



social work



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Leadership in social work

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore the current practice context of social work leadership in Scotland, through the perspectives of social workers from across the profession; with the aim of better understanding how Social Work Scotland and its partners, including Iriss, can support developing and existing leaders in future, especially in the context of a proposed National Social Work Agency and National Care Service.

As well as current experiences of social work leadership, this work also explored what social workers themselves felt they needed for future leadership in their own roles and career progression, and in the context of the wider needs in the sector. The perspectives captured in the focus groups detail how difficult it is to define leadership in social work, reflect the wider contextual challenges for the sector, and describe how these challenges relate to social work leadership from the perspective of practitioners.

The themes from the focus groups are presented following a wider review of the literature and policy context relating to leadership in social work. This highlights where these perspectives have synergies and divergences with broader understandings of leadership, and brings a richness of personal experiences and thought to the understanding of leadership in social work.



2. Research methods

One of the key research aims for this work was to explore the experiences and understandings of leadership among social workers in Scotland, and views on how training and learning contributes to its development. From November 2022 to March 2023, eight focus groups were conducted with social work staff. Participants were recruited by Social Work Scotland, and each group was made up of social work colleagues that shared the same role. This included:

- Newly Qualified Social Workers
- Practitioners
- Team Leaders
- Learning and Development colleagues
- Chief Social Work Officers
- National agencies colleagues

Organising the focus groups in this way supported participants to feel comfortable to share their experiences of leadership, alongside others who shared their roles and responsibilities. The focus group format was semi-structured, using questions that were exploratory in nature, and allowed participants to answer with what felt most important to them.

The purposeful sampling technique was used to ensure that those taking part had rich and relevant experience. This has allowed a comprehensive understanding of how leadership is understood and experienced by those social workers that took part. Sampling in this way allows for a depth of understanding of individual experiences, and reveals where these experiences may meet and diverge with wider literature.

In setting the aims and outcomes for this work, it became clear that researching 'leadership in social work' can be challenging, as leadership is understood differently for many reasons, including length of time in the profession, the role and responsibilities held, and the practice area someone is working in. It was clear throughout the focus groups that leadership is understood by social work professionals in relation to how they experience it day-to-day. Leadership was rarely talked about in isolation of the context that social workers, and the profession as a whole, is operating in. For this reason, pressures and barriers could get in the way of thinking about leadership needs for social work now, and in the future. We address this area in the discussion when exploring leadership supports that are needed at an individual level and how these are impacted by organisational and environmental factors.



3. Social work leadership in context

3.1 DEFINING LEADERSHIP

Good leadership in social work is highlighted in literature, policy and serious case reviews as a core part of healthy team dynamics and key to making positive change for those receiving support (Haworth et al, 2018). However, defining leadership in social work is contested. There is no one dominant definition, as trying to define the term results in difficult conversations such as: does leadership sit with the role or with the person? Is leadership held in qualities or processes or both? (Lawler, 2007).

“Leadership is a frequently used term, but these uses include various definitions and applications; these uses are sometimes contradictory. This definitional vagueness can be a particular challenge for professions, including social work” (Schaub et al, 2022)

Additionally, one definition is elusive because there are various leadership theories which might be relevant to social work, dependent on contextual factors. While a lack of definition can contribute to challenges in generating leadership knowledge in the sector (Schaub et al, 2022), the diversity of the profession across multiple client groups and organisations could render the assigning one leadership definition unachievable, and even restrictive for practitioners.

A useful conception of social work leadership may be this recent definition:

“The use of professional credibility, competence and connections to positively influence others in response to the interests and aspirations of people and families. Achieved through

coproduction with communities, collaboration with other professionals, and constructive conflict [with] injustice and inequality, it can be demonstrated through formal roles and informal encouragement of colleagues” (Schaub et al, 2022)

While one agreed definition of leadership in social work is lacking, the importance of good leadership for the profession is echoed across the literature, both for staff wellbeing and for the outcomes of people being supported by social work services.

3.2 LEADERSHIP THEORIES AND FRAMEWORKS

There are different frameworks for social work leadership, and public service leadership more widely. However it is suggested that leadership models in general should be reflective and inclusive of social work values, such as equality, fairness and respect. This ethos is reflected in suggestions for leadership models across the health and social care sector (Chapman, 2018).

It is suggested that because social work is directly involved with people’s lives, leadership approaches and models should be rooted in social justice values that recognise the complexity of individual clients’ lives (Ruch, 2020). Additionally, any leadership frameworks adopted should take into consideration that practitioners might experience an emotional load from their work, and so these frameworks should make provisions for leaders to support their colleagues appropriately (Peters, 2018). Across the leadership literature, there are various models that are suggested as best fitting the need to be social work values based, and the potential emotional impact of the work (Table 1 below).

Leading organisations for social work have stated that the leadership training requirements for social workers are distinct from other professionals in the health and social care workforce (SWS, 2021). Amongst those responses is a key message that social work leadership is essential to deliver on the many aspects of practice where human rights considerations are required, and the associated complexity of leadership that is required to navigate those considerations.

Social work leadership can be viewed as a continuum, and part of the necessary skills development of the workforce, from the start of a worker’s career and throughout. Social work leadership is seen and felt, at all levels of the many systems in which social workers operate, such as education, healthcare and criminal justice. The profession needs to be fully equipped to lead now and

Table 1: Leadership models

Compassionate Leadership	Leaders take a relationship based approach, listening, understanding and empathising with their colleagues (Bailey and West, 2022). Compassionate leaders value their colleagues and work with them towards solutions (Bailey and West, 2022).
Transformational Leadership	Leaders assist change primarily though by valuing individuals, being accessible to and motivating practitioners towards both their personal, and organisational goals (Haworth et al, 2018).
Participatory or Distributed Leadership	Leaders foster a collaborative culture and develop shared purpose across the team. Rather than attached to a role, leadership is a practise distributed among colleagues. This style of leading aims to create a democratic working culture (Haworth et al, 2018).
Client Centred Leadership	The person accessing the service is the main focus of the team, and meeting their outcomes is the measure of success (Sullivan, 2016). Meeting the needs of clients is the main motivator of team actions and drives leadership direction. (Sullivan, 2016).
Communities of Practice	Communities of practice form when knowledge is generated and shared in the workplace (Ferguson, 2022). Colleagues build strong relationships to support a learning environment, where there is a knowledge based approach to leadership (Haworth et al, 2018).
Adaptive Leadership	Recognising change that happens in the sector, adaptive leadership understands the complexity of social work. Leaders should support, rather than control change, and so leadership is dispersed through the team (Haworth et al, 2018).
Systems Leadership	This style recognises that disconnection between services results in poorer outcomes for people. Leadership should work well across systems and processes, and should foster collaboration within teams and colleagues in other services (Haworth et al, 2018).

in the future. However, *Setting the Bar* (Miller and Barrie; 2022) revealed many of the leadership challenges, including instances where qualified social workers are only represented at team leader level within integrated teams. Considering the unique responsibilities and duties of social workers, that issue of influence and representation is an area that needs to be addressed.

3.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD LEADERSHIP

Social workers might not know what leadership models are being used by those in leadership positions, if any, but individuals are able to identify what good leadership looks and feels like (SSSC, 2016). This goes beyond the responsibilities and duties associated with leadership roles, such as budget

management, and is instead about the personal attributes that make for good leadership; the ways of ‘being’ as a leader (Applewhite, 2017).

Beginning with public sector leadership more widely, Chapman et al (2017) notes that “in collaborative settings good leadership demands working in ways that builds trust, manages relations, connects people and facilitates collaborative activities and processes.” Social work occupies a unique space, working across several areas including child and adult protection, justice and mental health; and with other agencies including education, the police force and the NHS. To be effective, leaders in social work must be ‘boundary crossers’, able to build strong partnership relationships, and have strong negotiation skills to communicate with other actors (Morse 2010; Silvia and McGuire, 2010).

In addition to partnership working, social workers engage with diverse groups of supported people, with a range of challenging personal circumstances. The emotional toll this work can have on staff means leaders must be able to motivate and support others (Sullivan, 2016). As well as providing support, social workers should model the respect with which supported people should be treated, and should serve as role models to one another and their communities more widely (Ruch, 2020).

