36) are Students, and 7% (n = 33) did not report
- 57% (n = 378) are 6+ years qualified, 23% (n = 152) are 1-5 years qualified, 12% (n = 80) are less than 1 year qualified, 7% (n = 49) are students, and 1% (n = 8) did not report
- 60% (n = 298) are Frontline Social Workers, 12% (n = 61) are Middle or Senior Managers, 11% (n = 54) are First Line Managers, 9% (n = 47) did not report, and 7% (n = 36) are students. Total = 494
- 50% (n = 247) work in Children & Families, 21% (n = 106) work in Adults, 12% (n = 60) work in Mental Health, 6% (n = 31) are students, 4% (n = 22) did not report, 4% (n = 18) selected 'other', 1% (n = 7) work in Palliative Care, and 1% (n = 3) work in Justice. Total = 494
- 26% (n = 175) of those registered have declared a disability

APPENDIX 3: SURVEY DATA DEMOGRAPHICS

	Coaches (n = 21)	Coachees (n = 22)
Gender identity		
Women	12	19
Men	8	1
Prefer not to say	1	2
Race or ethnicity		
Asian, Asian British or Asian Irish	2	2
Black, Black British or Black Irish, Caribbean or African	3	1
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	1	1
White	12	16
Chinese	1	0
Latina	1	0
Prefer not to say	1	2
Age range		
25-40 years	2	4
40-65 years	15	16
65+ years	2	2
Prefer not to say	2	0
Area of practice		
Adults	3	4
Children & Families	11	10
Justice	0	1
Mental Health	2	5
Other	5	2
Career stage		
Student/ NQSW	0	2
Frontline Social Worker	2	8
First Line Manager	0	2
Middle or Senior Manager	7	6

Retired	5	2
Other	6	1
Not reported	1	1
Employer		
Local Authority/HSCT/ NHS Trust	7	15
Independent Sector	0	1
Self Employed	9	2
Third Sector	0	2
Other	4	1
Not reported	1	1
UK Nation		
Northern Ireland	2	1
Scotland	4	4
Wales	2	1
England	13	15
Not reported	0	1
Sessions completed		
1-3	N/A	12
3-6	N/A	8
Time as coach		
Less than 1 year	3	N/A
1-2 years	4	N/A
2-3 years	3	N/A
3-4 years	11	N/A

APPENDIX 4

4.1 Focus group templates

SWPSS Evaluation: Coachee Focus Group template

****** ENSURE TRANSCRIPTION IS ENABLED AND THE MEETING IS BEING RECORDED ******

Record the following information for each focus group

Date: _____

Time: _____

Platform (Zoom/Teams): _____

Participants: (Nation, number of participants): _____

1. **Welcome & Introductions (10 mins)**

- Brief introduction to the BASW coaching service and the purpose of the focus group.
- Explain confidentiality (i.e., all names and identifiable information will be anonymised before analysis), ensured anonymity of responses and participants' right to withdraw at any point.
- Confirm participants are happy for the session to be recorded.
- Introduce facilitators and participants.
- Agree a code of conduct (e.g., respecting others' opinions, timekeeping, confidentiality beyond the setting).

2. **Service uptake discussion (15 mins)**

- Ask participants to briefly introduce themselves and share their general experiences with the coaching service.
- Discussion prompts:
  - What motivated you to first become a coach?
  - How did you first learn about the service?
  - How frequently do you provide coaching?
  - Have you noticed any emerging trends in the number of people using the service in specific nations? Why do you think these trends exist?
  - Have you noticed any barriers to accessing or providing the service?

3. **Meeting expectations & suggestions for improvement (15 mins)**

- What were your initial expectations when you first became a coach?
- To what extent were these expectations met or unmet?
- How do you feel about the expectations coachees bring into the service? Do you feel equipped to meet these expectations?
- Are there any gaps in the service that you believe should be addressed? How?

4. **Experiences of coaches (15 mins)**

- How has providing coaching impacted you professionally or personally?
- What challenges did you encounter during the coaching process?
- Would you recommend the coaching service to a colleague? Why/why not?
- How has the service supported social workers' wellbeing in different nations, especially post-COVID?
- What improvements could be made to enhance the service?

5. **Regional differences and/or similarities (10 mins)**

- Have you noticed any regional differences in how the service is used or perceived?
- How might the experience in one region differ from other nations in the UK?
- Does the service help address nation-specific challenges?
- How does the funding structure in your nation affect the service delivery or your experience as a coach?

6. **Closing remarks & next steps (5 mins)**

- Summarise key points discussed.
- Outline the next steps: explain how the information will be thematically analysed, invite participants to complete the survey, and provide the final report timeline (Summer 2025).
- Thank participants for their time and contributions.

7. **Feedback (5 mins)**

- Share an additional feedback form (optional) in the chat for participants to share any further thoughts or ideas.

General considerations for facilitators:

- Encourage open discussion but be mindful of the time allocated for each section.
- It is not expected that every question will be covered but try to introduce one or two from each section to support the overall structure.
- Encourage the participation of quieter members, where appropriate.
- Record key themes, quotes, and observations (e.g., body language, tone, interest) in real time.

Focus Group Additional Feedback Form

Date of focus group: _____

Additional comments

Please return your completed form by email to evaluate@basw.co.uk

4.2 Survey template

Demographics (all)

1. What is your age range?
2. What is your race or ethnicity?
3. How do you identify?
4. What is your career stage?
5. In which specialism do you work?
6. In which UK nation do you work?
7. Are you a coach or a user of the coaching service (coachee)?

(Coach)

1. How long have you been a coach with the SWPSS?
2. On a scale of 1 to 5, how satisfied are you with the coaching service?
3. How has your coaching role impacted your personal development (e.g. self-awareness and emotional wellbeing)
4. How has your coaching role influenced your professional growth?
5. What do you feel has been your greatest personal or professional gain from coaching others?
6. What improvements would you suggest for enhancing the coaching service?

(Coachee)

1. How many coaching sessions have you completed so far?
2. On a scale of 1-5, how satisfied are you with the coaching service overall?
3. How would you rate your personal growth (e.g. confidence, work/life balance) since starting the coaching sessions?
4. To what extent have the coaching sessions helped you develop professionally (e.g. professional curiosity, communication)?
5. To what extent have your expectations of the coaching service been met?
6. What do you believe has been the most valuable outcome of the coaching sessions personally or professionally?
7. What improvements would you suggest for enhancing the coaching service?
8. If you would like to participate in an online focus group to discuss SWPSS in more detail, please record your email below

BASW
The professional association for social work and social workers

BASW SOCIAL WORK PRACTITIONER RESEARCH NETWORK

Durham University