

# A Charter for Social Work Research in Adult Social Care



directors of  
**adass**  
adult social services



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# FOREWORD

Research can be a vital tool to understand how we can improve social work practice for people who receive support from social workers. Research is never an 'optional extra', indeed in these challenging times it is more important than ever. We need to integrate high-quality research evidence into improving our practice and social workers need to be engaged in developing this evidence.



I welcome all the initiatives that are taking place across England to develop, disseminate and embed research into social work practice and to support social workers in the process of engagement with research as part of their professional development.

A Charter for Social Work Research in Adult Social Care is one such initiative and grew out of the work of the Chief Social Worker's Research Advisory Group.

The Charter is an opportunity and a tool for individuals, teams and organisations across a range of agencies and institutions to reflect on how they continue build research into the design and delivery of social work services for adults.

If in your own organisation you recognise many, or all, of the aspirations set out in the Charter, you might wish to consider joining those agencies that have already demonstrated their commitment to the Charter. Signing up to the Charter does not involve an accreditation or monitoring process – simple assent to the Charter is enough.

The Research Advisory Group will continue to consider how to further disseminate, develop and embed the aspirations of the Charter. The Group welcomes ideas and discussions about how this is best done. Contact details can be found on the inside back cover.

**Lyn Romeo**  
**Chief Social Worker for Adults**

## SUMMARY STATEMENT

This Charter is based upon a commitment to a social work profession that is fully engaged with research and generating and using research evidence.

The broad aims of the Charter are to:

- Assert the importance of research evidence to a vibrant, effective and developing social work profession.
- Set a vision for, and outline a pathway to, greater engagement with research of the social work profession and help define and collect data on how we will know what progress is being made.
- Gather long-term commitment from stakeholders to make this Charter real.



All social workers should be able and supported to keep abreast of the latest research evidence to inform their practice as part of their Continuing Professional Development.

To deliver on this requires partnerships, including with people with care and support needs, with carers and across the profession, with employers, educational institutions, care providers and funders of research. This Charter promotes this commitment to and understanding of the importance of social work research, encourages partnerships, and provides a framework and examples to make it real – to create lively local evidence-informed, learning organisations supporting better outcomes for people.

In addition to all social workers using research in their practice some may take this engagement further and become more involved in research, including leading studies. It is healthy for the profession, for social care generally, and the people being supported through these systems, that a realistic proportion of social workers, at various stages of their careers, can take their engagement in research to these higher levels. This will help to, for example, generate evidence-informed professional leadership and provide a bridge between generating and using research evidence.

# BACKGROUND

This Charter acknowledges and builds on a set of documents and decisions over the last 20 or so years including:

- Support from the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) to hold the *Theorising Social Work* seminar series in 2000, a landmark in recognising social work as a separate academic discipline and raising the profession's profile amongst research funders.
- The Joint University Council Social Work Education Research Strategy (2006), its more recent Research Strategy (2018-2028) and subsequent 4 Nation Meeting with Stakeholders (February 2019).
- The work of Croisdale-Appleby in his 'Re-visioning social work education' review (2014).
- Manthorpe and Moriarty's *Social work research with adults in England: The state we're in* (2016).
- The James Lind Alliance Priority Setting partnership on adult social work in 2018 ([www.jla.nihr.ac.uk/priority-setting-partnerships/adult-social-work/](http://www.jla.nihr.ac.uk/priority-setting-partnerships/adult-social-work/)).
- NIHR SSCR & NETSCC *Research Priorities in Adult Social Care Scoping Review* ([www.sscr.nihr.ac.uk/publication/research-priorities-in-adult-social-care-scoping-review/](http://www.sscr.nihr.ac.uk/publication/research-priorities-in-adult-social-care-scoping-review/)).
- The commitment to developing social work research from the Department of Health and Social Care, the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) and the Chief Social Worker for Adults in England.

The commitment to a social work profession that is fully engaged with research and generating and using research evidence also connects with:

- *The Social Work Professional Standards* ([www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/professional-standards/](http://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/professional-standards/)) – notably maintaining continuous professional development to be able to deliver the other standards.
- *The Standards for Employers of Social Workers*

(<https://www.local.gov.uk/standards-employers-social-workers-england-0>) – notably support to Social Workers to be able to keep their knowledge and skills up to date through continuous professional development.