The Enabling Leadership work (SSSC, 2016) offers an in-depth look at what characteristics are valued in social services leaders. Leaders working from a value base, with authenticity and openness to changing their mind, was important for their colleagues (SSSC, 2016). Participants also highlighted that good leaders have vision and drive, but are approachable and flexible in their methods (SSSC, 2016). This fosters strong working relationships, in which staff feel valued and listened to, and motivated in their work (SSSC, 2016).

Whilst useful, it should be noted that Enabling Leadership (SSSC, 2016) is not specifically about leaders or leadership in social work, but rather leadership in social services as a whole. This highlights the paucity of input around leadership needs specific to the social work profession, and that discrete parts of the wider social services sector are sometimes conflated in terms of their leadership needs, and qualities.

A helpful summary of the characteristics key for good leadership is given by the SSSC’s (2017) list of key capabilities (Table 2), which offers an understanding of what is needed for good leadership in social services at all levels.

Table 2: Leadership capabilities

Capability	Definition
Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeing how best to make a difference • Communicating and promoting ownership of the vision • Promoting a public service ethos • Thinking and planning strategically
Creativity and Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeing opportunities to do things differently • Promoting creativity and innovation • Leading and managing change
Self Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrating and adapting leadership • Improving own leadership • Enabling intelligent risk-taking • Demonstrating and promoting resilience • Challenging discrimination and oppression
Collaborating and Influencing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leading partnership working • Influencing people • Understanding and valuing the perspectives of others
Motivating and Inspiring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspiring people by personal example • Recognising and valuing the contribution of others • Driving the creation of a learning and performance culture
Empowering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling leadership at all levels • Driving a knowledge management culture • Promoting professional autonomy • Involving people in development and improvement

3.4 CONDITIONS AND CHALLENGES FOR LEADERSHIP

The SSSC (2016) further examines leadership through the conditions leaders need in order to show good leadership. This includes support and rapport with their peers, where there is openness and safety to challenge and be challenged. From seniors, there needs to be clear communication and a clear direction, to give the team the information and autonomy needed for decision making. Both for established and emergent leaders, the support of colleagues and the organisation is foundational to exercise fully effective leadership (Peters, 2017).

This understanding sees context as key in supporting and inhibiting good leadership in social services; and understands that leadership cannot

be divorced from the political, social and economic circumstances it is operating in (SSSC, 2016).

However, the context that social workers are operating in is a challenging one. Leaders need to be increasingly skilled in navigating unpredictable and difficult circumstances; a recent example including the National Care Service bill (Sullivan, 2016; Nutt, n.d). It is important to understand the impact of these challenges for leadership, as when systems are stretched, even the most resilient leadership can struggle (SSSC, 2016). This need for navigation, operating in complex environments, and often lacking the explicit control and resourcing to influence is clearly shown in the report on social work leadership through COVID-19 (Iriss, 2020). The *Setting the Bar* report (Miller and Barrie, 2022) similarly highlights that there is tension between what professionals are being asked to do, and the resources they are asked to do it with.

3.4.1 Policy landscape

One of the most potentially significant changes to the policy, structural and governance landscape for social work is the introduction of the National Care Service (NCS) Bill. The Bill has been introduced in response to the recommendations of the Independent Review of Adult Social Care, and aims to increase the national oversight of adult social care (Feeley, 2021). However, while the details of the Bill has proposed the re-organisation of how social work and social care is managed, there is a lack of clarity for the workforce on the ways in which this would impact their profession, and at a time when social workers are already stretched and under pressure (UNISON, 2023; SWS, 2021). Social workers are concerned that the NCS would negatively impact their jobs; and that the splitting of services, for example children and families and justice, would impact negatively on the ability for social workers to provide holistic support (Nutt, n.d). Reservations are reflected in a UNISON survey, where only 13% of staff thought that a National Care Service was an effective way to improve the 'quality and consistency of social work.' By contrast, 94% responded that investing in social work staffing and resources was a more effective way to improve support (UNISON, 2023).

As part of the NCS, the creation of a National Social Work Agency, responsible for workforce development and training, was proposed in the consultation (SPICe, 2022). The creation of such an agency may be considered to have potential to close the implementation gap, have opportunities for training and to share good practice, and allow meaningful workforce planning (SWS, 2021).

At a time of potential change in policy, discussions about how social work might change are very much alive. As the landscape around social work is moving, this piece of work is timely in its contribution to some of the wider discussions about the social work profession, and about leadership in social work in particular.

3.4.2 Budgets and resources

Policies of austerity have resulted in public sector budget cuts, leaving local authority and health and social care partnership (HSCP) social work departments with reduced finances on which to continue to deliver the same level of support to their communities (Schaub et al, 2022). Social workers have always worked with, and will continue to work with, people facing challenging and complex circumstances. However, an ageing population and an intensification of the needs among supported people places additional pressure on social work departments (Sullivan, 2016; Audit Scotland, 2022). Most recently, the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on poverty, domestic abuse, and mental health among other issues, resulted in the concern that more people will be in need of social work support in the short and longer term (Iriss, 2020).

3.4.3 Leadership legacy

In comparison to healthcare, social work is a newer discipline, having been most formally established in the 1970s through the creation of social work departments. There are marked differences in the reception and legacies of the professions, perhaps rooted in their social and medical models respectively. While medical models are derived from the empiricism of science, social work is a mix of psychology and social sciences, including philosophy. As such, social work leadership has less academic and historical knowledge to draw on than longer established professions, such as healthcare (Haworth et al, 2018). It might also make it more challenging for leaders to draw upon models to inform their own leadership language and behaviour. Evidence from integration, for example, demonstrates that not having historical or embedded leadership models to draw on can be a challenge for those in leadership positions (Baylis and Trimble, 2018).

3.4.4 Staffing pressures

Social Work is experiencing a recruitment and retention crisis, which impacts leadership. As more experienced social workers and leaders leave the profession due to age, work pressures and myriad complex factors,

vacancies in general struggle to be filled. This reduces the number of people able and experienced enough to take on leadership roles (Sullivan, 2016; Audit Scotland, 2022). As knowledge and experience leave the profession, practitioners without the necessary skills and experience may have to take on leadership roles that they are not prepared for, and they leave a gap around informal coaching and mentoring to newly qualified social workers (Haworth et al, 2018; Schaub et al, 2022; Samuel, 2023).

This can result in an uneven skill mix within teams, negatively impacting the quality of the service provided (Samuel, 2023). However, it can also result in higher workloads for those remaining in the team. Among social workers, having increased or more intense workloads as a result of short staffing, is manifesting in burnout, stress and moral distress at being unable to take what is viewed to be the most ethical action (Samuel, 2023, Professional Social Work, 2023; SWS, 2022). These circumstances might contribute further to retention challenges, and a quarter of social work graduates de-registering after six years of practice (SSSC, 2019).

Additionally, the staffing challenge causes immediate delivery issues as teams struggle to meet the demand (Samuel, 2022). At the end of 2021, the sector was short of 79 Mental Health Officers, resulting in those in post working longer hours in attempts to meet the needs of people accessing support (SSSC, 2021). These more immediate risks often take precedence over other areas of work, such as leadership development (Schaub et al, 2022).

3.4.5 Leadership training

For social workers in Scotland, training and development is often decided at a local level. However, there are some national leadership options available. Leading to Change¹ is designed to be complementary to local leadership training for health, social work and social care workforces. Leading for the Future² is a programme supporting leadership and management development, and there are central resources on the SSSC website on Step into Leadership³. However, engagement with these central offers depends on how that is enabled on the local level, amongst partnerships, services and teams.

1 <https://leadingtochange.scot>

2 <https://learn.nes.nhs.scot/946/leadership-and-management-programmes/leading-for-the-future>

3 <https://stepintoleadership.info>

Whilst resources and programmes such as those mentioned above, and others operating in the integrated sector, can support broader generic leadership skills, none of these programmes have been designed specifically for the social work profession and reflect the need to lead as a social work professional.

