

THE AGENDA

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BASW's Chief Executive on valuing the profession's next generation



Welcome new social workers – the world really needs you!

Sometimes it just needs saying: society needs great social workers. As courses start and graduates take up first posts, I've been thinking about how much we need and value our next generation of colleagues and how BASW can support their journey into social work.

We need to enable new joiners to bring their inspiration and fresh curiosity into teams and into the lives of people needing support. We need them to feel secure and confident in their learning and to become settled in their work, able to sustain and build on their wisdom and skills. And we need them to become the next wave of challengers and solution-finders for some of the major social and existential problems we face - nationally and globally.

I was attracted to social work over 25 years ago by the prospect of combining practice skills and knowledge, systemic and contextual understanding, political awareness and the reflexive, authentic use of self. And I wanted to change the world, one step at a time. I don't think these fundamental motivations have changed that much for people coming into the profession today.

Social work is about life, treasuring humanity, building connections, sharing and promoting fairness. It is about creativity, care and love - being there to help people overcome obstacles and oppressions that hold them back. For people using our services, a social worker should be someone to trust and believe in - someone who helps you believe in yourself. Sometimes we must hold boundaries, protect rights, advocate and challenge. We are always in the midst of the messy stuff, finding ways forward.

I think it is often the prospect of getting stuck into life and society's most wicked problems that really energises and inspires people to come into the profession.

As social workers we also believe in prevention, reducing avoidable needs and disadvantages through earlier help and strengths-based work. This points to our responsibility to promote a better society for all and to plan our role in this we need to be part of collective professionalism.

As the International Federation of Social Workers policy on social work's role in social protection, endorsed by the United Nations, says: "Worldwide the daily work of social workers involves - strengthening solidarity between people,

promoting people to care for others, engaging people to respect the rights of others, strengthening solidarity within a family, a community and society."

We face many national and global challenges caused by the resurgence of overt politics completely at odds with these principles. It has become politically and publicly more acceptable to be hostile towards communities in need and to implement social policies - such as Universal Credit - which directly cause suffering and breach human rights.

We have seen nationalist extremism and racism return to mainstream politics across Europe and beyond. There has been a resurgence of poverty across the UK and the financial evisceration of local authorities under austerity.

And then there's Brexit. We still don't know the shape of it and predictions range from catastrophe to gradual change. We expect the current drop in EU nationals joining our workforce to continue. The importance of treasuring our home grown social workers may become even greater.

In the face of these pressures, social work needs to offer hope and fortitude through making a difference at all levels - from individual to international change. Social work values are rooted in belief in a strong civil society and a belief that with support, people, communities and economies can thrive and find common solutions to common problems. This is evidence-based, it is professional, it is humanitarian and it is about life.

It is important for all new social workers to choose sources of support carefully and seek out the wisdom of people with great track records and really sound ethics. This is where BASW branches, groups, events and CPD opportunities come in. They provide platforms for 'cross-generational' conversations which are vital to ensure our profession continues to flourish, build its identity and culture, and stay fresh and ready for future challenges.

So as you begin your social work journey we welcome you with open arms into a profession that will help you develop and feel supported - through BASW, through colleagues, through ongoing learning, through networks, through activism and solidarity. In these testing times, your profession, your nation, your world really needs you and your commitment to social work.

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