*To crystallise commitment and mobilise action to further developing social work research it is timely to establish this Charter that builds on the momentum gathered from the above work.*

## The importance of evidence to improve social work practice

Social work is an applied discipline: what social workers do and how they do it matters profoundly to people's lives. While the task of social work is broader than legislative duties, these are central to what social workers in adult services undertake: for example, duties under mental health and mental capacity legislation, adult safeguarding requirements, and under the Care Act 2014. The heart of this work is relationship building, built on ongoing reflection incorporating people with care and support needs and carers' knowledges, practitioner wisdom and research evidence. Understanding the importance of such knowledges and the diversity of various forms of evidence within them and how to use such evidence to enhance practice is crucial to valuing the significance of the work undertaken when caring for and with others. Given the size, scope and importance of Adult Social Care anecdotal material and assertion without evidence, are by themselves insufficient.

The Charter acknowledges that organisations face challenges in creating and sustaining capacity to engage with research i.e. to undertake and participate in research throughout its various stages and to evaluate research and the evidence it generates. However, research is vital to gathering evidence that supports and challenges current social work practice and supports innovation and improvement with the goal of

improving outcomes for people, including wellbeing. It is easy to overlook this, though, as other priorities take precedence over supporting more research-informed cultures and practice. This is, however, a short-term view of how best to improve practice and outcomes.

Since social work is an applied discipline, evidence gathered through research needs to support developments in practice – including being specific, relevant, rigorous and timely. Sometimes social work practitioners are told by academics they need to be more ‘research minded’, and it is often helpful as a reminder to say that researchers sometimes need to be more ‘practice minded’. This includes considering the perspectives of people with lived experience and their carers. The involvement of these experts by experience is not just an ethical imperative but is essential in improving practice and outcomes. At the centre of how research has developed in recent years is coproduction, bringing meaningful partnerships between researchers, practitioners, people with lived experience of support and carers.

Whilst integrating research evidence into practice is essential, there has often been a significant divide between research and social work practice. Recent years have seen further efforts to narrow this gap, and we anticipate further investment to address this challenge, particularly linked to increased commitment of the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) to social care and social work research. Hence, this is the right time to publish this Charter for social work research to:

- Assert the importance of research evidence to a vibrant, effective and developing social work profession.
- Set a vision for, and outline a pathway to, greater engagement with research of the social work profession and help define and collect data on how we will know what progress is being made.
- Gather long-term commitment from stakeholders to make this Charter real.

*The Charter acknowledges:*

- Making research evidence accessible and available to practitioners is an essential part of the research task. Developing pathways to impact with partners is an important consideration throughout the research process.
- There is a range of research methods and methodologies in gathering, analysing and presenting evidence, but rigour is an important criterion for the research we want social workers to engage with.
- Such rigorous and relevant research is increasingly likely to require partnerships and not only be undertaken by colleagues in universities.
- The adoption and application of evidence has immediate, medium, and long-term benefits in supporting, improving and challenging social work practice and ultimately improving outcomes for people.

*To deliver the Charter requires commitment and partnerships across many stakeholders. In the following we seek to map these groups and begin to identify steps they may take to make the Charter real.*

## CASE STUDY 1: DEVELOPING THE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND STRUCTURES TO SUPPORT SOCIAL WORKERS TO ENGAGE MORE WITH RESEARCH

*My organisation is interested in supporting more of our social workers to get engaged in research, but where do we start?*

Increasingly employers of social workers and higher education institutions are looking to develop formal partnerships to be able to share resources to set a culture that expects and supports social workers to engage more with research, and with the infrastructure to make this viable.

An example is the partnership between the University of Keele and Midlands Partnership Foundation NHS Trust (<https://research.mpft.nhs.uk/partnership-working/cosmic/screen>). Through this partnership the organisations are creating an environment to support all social workers and social care staff in the Trust to engage more with research. Their programme included a survey of staff about their engagement with research, and which has been published in the British Journal of Social Work (<https://academic.oup.com/bjsw/advance-article/doi/10.1093/bjsw/bcab169/6363621?login=false>).

Having identified several barriers through the survey, such as a lack of knowledge amongst staff about research and low levels of involvement in research, the partners are in the process of addressing these to develop a more supportive environment. This has included an internal training programme to develop more understanding of research, focused support for Think Ahead social work students as they work on their dissertations, and the development of a research career map to help staff identify where they are in terms of a research career and what funding and other support might be open to them. The Research Champion for this programme, Stacey Wilde, was successful in obtaining an NIHR SSCR Career Development award to develop her research interests.