Most social work training develops specific skills and knowledge relevant to delivering the work itself. As an exemplar, this is shown in the categories of training and development offered (and sometimes taken up) by Chief Social Work Officers in Social Work Scotland's annual CSWO (Chief Social Work Officer) survey (2021):

- PGDip CSWO
- MBA
- MSc Applied Professional Studies
- MPhil
- CMI SCQF level 11 Award in Strategic Management and Leadership
- CMI SCQF level 11 Certificate in Strategic Management and Leadership
- CMI SCQF level 11 Diploma in Strategic Management and Leadership
- CMI SCQF level 11 Extended Diploma in Strategic Management and Leadership
- MSc Business and Management
- Profession Masters Programme
- Project Lift
- Leadership for Integration - You as a Collaborative Leader and/ or Collaborative Leadership in Practice.
- Scottish Improvement Leaders Programme
- TURAS - Leading for the Future
- Other: (please state)



4. Focus group themes

The following sections examine the direct findings from the focus groups. The findings are grouped into five key themes that emerged from the discussion with participants. The final theme is direct thoughts from the focus group participants on what is needed in the future.

4.1 UNDERSTANDINGS OF LEADERSHIP IN SOCIAL WORK

4.1.1 Defining social work leadership

Participants in the focus groups brought multiple perspectives and insights to their understanding of leadership in the profession, ranging from behaviours to personal characteristics, to role fulfilment.

“I see [leadership] more as like an inspiration to the group. You know, to be able to kind of make the decisions when the time is needed... to kind of empower the group as well... that’s what I think leadership means for me.”

“I think it’s different things at different times. I don’t think it’s one thing in social work”

Broadly, leadership was discussed in terms of positional and non-positional leadership. In the positional understanding, the duties and tasks attached to roles are what defines leadership, and the hierarchy of an organisation determines the leadership tasks attached to roles.

“When I think of leadership, I probably think of it more as in like manager roles, like an authoritative role rather than like self-leadership or any independent... it’s like looking at a hierarchy in an office kind of idea.”

Leaders in these formal positions were seen to have a role to play in creating a positive team culture, and providing the staff with a clear strategic direction. Their position as the head of a team meant their actions were considered to influence the team dynamic overall, and there was a sense that there is a responsibility for people in senior positions to be cognisant of their role and influence.

“I think [leadership is] about maintaining a good culture in the organisation, and leading from the top in that respect, in terms of behaviours, trust, openness... I think it’s also about bringing people with you... there’s a whole lot in there but I think setting the culture is really important.”

Social workers shared that those in positional leadership roles should understand and be passionate about the role of social work and the value of the profession, particularly in integrated settings; and should be willing, able and confident to articulate social works’ role in individual lives, and the health and social care landscape as a whole.

“[Leadership is] about that clarity of the social work approach and we bring into the system... you do need a medical approach but you also need a social approach... and I think good social work leadership does that because it provides that clarity of why we think differently.”

Others had an understanding of leadership as something which people can show at many levels of an organisation and in many different circumstances.

“I think leadership at all levels. It’s not just people. Some people may view leadership as if you’re a manager etc but I don’t. I think leadership is at all levels...”

Social workers had experience of non-positional leadership exhibited by colleagues, who had sometimes been the primary leaders in a team. They provided the support and leadership typically associated with someone in a position of formal leadership.

“I had a manager who was probably quite hands off in his approach and didn’t really lead in that way we’ve talked about, but had a really experienced team... And the leadership was from colleagues within the team so it was a really good team to be a part of... it still had that leadership but it didn’t necessarily come from the team manager. So, yeah, I suppose that was... still a good experience; good team to be in. But we lacked that leadership. And for me it wasn’t an issue because as I say, I had good colleagues to work alongside but a lot of people did leave the team...”

Non-positional leadership was also understood as actions that individual social workers take in their individual cases. Autonomous working and decision making was viewed as leadership at an individual level.

“So I think for me it’s about being that bit more confident and interested in myself and my skills and realising you are the lead professional on somebody’s case.”

Modelling positive behaviours to their colleagues and wider community was also considered part of social work leadership.

“When you are out and about and working in communities, you’re effectively demonstrating leadership skills in your community.”

The skills, knowledge and qualities that an individual can bring to the team was also linked to leadership. Sharing specific knowledge and understanding allows individuals to demonstrate leadership in upskilling their colleagues, and adding value to the team as a whole with their area of expertise.

“I think realising what qualities you have and what you can bring to a team, like for example, I have quite an interest in violence against women and I volunteer with the Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre. So, I was able to bring that to the team and people ask me questions about that sort of thing ... So that will be good to make sure everyone is more informed.”

There was a clear connection between leadership and support for many social workers, with activity focusing on supporting staff and wider teams considered a key function of leadership. Nurturing and encouraging the learning of colleagues, particularly those newly qualified, was considered a practical demonstration of leadership.

“Being able to support staff in terms of their role and the social work values and maybe challenges that they have within their role; working in more of a clinical medical setting. So, for the people that I don’t manage... in some ways it’s more validation and support. And that’s what I think I get, as well, from social work professional leadership that I have.”

Particularly for NQSW (newly qualified social workers), practise educators were experienced as an important part of leadership. Having support to embed their learning and reflect on their practice could support the autonomous working that is key to social work practice and non-positional leadership more widely.

“... I was allocated a practice educator for my first year and I think that’s been so helpful... but I don’t know if I would have really been able to, like I was just really supported by my practise educator the whole time. So, I think that’s something that could really be looked into for all newly qualified workers...”

4.1.2 Characteristics of good social work leadership

The focus groups explored the characteristics of good leadership. There were key themes that emerged from the groups, although ideas were wide ranging, and could depend on aspects such as the role of the leader or the practice knowledge they required.

“I think there’s a place for everything. You could be a very good leader in relation to practice, like social work practice. You might sit in a very specific team, say foster and adoption, and you drive that and you are a great leader. So, it depends like where your leadership skills needs to match where you are sometimes. However, there are characteristics that I think you would want. People to understand the systems effect of that, for me. Because no one does everything...”

Leaders having an understanding of both social work as a profession and the individual role of social workers, was viewed positively. Professional social work experience allowed these leaders to provide depth and understanding to guidance they were giving.

“I think she’s had a lot of experience from the ground up so, when I feel as though I am talking to her about things... I know that she is not talking from a textbook she’s talking from her work experience and life experience.”

Social workers also valued leaders that were motivated by the social work values base, and whose decisions were guided by these values. Recognising that a demanding context can pull people from their value base, social workers expressed that they wanted to see leaders’ decision making remain rooted in social work values.

“My current manager challenges a lot of bigger decisions which is good because other managers maybe just accept the resource led way of management... if she knows something is right, she’ll just go for it.”

When working alongside other partners, social workers expressed a sense that the value of the social work contribution can be lost or misunderstood, and that the social work values are crowded out of decision making. Particularly in these settings, participants wanted positional and non-positional leaders to tenaciously uphold and champion social work values.

“I think when you’re working in an integrated environment the social work values, it’s really important that they’re mirrored... that they’re demonstrated so that actually they don’t get lost in amongst health which is a much, much bigger partner.”

Social workers valued when leaders recognised the achievements and the expertise that individuals bring to the collective. Feeling appreciated was significant to social workers feeling positively about both their role, and the leadership they experienced.

“She’s... quite open to suggestion... And she really, really encouraged the staff and she’s really like quite, you know, she acknowledges your achievements and your good work and I think that always helps.”

Participants had varied experience with the amount of autonomy they were given in their practice, but it was highly valued when they were empowered to make their own decisions.

“I’m allowed to be creative and flexible around the services that we’re providing and how we’re developing them, which is wonderful. It makes it a very positive experience.”

It was valued when leaders made time to listen and respond to staff challenges and ideas, as their leadership was seen as visible and tangible.

“I think it’s refreshing when people actually are willing to hear. They don’t need to agree with everything. You know, and we’ve had times where we’ve put an idea forward and it’s either rejected or it’s not been the right time, but I think that the fact that we can come forward and people listen really makes me feel valued as a leader and a manager and as part of the agency as well.”

Similarly, leaders that were visible and transparent supported understanding between colleagues and could support feelings of team connection.