Through the partnership between the employer and the university the organisations have a long-term commitment to develop the research careers of social workers – building local knowledge to support workforce capacity development and service improvement.



# COMMITMENTS OF KEY STAKEHOLDERS IN THE CHARTER

## Leaders in Adult Social Work Services

Leaders in Adult Social Work Services need to be able to:

- Recognise and articulate the importance of research to their organisations and social work practice – *lead with a commitment to the value of engaging with high-quality, robust research.*
- Demonstrate they value the deployment of evidence in the planning and delivery of services and interventions – *lead by engaging practically with research evidence and research participation.*
- Create space and opportunity for managers, teams and individuals to consider evidence in the planning, review and delivery of services and interventions – *lead by creating environments for colleagues to engage with research and practice.*
- Recognise that building the research evidence base for social work is an ongoing process and requires working with others, including people with care and support needs and carers and other organisations such as universities and trainers – *lead by building sustainable collaborations to further this Charter locally.*
- Ensure that leaders of social work employers participate in ownership of the Charter and regular reviews of its relevance and operationalisation – *lead by an evaluative, evidence-informed process based on an ongoing commitment to the Charter and its goals.*

## Social workers and social work managers

Social workers and social work managers are asked to:

- Recognise that engaging with research evidence is an important element of continuing professional development and ongoing reflective practice about what they do, why and how effective it is – *demonstrate a personal commitment to*

*engaging with research evidence to inform their own practice.*

- Grow in confidence in sourcing and weighing evidence and undertake development opportunities including training to nurture these capabilities – *seek to continuously develop skills to engage with research.*
- Interrogate received wisdom and become evidence-informed practitioners by using research evidence to inform their work – *undertake reflective practice that draws on and critically appraises research evidence to improve practice.*
- Reinforced by employers and managers, help create supportive environments for colleagues and students to engage with research and evidence and develop a culture that expects colleagues to engage with and share research evidence to improve practice – *work with colleagues to develop a culture of engaging with research and evidence-informed practices.*
- Ensure that social work profession leaders participate in ownership of the Charter and regular reviews of its relevance and operationalisation – *demonstrate an ongoing commitment to this Charter and its goals.*

## Educational leaders

Colleagues in relevant educational institutions and training or practice development roles are asked to support this Charter by:

- Supporting social workers to have the professional capacity of integrating research evidence with practice i.e. strengthen the capabilities of social workers to identify and evaluate research evidence and consider its implications for improving practice by including research in their curriculum.
- Supporting colleagues and students to engage in empirical research projects, requiring students to undertake primary, empirical research throughout the entirety of their education and its different stages.

- Helping build capacity to collaborate to coproduce rigorous and relevant research evidence.
- Participating in collaborative local partnerships to further this Charter.
- Ensuring that academic social work education leaders participate in ownership of the Charter and regular reviews of its relevance and operationalisation.

## People with lived experience

People with lived experience, including carers, are invited to:

- Endorse from their experiences the importance of ensuring that social work is engaged with research evidence to improve practice and outcomes, including the wellbeing of people being supported.
- Help advise on implementation and evolution of this Charter, in localities and nationally.
- Participate in meaningful and supportive opportunities to engage in social work research.

Social workers, researchers and other stakeholders will encourage and enable people with lived experience to be part of all processes in planning, undertaking and reporting research and developing impact from research findings. As part of this, social workers, researchers and other stakeholders will identify and work to overcome the barriers to active engagement that many people with lived experience face in actively participating in the research process.

The Charter acknowledges that social workers and researchers may also be people with relevant lived experience.

## Guardians of research systems

The Charter uses the term 'Guardians' to collectively describe those responsible for organising systems that support research, including funding research projects, programmes and individual awards, and for research infrastructure, including ethics committees, and are collectively invited to:

- Ensure all aspects of the systems they are responsible for support social work research.

- Review their funding streams for commissioning research to ensure they are open to social work research and ensure that the processes in place support this.
- Review research infrastructure, including ethics committees, to ensure there is a clear understanding of, and hence capacity to support, social work research
- Participate in ownership of the Charter and regular reviews of its relevance and operationalisation.

## Practical steps

Implementation of this Charter is an evolving process. Here we set out initial practical processes to supporting operationalising the Charter and its goals.

### Establishing leadership for the Charter

Bringing together leaders from the stakeholders mentioned above to agree:

- Operational plans for the Charter and share evidence of good models of its implementation.
- Indicators for implementation of the Charter and data collection to support reviews of the Charter.
- Processes for review and refresh of the Charter as necessary.