“And actually the whole transparency issue just sort of took away a lot of like the well what are they doing? Where are they? You know, etc, etc. Why can’t they respond to me? And I just sort of think that actually in terms of leadership in a local authority, we are directed by our chief social work officer. So, it is from the top down. And so, you’ve got your family support workers or your community care officers or whatever they are, you know? At the bottom of that league. But everybody should have a feeling that they are important and included and actually their views are important.”

As some participants highlighted, there may be many characteristics leaders exhibit that layer together to create good leadership, and an overall supportive environment.

“It’s the small things I think, not even just the big things like supervision... they do trickle back down on the day-to-days of the office which I think makes a big odds.”

4.2 TIME TO LEAD

Social workers shared that they are facing pressures on their time that does not allow them much space to reflect and think about their day-to-day, or profession more widely.

Recruitment and retention difficulties placed time challenges on both positional leaders, and the wider staff team. Absences, unfilled posts and a lack of experienced staff in the team composition meant that some of those who remained in the team found themselves stretched in their own role. Some were reluctant to approach the managers and colleagues that remained as they could see the impact short staffing was having.

“So right now there seems to be a lot of newly qualified workers and not many experienced workers left...sometimes you feel that you’re pests on the only few experienced workers that are left... it would be helpful to have more experienced workers on the team, especially because we don’t have senior social workers.”

Under these circumstances, staff teams experienced having less time to dedicate to their work, alongside the stress brought on by increased workloads.

“I came to know that one of the managers went on long term sickness. So, that impacted the team so much. You know, when I joined the team, just for the first few weeks they were really stressed. One of the senior managers was taking the role of literally everything.”

Some formal leaders felt challenged to find staff to fill the gaps in the service, and so have less time and space to support and lead the team. For some senior leaders, they see these challenging circumstances as in turn, hurting the capacity of social work to retain staff in general. They felt this created another concern that senior leaders had to balance alongside other contextual factors and day to day duties.

“My levels of anxiety are higher than ever before because you worry about people moving on, you worry about how you’re going to hold onto people. That’s my biggest challenge.”

Attempts to remedy staff shortfalls, for example, colleagues taking on part time lead roles to make up for management shortages, did not present long term solutions, as time to access management was still limited by these circumstances.

“There’s like 7 or 8 social workers and we’ve got one and a half [practice leads]... we just kind of got allocated to a manager and then they oversee our work, but then it’s difficult if one’s off because the managers have different thresholds for things. So you can go to one manager and you can get a different opinion.”

Some participants reflected that on taking on a new role, there is not always the time for social workers to consider the practice in the context of a new team, and to calibrate with different ways of working.

However, there were some participants who positively reflected on their experience of their organisations building in time to critically reflect on practice. This space to think was viewed as key to continued professional development both in leadership, and in the profession as a whole.

Support and supervision processes were seen as a key time for practitioner learning and critical reflection, and as an opportunity to seek the guidance and expertise of more experienced colleagues. However, some senior social workers had experienced challenges in accessing robust support and supervision for themselves. This time is needed to strengthen and affirm their own leadership, in order to support others in theirs.

4.3 THE OPERATING CONTEXT

4.3.1 External structures

The wider structures that social work teams are operating within can be challenging for those in senior leadership positions to navigate. Some felt this was because they have little opportunity to influence these structures, as social work representation has been left out or removed from key groups and conversations.

“[...] effectiveness and value have gone out the window from many of the organisations that we work with, including the senior leadership within social work being eroded so we don’t have enough senior leaders sitting at senior tables and governing structures that come from social work backgrounds, to be able to advocate an authentic leadership style and a leadership that’s based on values.”

For some of the social workers, this resulted in feeling devalued. Practically, some had experienced that an absence of a social work presence in strategic areas could result in decisions being made that negatively impact the ability of social workers to carry out their role.

“So, in the wider Council it feels as if the senior management within the Council that our Chief Social Work Officer reports to, feels very distant to what we’re doing on the ground and make decisions that can impact favourably but often impact adversely on us and there seems to be little opportunities for collaboration and collective problem solving across the wider local authority or, indeed, who takes responsibility for decisions?”

In addition to being excluded from conversations, opaque structures and sometimes conflicting messages from governance structures (local and national) challenged some leaders. Some found that negotiating complex structures had squeezed their time, so they were less able to spend time supporting their team. For some in more senior positions, they felt responding to change in both local and national policy and priorities was the focus of their leadership, rather than promoting or upholding social work values and principles.

“So we’ve got the local government and the council that we need to answer to and we’ve got the Scottish Government and sometimes those two systems can be in conflict and that makes it really challenging as a manager trying to negotiate those different systems.”

Some experienced limited budgets, moving social workers away from leadership driven by their core values, instead taking decisions based on finances.

“There’s obviously budget cuts across the country so everything has been more resource led rather than, like for me, child led. Like it’s not really always what the child needs, it’s just what we can afford to provide. And that’s not really what social work should be.”

4.3.2 Internal structures

Leadership and culture emerged as having a bidirectional relationship; leadership could influence the type of culture in a team, just as the culture within a team could impact on the leadership.

“So the leadership wasn’t strong so they couldn’t counteract a lot of people in the team, but if they had a stronger leader we maybe wouldn’t have had as much of the bitchiness and toxicity.”

Senior leaders can play an important role in shaping team dynamics, as their behaviours and attitudes can powerfully impact the cultural tone set.

“Our team leaders make such an effort to set a lovely tone in the office... I think it makes it a much more relaxed place when we’re working with such intense and sometimes really high risk cases... it feels very comfortable... you just feel like you’re being looked out for.”

The team culture has ripple effects into practice, as social workers felt more able to learn and fulfil their role in the context of a supportive team.

“And probably I think, leadership is about creating that kind of culture, environment within a team where people can learn from each other as well.”

Some participants found that the structure of integrated teams could be challenging in terms of social workers having the value and role of their profession understood by colleagues outwith social work. Participants shared that tension and misunderstanding between medical roles and social work roles was felt to inhibit leaders making decisions, and instead have to fight for the value of the profession to be recognised.

“You are constantly fighting to keep the profession afloat... so actually it’s a bit hard sitting here at the moment, thinking what are we going to do about social work leadership when actually, our leadership role has been forgotten about.”

Internal structural factors, within organisations and social work teams, could also inhibit both positional and non-positional leadership. Leaders shared they didn’t always have the space or authority to give freedom and autonomy to workers, to encourage the innovation and creativity that social workers often value.

“I just feel like we are so rigid in in this structure and hierarchy. So, there isn’t much kind of room, even maybe a leader wants to make changes but he or she is not able to... I used to work in different fields and it was more creative you know, loads of room for different things to do while in this team I just feel I’m kind of set in certain rules.”

A lack of social workers in formal leadership positions could also be challenging for a staff team who are looking for leadership and guidance from seniors. This could be related to vacancies and staffing issues as well as health colleagues occupying the more senior positions in a team, whom social workers may not feel able to approach for support in their everyday work.

“But we don’t have any seniors in our office. It’s just like social workers then the manager so that is something that I’ve found, I wouldn’t say challenging, but it’s just kind of... Sometimes I feel like I don’t want to be going to the manager all the time. I’d rather just get like a supervisor or something like that, but in all it is a positive experience but it’s just something that is in the back of my mind.”

Some participants emphasised that leaders need to be empowered to carry out the work they are statutorily required to deliver, as social workers can come into conflict with other professions.

“In whatever areas you’re working, making sure that you feel really confident about the social work contribution within that political sphere. Because that’s where I feel people become unstuck, when you’re having quite shouty conversations with consultants for example, who are furious with you for not doing what they wanted you to do, that’s where I think new team managers become unstuck because they lack the confidence”

It was also suggested that leadership training should equip social workers with the understanding of their legal duties, and the confidence to execute their decisions.

4.4 TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Experience of training varied among those that took part. Social work leadership was covered to varying degrees within the formal university training. Participants reported that leadership modules ranged in their focus, and were not mandatory. Broadly, NQSWs reflected that leadership teaching was weaved throughout their qualification, focusing on non-positional leadership qualities, such as autonomous working; and on social work as a profession providing leadership.

“My training that I did at uni...was just very much a focus on how to help people as well as like change and develop and succeed as well as the importance of understanding thing like, ethical working and like promoting social justice, collaborative working, like these sort of things.”

Senior leaders felt that understanding the positional leadership roles was important for social workers’ overall understanding of the profession, but seemed to be missing from formal education.

“And, which always disappoints me is that the leadership role of the CSWO isn’t discussed within social work training either... so we get students across the board who come, and I always say are you told around professional leadership within social work, no it’s never been mentioned... so if we’re actually not starting at the very beginning to tell people what their professional leadership is... we really need to start at their end.”

Leadership training as a distinct type of training had not been accessed by all. In this group, it emerged that experiences of leadership training were focused among those already in leadership positions, rather than those in

practitioner positions. Some senior social workers had been able to access direct leadership training, such as coaching skills, that would support them in their leadership positions.

“Yeah, to be honest I’ve not really had any formal kind of training about leadership. You know, you’re talking about the theoretical models and things. I’ve not, other than I did a training session on coaching conversations which was really good. Which was about, yeah, the kind of role of a coach in a supervision and things and developing staff and that sort of thing. But yeah, not a lot of formal training around that.”

Some participants reflected that is because there is no one body responsible for social work training, and so the offer differs across local authorities and between organisations.

“[Current training] is probably quite a mixed bag... the health service... it’s essentially one organisation, so it has that kind of formal structure to support learning in a formal and very structured way. It also has NHS education for Scotland that kind of leadership development and support. We don’t have that in social services... that’s fairly significant in thinking about how we address some of this going forward.”

Participants also highlighted that there is no mandated leadership training for social workers, which means participation is dependent upon individual managers supporting their staff to attend training, or individual social workers approaching their team leaders to ask to attend.

Participants reflected that the focused training that would be needed for particular roles and positions did not in fact exist for people to access, should they want to.

“The one thing I was going to say about senior social workers, and I think this hampers leadership in social work... there is no specific training for that level of worker, there is no specific cour.”

The experience of leadership training was that it often had a generic focus and was not specific to the social work profession.

“We’ve got a corporate training and the corporate training unit does the SVQs for the care workers as well as the binmen. And then there’s just me and a couple of other people organising students and increasingly taking responsibility for other things. If there was some, I don’t know, ring fenced funding that each local authority had to spend on developing training resources.”

Similarly, leadership training alongside health colleagues, as part of integrated teams, often lacked the necessary social work focus and relevance. This kind of training was at times embedded in a different value base to that of social work, and emphasised approaches that are not in line with the asset-based approach social workers are trained in.

“Everything that’s available via the NHS is then available across the piece. But it’s got a very distinct flavour to it. And if that’s not fitting with your profession it’s not going to feel that relevant to you.”

This augmented frustrations that social work is not considered different and distinct from health, and requires bespoke training in order to be fully relevant. Social workers noted that it is not expected that social work specific training would be wholly relevant for health colleagues.

4.5 WHAT IS NEEDED IN THE FUTURE?

We asked this question directly in the focus groups to gain the perspectives of the participants on what would help them personally and the profession.

4.5.1 Beyond leadership

Some participants felt that the wider context social work is operating in needs to be tackled before challenges to leadership can be addressed.

“You need magic wands and fairy dust... there’s not enough people. There’s not enough money but even if there was enough money, there’s not enough people. The ever increasing complexity ... juggling money ... the volume of complaints”

For some, the breadth and depth of the structural challenges could make meeting leadership training needs feel insignificant while wider pressures persist. For others, these challenges meant that the social work leaders of the future need to be empowered to navigate this complexity, motivated from the social work value base.

“Where I think our leaders of tomorrow have to be is that ability to work across a very complex, and an increasingly complex landscape of social interconnections of our services. Social work is going to have to build alliances to ensure its voice continues to be heard... but in doing that we have to be absolutely true to our core values as well. There is a real risk we

could become yes people... we have to be absolutely clear what is our key statutory duties, what are the tasks and roles that social work is here to do.”

In light of that clear articulation of need, and the overall complexity, leadership training should equip social workers with the knowledge to understand their legal duties, to ensure they feel confident in putting forward and defending their decisions.

4.5.2 Clarity and culture

There was a sense that overarching social work leadership needs to have clarity and depth of understanding on what the objectives are for creating, and for completing a particular piece of leadership training.

“And about how does an organisation decide which one it wants and what it’s looking for from it. Does it think if it puts 20 people through 4-day courses, that it’s going to suddenly become better at what it does? Or is actually looking for something specific from that? Is it looking for the creativity from people? Is it looking to get the most out of its workforce? ... And I think if you understand your objectives then you try and develop the leadership to then go with those objectives rather than producing a leadership course and trying to get everybody to fit in to it.”

It was also expressed that training in a vacuum is limited in supporting leaders and leadership. An environment that supports social workers to embed their leadership learning in their everyday practice was preferred.

“I think in relation to implementing anything like that it will not be successful unless you have a really strong culture and behaviour and attitudes within your organisation. So, a course doesn’t mean anything unless it’s embedded under a set of stuff that supports that behaviour... I think the training sometimes helps plant approaches in particular people’s heads in relation to kind of when... you want to understand that a wee bit more or you want to reflect on that and think about it like theory to practise kind of concepts. But organisations need strong cultures that are based on that...”

Participants shared that an organisational culture that allows positive leaders and leadership to flourish, should sit alongside robust training. Some suggested that organisational cultures in and of themselves might be more powerful in supporting leaders and leadership, than formal training.

“What are the ingredients that allow leadership to happen rather than trying to teach it?”

4.5.3 Knowledge development

Social work leaders need significant knowledge, both of the different practice areas and of the functions attached to positional leadership roles. Training related to the practical responsibilities that are attached to specific leadership roles need to be understood, to allow people to move into these roles.

“What would’ve really helped me if there had been a check list when I first started that said these are the things that a chief social worker must have their eye on... for example secure orders, I would have been in post two years before that came across my door and I’ve never, ever done one before. So, there’s just certain things that if I’d had a wee bit of checklist I would have familiarised myself with some of the duties.”

Opportunities for social workers to formulate the broad knowledge needed throughout the course of their career should be built in. Social workers suggested secondments to different teams, and other areas of social work, and the creation of intermediary roles, such as senior practitioner roles, would support leadership learning.

“Because we don’t move people around in our system, somebody might never have worked in the area that they’re going to be team managing in. I know lots of team managers that have come from say children’s services, are now managing a learning disabilities service, and they are totally different.”

Mentoring and coaching from those in leadership positions could also support social workers to gain the necessary knowledge to have the opportunity to move into and through leadership roles. This was also viewed as an important part of securing the longevity of strong leadership for the service, and the profession more widely.

“I am also conscious as well that part of my role is ensuring that there is life beyond me. So I think it’s really important for me to actually take on a coaching, take on a mentoring type role with some of my aspiring managers and service managers... being able to really make the time to engage with the workforce around the decisions you make.”

4.5.4 Training in practice

Participants felt that how training is delivered plays a part in its effectiveness. Models were favoured where social workers could undertake training alongside their practice, where there is the opportunity to embed their learning into their day to day work as they progress.

“I think we need training but training on its own doesn’t do anything... Any training that is detached from your work that you then don’t then go out and practice, isn’t going to be effective. You just go away do it, come back and carry on as you were because when you’re working with people who have entrenched patterns of behaviour, it takes quite a lot of practice to create new patterns of behaviour.”

SVQ qualifications were suggested as a model that might be adapted for social work training.

“Sending somebody away to university to learn some stuff is only good if they then come back and practice doing it... SVQ type models work really well because that can then be tied into workplace learning. So, if there’s, I think, an SVQ level 10 and a level 11, if they became post qualifying awards more widely used, they could then be tied into experiential learning and people could be writing about and submitting work about having actually done the things that they’re learning rather than it all being theoretically based.”

Relatedly, some practitioners suggested training opportunities less formal than an SVQ, but that are based on practice learning would be helpful in the future. This might include having the opportunity to rehearse scenarios with other practitioners.