### Social Work Continuous Professional Development

Social Work Continuous Professional Development (CPD) should:

- Be underpinned by mechanisms for gathering and weighing evidence and incorporating them in the curriculum.
- Embed existing and new evidence and help social workers develop the skills to engage and assess the evidence.
- Ensure that social workers (including managers) can appraise different claims to evidence.
- Ensure that the skills of research and evidence appraisal are taught in CPD programmes.
- Help build capacity and capability to understand and use evidence of diverse kinds.
- Create an expectation and culture to engage with research evidence.



## CASE STUDY 2: BUILDING A REGIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

### *We're already involved in some local research activity, but can we build a wider research infrastructure?*

Some of the current research infrastructure and activity in adult social care in local authorities is at best variable and un-co-ordinated. Principal Social Workers in the West Midlands receive multiple requests regarding university-based research and are engaging with many of these, and a small number of practitioners are undertaking research as part of a university-based programme.

With reductions in local authorities funding West Midlands (WM) Association of Directors of Social Services (ADASS) recognised that most of the policy posts within local authorities have been lost. They believed there was the need to build a local/regional infrastructure to identify research priorities and for research to be driven more directly by local authorities and practitioners in the field, engaging with local people with lived experience and working with academic institutions. Over the past year WM ADASS have been working closely with the National Institute for Health and Social Care Research (NIHR), who have also recognised and prioritised improving research in adult social care, and the University of Birmingham.

A research capacity, capability and culture survey was undertaken across all 14 local authorities in the West Midlands and the findings supported a successful bid to NIHR for £100,000 to begin to build a research culture for adult social care in the West Midlands.

WM ADASS have appointed 3 Research Champions, existing qualified social workers from local authorities in the region, initially for a 12-month period and seconded for 2 days a week to devote to research activities. They will develop and build links with the Teaching Partnership, Higher Educational Institutions, local authorities and experts by experience. Their key priorities are to:

- Establish three Communities of Practice across the region
- Maximise the use and uptake of existing knowledge resources
- Ensure there are effective models for research dissemination
- Explore and facilitate models for evidence informed practice
- Identify and collate research resources and pathways/awards to encourage and support practitioners to undertake research
- Promote practitioner attendance at research conferences and events
- Support the development of research priorities and undertake research

The research champions are being supported by a Principal Social Worker Research Associate and other WM ADASS Associates to drive forward this work, and the University of Birmingham are supporting and providing learning and development sessions to the research champions. In addition, WM ADASS are working with the university to plan a programme of learning and development about research to large groups of practitioners in the region.

The funding received from NIHR will also support the development and training of a pool of experts by experience to engage with practitioners and universities in setting research priorities, undertake research studies and deliver learning and development sessions to practitioners across the region.

- Contribute to building an evidence-informed culture and capacity for practitioners to be engaged with research evidence.

## Pathways into social work research careers

Pathways into and through the profession should build on the experience of those who have, or sought to, establish an academic or research base to their professional development.

Those responsible for social work careers should be clear of the importance of research literacy in CPD and the progression of those careers, also acknowledging where core social work skills are transferable to research (e.g. engagement with participants, building rapport, interview skills etc.).

Stakeholders should assist the developments of resources and funding support for individuals considering research in their social work careers, including pre-research, practitioner researcher and leadership programmes. Sponsorship and mentoring linked to each of these stages should be included.

Networks and forums of social workers to support social work research career development should be developed and fostered locally, regionally and nationally.

## Equality, Diversity, Inclusion

An explicit commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) should run through all aspects of social work research and using evidence to improve practice and operationalising this Charter. Being inclusive is core to the profession's ethos, and is vital to achieve better outcomes, including wellbeing, for diverse communities. EDI commitment includes:

- Furthering EDI in all aspects of social work research careers, including leadership.
- Ensuring EDI is at the forefront of programmes of research including in the questions being asked, and ensuring the methods used to address them do not systematically unjustifiably exclude people.

- Ensuring that the wider research system, including funding opportunities, are clearly supportive of developing better EDI in social work research and its translation to improving practice.
- Ensuring sustainability in the inclusionary processes.