4.5.5 Protected time for learning

On taking on a new role, it was suggested that time should be built in for social workers to consider their approach to their practice in the context of a new team, and to calibrate with different ways of working. Robust induction processes could support the creation of time for leaders to familiarise themselves and become comfortable with their responsibilities.

“I would want to say not just training but something about mentoring and coaching and inductions, because I think they’re so important. And even when they’re coming out of University into their first job it needs to be slow, steady. And I do think we’ve got a staffing crisis... that has a direct impact... where people really need time to find their feet, be part of a team... When I became a service manager, I had a one year induction plan given to me and I probably was the first that had happened to.”

Time should be built in throughout the social work career to critically reflect on practice, in order for continued professional development.

“I think one of the things in the organisation we really tried to instil over the last few years is that notion that social work is a thinking profession as much as a doing profession and that we need to build in time for reflection and critical analysis and individual and team development and starting to see the fruits of that from the organisation which, in itself, develops leadership because what you do is that you give back some of the autonomy to the individuals to make decisions and how they practise and what they do rather than nose to the grindstone all the time just doing and not thinking.”

Some participants suggested strengthening existing support and supervision processes as a time for practitioner learning, and critical reflection. Some senior social workers had experienced challenges in accessing robust support and supervision for themselves, which is needed to strengthen their own practice and empower others in theirs.

Support and supervision should also support social workers emotional wellbeing at work. The pressures of the role can be challenging for day-to-day practice, as well as for leadership development.

“There’s a therapeutic model for all staff as well so almost everyone no matter job they’re in and what level they’re at, they are all getting therapeutic supervision input and I think that’s been really refreshing for me because when someone comes into supervision, if I just want to hammer out all their cases and what’s gone on with their cases but not start off by asking how they actually are and look at their wellbeing and be therapeutic then it’s a bit like, how do I expect them to concentrate on having discussions around work if actually they’ve found out that morning that something distressing has happened in a family context or whatever. So, I think it’s for me being therapeutic, being really interested in the people that you work with. Giving them those opportunities to share and to know that your door’s open.”

4.5.6 Clear leadership pathways

There was a sense among some participants of stumbling into leadership positions.

“I find that every decision that has led me where I am today has been by accident. I’ve either taken a wrong turning or someone else has turned me in a particular direction... I have never been ambitious for leadership... it would be counter intuitive for me to be”

It was felt that for those more interested in planning a move into leadership, career pathways lacked clarity and were not considered readily identifiable to social workers in all contexts. It was also suggested that in some settings

there is a lack of social workers in senior, formal leadership positions to act as role models for others.

“I can only speak from a HSCP perspective, that I don’t think those [leadership] routes are well cut out for social workers at all... it’s not uncommon for the most senior social worker in an HSCP to be a team manager.”

Those social workers who had experience of training alongside health colleagues, had the opportunity to observe the clear and formal routes to leadership roles within the NHS, compared to the less obvious pathways in their own profession.

“It’s really striking, the routes they have in health... I mean it’s a much, much bigger organisation obviously but they have that very well set out...”

Consideration was also given to how non-positional leadership pathways could recognise and cultivate non-positional leadership aims. Social workers shared leadership aims but they were not related to managing teams, or moving up in the role hierarchy.

“I mean we were looking for a senior in the team, but I prefer the day-to-day stuff... what I would enjoy doing, being able to grow people and develop them in their learning is more what I’m interested in.”

Giving opportunities to social workers who may not wish to take up formal positions, or who may not want to manage people was seen as important to developing non positional leadership.

“If you don’t want to be a team manager and do that kind of route ... we’ve kind of recognised that what we need to be doing is creating, I guess it’s space, for recognition of where people have been qualified for a number of years they’ve maybe got a specialism in a particular area and actually celebrating that and recognising that”

It was reflected that encouraging more social workers to consider positional leadership roles, as well as recognising leadership at every level, could support the retention of social workers, and so adding to the vibrant mix of leadership styles that strengthen the profession.

“So we know that the majority, or a fair percentage of social workers leave the profession within, what is it 7-8 years? It’s a short time anyway... what is that about... the fact that

there's not a career pathway... the pathway you think of is taking on management and leadership roles and actually sometimes that's not what people are looking for... you need to create opportunities for people that don't want to do that."



5. Discussion

5.1 UNDERSTANDINGS OF LEADERSHIP IN SOCIAL WORK

What leadership looks like and who leaders are, was defined in many ways by participants in this cohort. We heard a number of views that still held leadership as being most relevant to those in senior positions, mirroring a traditional view of leadership relying on, and being the purview of, those at the top. However, there were instances outlined where participants spoke of leadership across social work being shown amongst teams, in supporting colleagues, and in leading change in the lives of communities and individuals. This was reinforced when the groups expanded on what they saw as the characteristics of leadership (values-based, challenging injustice, listening, enabling, providing encouragement, being transparent and trustworthy). This included a view of leadership that needed to be non-positional and that this has to be supported in the sector.

There was also a focus on social work leadership being particularly strong within people who were knowledgeable and experienced in social work practice, across all levels. And there was a recognised importance of those individuals to lead and support colleagues. The characteristics of good leadership described in the focus groups very much supported a need for leadership framing to be practice-based and strengths-based, while also aligning with the four behaviours of compassionate leadership: attending, understanding, empathising, and helping (Atkins and Parker, 2012; Bailey and West, 2022).

5.2 TIME TO LEAD

The experience of social workers in this cohort, finding pressure on their time from many directions, is reflected in the literature around social work and social care more widely. Most pertinent are the findings of *Setting the Bar*, which set out to recommend an indicative case limit for social workers (Miller and Barrie, 2022). This work found that 48% of survey respondents found high caseloads to be one of the least satisfying things about their work, and found that 70% of respondents worked additional hours most of the time, or always to meet their workload demands (Miller and Barrie, 2022). 27% of respondents to Social Work Scotland's Chief Social Work Officer Annual Report (2021) said they were working more than an additional 20 hours per week.

These findings both underline and echo the experiences of social workers in the focus groups, who found that their teams were experiencing stress while attempting to meet their workload, and they were having to fill the gaps in service caused by high vacancies and absences. Particularly for senior positional leaders with staffing responsibilities, filling vacancies was adding significant stress to their role; an experience that is also reflected in Social Work Scotland's CSWO Annual Report (Scott, 2021). At a front line level, being unable to meet the needs of people they are working with goes beyond stress, and can cause deep emotional and moral distress for social workers (Social Work Scotland, 2022).

The focus group findings highlight the ways in which these staffing and workload pressures limit the time and space that social workers have to think deeply about their practice; as one participant explained, "social work is a thinking profession as much as a doing profession and that we need to build in time for reflection and critical analysis". The focus group contributions also add to the body of work in leadership in social work, by highlighting how these pressures on time and workload inhibit the ability of leaders to exhibit the positive characteristics of good leadership.

5.3 THE OPERATING CONTEXT

Throughout the focus groups, it was clear that the external environment that social work operates in, and the internal structures of organisations, have impacts on leadership potential. While the impact of these structures and constraints, such as financial limitations, filters down to frontline social workers,

social workers more senior in the hierarchy were best able to view the impact of this on leadership. For some, as long as these structural challenges persisted, they found it difficult to consider what could support leadership in the future.

At the strategic level, there was a feeling that the voice of social work has diminished, and that key social work leaders are not a part of the conversations and groups that they should be. This is reflected in sector evidence that has found managers and seniors are sharing the challenges for social workers, at HSCP and strategic levels (Social Work Scotland, 2022). Similarly, the CSWO Report found that 91% said they had direct access to their councils Chief Executive, but that this was accompanied by finding their meetings cancelled, or that the meetings lacked the structure and depth required for the social work voice to be fully heard (Scott, 2021).

It was shared in this cohort that leaders want to, and are valued for, leading from a social work values base. However, competing challenges from local and national government priorities, and from financial limitations, moved leaders away from this values base. This is also found in the CSWO Report (Scott, 2021). While 43% of respondents were fully involved in the HSCP budget setting, there are nuances to their involvement. CSWOs felt that financial decisions are still leaving the profession having to do more with less, and that their budgetary input was not always consistent (Scott, 2021).