## Implementation progression points

Through guardianship for the Charter discussed above, progression points and related data should be agreed to demonstrate when organisations and local systems are making progress towards implementing this Charter and when as a national system of research we can see progress against its intentions and commitments. Early thoughts on this topic are:

- We would consider a temperature check from the perspective of the profession through the BASW Survey of Social Work.
- Indicators could be numbers of social workers progressing at various stages of research careers e.g. research degrees and pre-doctoral studies and requests to funders to supply such data.
- Completing and finishing doctorates.
- Leading externally funded research projects.
- Social workers receiving personal career awards for research such as NIHR Fellowships, other local/national fellowship awards and support from Doctoral Training Units in universities.
- Middle and senior career colleagues can successfully combine research and practice careers as practitioner-researchers.

Guardians should also consider how indicators could be organised for analysis and discussion at national, regional and local levels.

## CASE STUDY 3: FUNDING FOR SOCIAL WORKERS TO SUPPORT RESEARCH CAREER DEVELOPMENT

### *But I am a social worker with little to no research experience.*

So, you are a social worker interested in engaging more in research, but you have little knowledge of where to start nor of funding opportunities. Happily, building research capacity in social work has meant recognising that individuals will not be coming from the same places in terms of their experience of research. A system that wants to be inclusive and maximise capacity building opportunities needs a range of funding opportunities and support to bring in people with an interest in and ability to develop their research interests irrespective of their starting place.

Across NIHR, then, there are a range of funding schemes to apply to for funding to develop your research knowledge and interests and there should be one that connects directly with your level of experience and development needs. Many of these have been developed specifically for this need. Others are more generic and open to a range of practitioners, including social workers.

The NIHR School for Social Care Research (SSCR) has been running Career Development Awards for some years. These have set parameters around the awards, such as the maximum level of funding allowed and selection criteria, but were designed to be very flexible. Applicants need to state the case for support for their level of research knowledge and development needs, such as networking, mentoring, training, and/or developing research ideas and further funding applications. The scheme has funded individuals with little research experience to undertake Masters-level degrees focused on developing understanding of research methods, and others who have more research experience and have used the award to buy time to develop proposals for future individual/Fellowship or project research awards.

NIHR Academy runs Local Authority Fellowships spanning career stage and level of experience of research (PLAF, DLAF, LA SPARC). The Pre-Doctoral Local Authority Fellowships (PLAF) enable awardees to retain their existing employment contracts and salaries, whilst protecting their time to prepare an application for a PhD fellowship and undertake a fully funded programme of relevant Masters level training. The Doctoral Local Authority Fellowships (DLAF) similarly provide funding to protect awardees time to undertake a PhD by research.

These complement existing Academy Fellowship schemes that are also open to social workers regardless of where they are employed. The existing Fellowship schemes are the more generic funding streams

The Academy's Local Authority SPARC (LA SPARC) scheme allows individuals to apply for funding to support them to undertake a short placement moving between NIHR/academia and practice to grow understanding and partnerships for further research.

These are examples of the funding opportunities increasing open to social workers to develop a research element to their careers, often now alongside maintaining a portion of their time committed to practice i.e. in a Practitioner Academic/Researcher role similar to the Clinical Academic on in health care.

As you can see, there are many schemes, which is great in terms of being more likely to find one that fits your circumstances and needs. However, it does also mean that navigating these awards can be difficult if you are not familiar with the landscape and the expectations of what makes a good application. Social workers wishing to apply to any of the schemes should seek support from people with knowledge to help them understand the funding schemes. This may be someone in a partner university with experience of the awards and/or support from the NIHR Research Design Service ([www.nihr.ac.uk/explore-nihr/support/research-design-service.htm](http://www.nihr.ac.uk/explore-nihr/support/research-design-service.htm)). These experts in the funding landscape may be able to refer you to other suitable funding opportunities in addition to the ones we have discussed here.

## HOW THIS DOCUMENT CAME ABOUT

This Charter grew out of the work of the Research Advisory Group for the Chief Social Worker for Adults in England.

We acknowledge the contributions of all the individuals and their organisations in that group. We are particularly grateful for those who offered to provide a case study.

The Charter is not a process of accreditation. Our aim is that the Charter will be a living document. If your organisation is working towards implementing some, or all, of these elements, we would be very pleased to hear from you. If you wish your organisational logo to be added to a subsequent edition of the Charter a simple statement of intent to us is sufficient.

The Charter was edited by Dr Mike Clark (School of Social Care Research, London School of Economics) and Dr Luke Geoghegan (BASW).

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We welcome any use or adaptation of the Charter by any relevant parties in their own endeavours in Scotland, Northern Ireland or Wales, but if so, please acknowledge this Charter in the credits.



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