The structures of integrated teams could also be challenging. For NQSWs and social workers, they put a significant amount of leadership value in how they are supported in their work, both formally and informally, by senior colleagues. The need for senior colleagues to support them is crucial, both in formal areas such as line management and supervision, but also in more informal ways, helping provide direction and encouragement as they begin in their careers. A significant amount of that support is strengthened by colleagues who have that body of social work experience, which cannot be provided by those in health or allied health roles.

5.4 TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Training and development for social workers is key in equipping professionals with the knowledge and understanding needed to meet the challenges of the work (Kettle, 2016). A need and desire for quality training and development was present among this cohort, however experiences of training and development

related to leadership were varied. There was no uniform experience of leadership routes or development, beginning with differences in university education, both among NQSWs, and those who completed their qualification less recently.

Access to leadership training once in post was also varied among the cohort. Some attributed this to there not being no overarching body solely responsible for social work training. In this cohort, comparisons were made to the type and organisation of training within health, which does have one body responsible for organising training. The potential advantages that this can give health colleagues to access training was implicit in some participant responses, and is discussed in the social work literature more widely (Haworth et al, 2018). Of those in the focus groups, it was often only those in established senior positions who had received some or any leadership-related training.

A lack of mandatory leadership training for social workers meant that sometimes accessing training was down to local areas, or on individuals approaching their manager to ask. When training could be accessed, it was reflected by some participants that the options available were too generic, lacked a social work focus, or that for some types of training desired, there was nothing on offer. Some participants felt that these issues existed due to budget cuts to learning and development teams. Sustained budget cuts to these departments can result in the de-prioritisation of learning in the profession and was highlighted in the CSWO survey, in which 57% of respondents said there was no dedicated function for learning and development in their area (Kettle, 2016; Scott, 2021).

Echoing literature about learning and development in the profession, the experiences of this cohort highlight that social workers can see the need for training in developing leadership skills and capacities. As those closest to the work, they identified the key gaps and suggest that social work leadership training needed to be: more explicitly supported through their career progression from a social worker, from educational settings through to the most senior roles, more clearly framed within a career progression, and recognised and supported by peers and senior colleagues.

5.5 WHAT IS NEEDED IN THE FUTURE?

This study asked participants to think about the current experience and future needs of leadership in social work. Suggestions and perspectives were wide ranging, and informed by the personal perspectives of leadership

in the sector. Again, it could be seen that the type of support and training that might be effective and necessary to address leadership challenges, was difficult when the profession faces a myriad of demanding external pressures. However, this resulted in a diverse set of suggestions.

For some, there was a sense that training can only go so far, and that positive environments better equip people to learn and employ leadership skills than formal training. This reinforces that leadership development and progression in leadership must go hand-in-hand with enabled cultural change around the behaviours and values of leadership that should be embedded in social work practice nationally and across local areas. For those who saw structural challenges as deep and enduring for social work, it was suggested that leadership training should empower social workers to negotiate complex structures, and to carry out the human rights based work they are statutory bound to deliver. It was suggested that the aim of training should be to equip social workers with robust understandings of the contribution their profession makes, underpinned by an understanding of their legal duties.

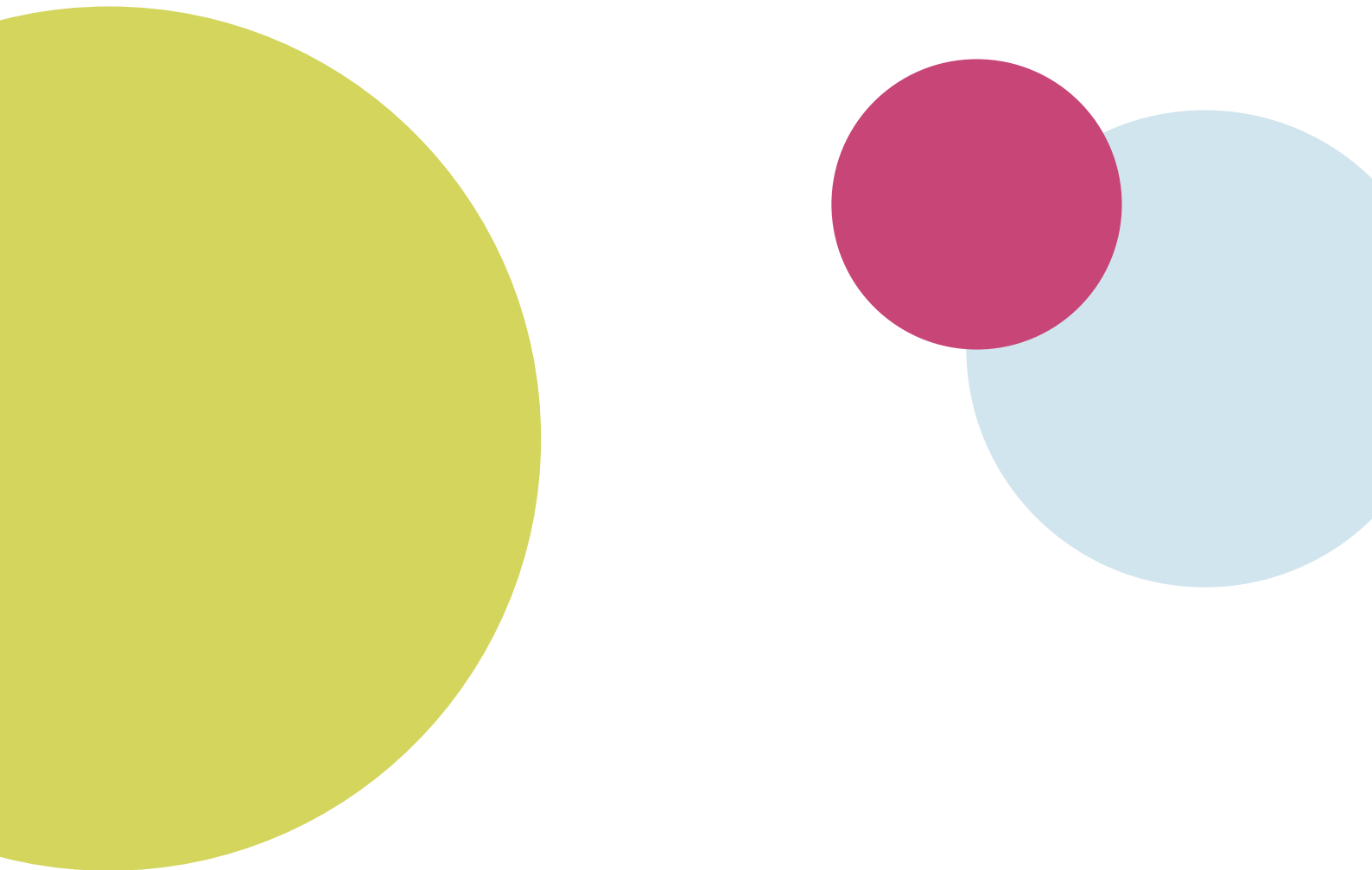
Others made practical suggestions that there should be time and opportunity to develop the knowledge of different practice areas, as well as the opportunity to mentor and be mentored by those in senior leadership positions. Secondments and intermediary roles could offer a chance to practically develop this knowledge, while building in time to the social workers' week to think critically about their practice could support professional development. The workplace itself as a place of learning is discussed by Ferguson (2022) whose work chimes with some participants' feeling that learning in the workplace is superior to learning that happens separately and is translated into daily practice. Again, reinforcing the importance of embedded principles of practice leadership.

In terms of leadership pathways, few in this study spoke about deliberate leadership aims, and there was a sense of stumbling into leadership positions, as opposed to considered career progression. Some even shared that considering leadership positions was antagonistic to the values and aims of social work. It was suggested that carving out more obvious leadership pathways was necessary. This includes recognising that leadership does not necessarily involve the management of teams, and that social workers should be supported into both positional and non-positional leadership roles. Setting the Bar found that only 12% of respondents would stay in social work because of progression

opportunities (Miller and Barrie, 2022). This was further emphasised in *Setting the Bar 2*, which found that more opportunities for career development would create a more positive working environment (Social Work Scotland, 2022).

There is a necessity for any social work leadership development, whether it be in theory or in practice, to encourage interventions that build the characteristics of positive leadership within individuals. In addition to this focus, there is also a requirement to influence national and organisational landscapes that can provide the profession with the wider environment to develop and embed positive leadership strategies, supports and behaviours.

With these considerations in mind we have developed a set of aligning recommendations.



6. Recommendations

This study reinforces and supports other recent workforce reports that have been conducted in Scotland, giving further clarity that social workers need more practical and situational supports to be able to develop their skills and their future careers in relation to leadership. These necessary supports are almost impossible to disentangle from each other as the elements are so closely interwoven in the system. We have outlined below what we see as key recommendations that have emerged.

Overall, we want to see a social work culture developing that has understandings of leadership at its core, a culture where social workers are confident in their profession, their individual and collective contribution, and their ability to support people. Often culture can be seen as ephemeral and hard to pin down, but if the recommendations below are addressed, we believe that a culture where leadership development can flourish will begin to emerge.

1. Social workers need to see where they are going, and how they can be supported to get there. There should be a **clear journey** and framework outlining progression for social workers across the stages of their career – from student through to CSWO. This should be national and applicable to social workers no matter what geographical area they practice in. It would remove any ambiguity on what training/support or progression is discretionary or optional, and help build confidence for workers on their career progression and how that is developed. As part of this, consideration should be given to the creation of new roles for qualified workers to help retain and reward expertise and experience outwith management and positional leadership pathways. This could include support for senior expert/advisory roles,

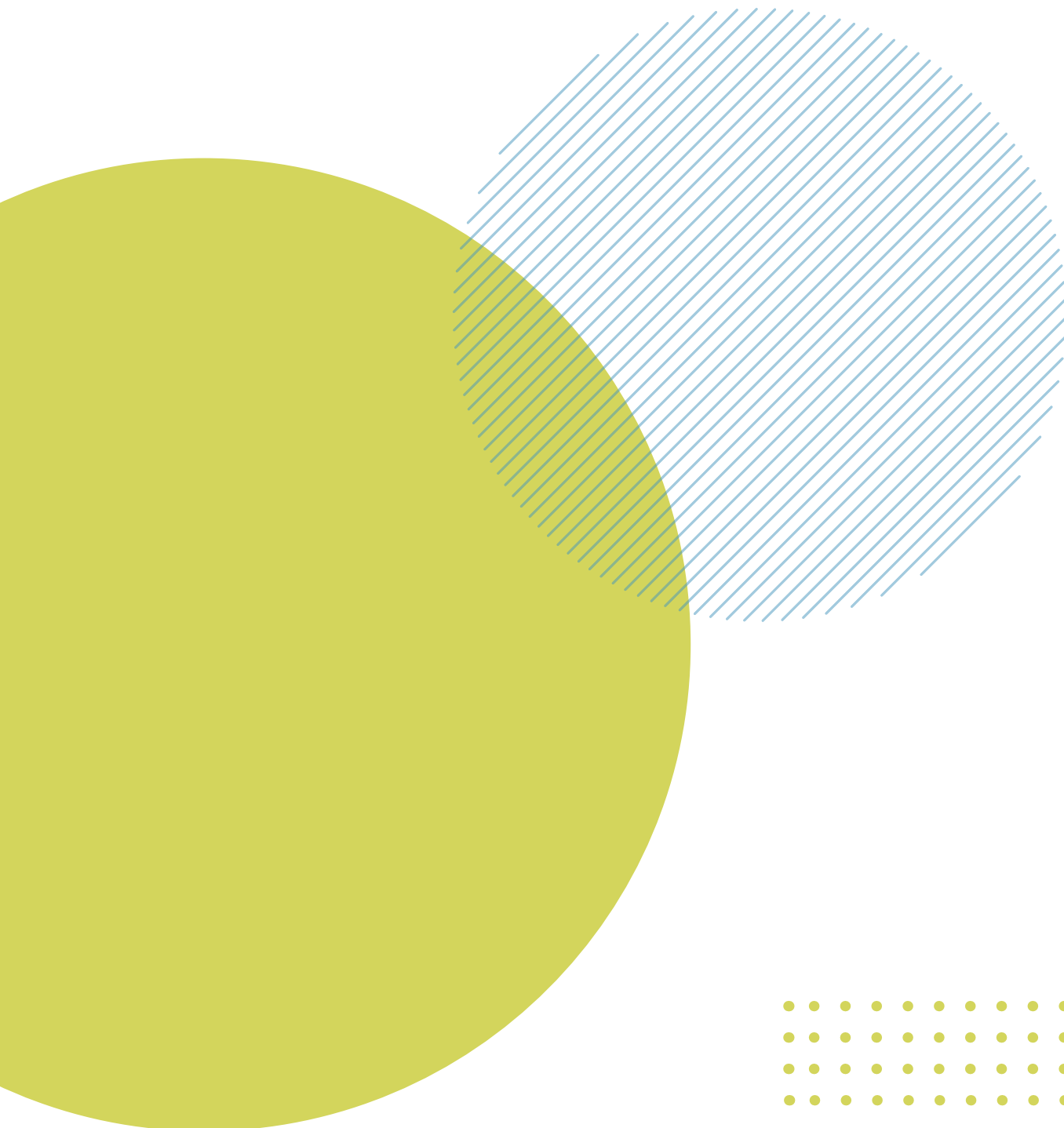
or hybrid research-practitioner roles. We know there is already progression in this direction through the *Advanced Social Work Practice Framework*. This work will set out the structures which support social workers to progress through different career phases and describe a cohesive and supportive series of academic, training, developmental, and work based opportunities to support the workforce.

2. There should be provision of **bespoke leadership training** for different stages of the social work career journey. This would involve the strengthening of the learning and development offer for topic specific, and skill specific, training at local and national levels. This should have a social work focus, not generic, and it should be developed with social workers to help shape the content and delivery. Again, this training should be universally available, folded into practice, and part of a continual professional development journey. There is scope to explore where and how this might be provided.
3. Training alone will not suffice to make a difference if it cannot be incorporated into practice. Active implementation strategies and **embedded resources** to support a leadership culture need to be developed. This would include models for mentoring and peer support, properly developed supervision around support (not just case discussions) and also developing national and local networks to meaningfully reflect and share learning. This would help embed and normalise that value of the relational aspects of social work, harnessing the experience of colleagues and setting standards and expectations across the country. This needs to be embedded in the day-to-day, not be a luxury addition.
4. Linked to the point above, given the importance of the link to practice and the need for experience based leadership identified throughout the report, consideration should also be given to the **design of leadership roles** and preparation for senior leadership in particular. This could include protected time for leaders to maintain a small caseload and thus a live link to direct practice and structured in-work opportunities for emerging senior leaders to gain experience across different service areas to better support them for the breadth of experience required by the CSWO and other senior social work roles.
5. **Time and influence** are key for social workers to be able to lead effectively. Leaders in social work, especially in senior positions, need to

have the time to be able to internally exhibit the characteristics of good leaders – especially those around critical thinking, analysis, reflection and support of colleagues. Senior social workers also need to be able (and invited) to represent the profession, alongside peers in health and other allied professions, in any developing structures around the delivery of health and social care. Decisions that involve social work need to be shaped by those who know the complexity and nuance of the work and the profession, and they need to have the influence and levers (financial and otherwise) to follow through on that delivery.

6. As well as leadership cultures and structures being resourced and supported at local levels, this all needs to be supported by a strong **national social work voice** and wider **evidence and innovation support system**. This cannot continue to be fragmented and locality dependent. It is critical that these strands of leadership training, learning and development should be held together, to represent social work as a whole. Our study and the other evidence it rests on assert that this training should not be removed from the day-to-day delivery of social work, but work alongside practitioners. It must be able to support the profession by developing and using evidence that is practically applicable, and by supporting the profession, at all levels, to make changes. And finally, that will only have an impact if there is learning, development, and improvement capacity in the social work teams around the country who have the opportunity to shape, try out and embed any changes.
7. Social work is facing huge challenges in terms of the operating context, the growing complexity of public service and direct challenges to social work's identity, role and value within this. Throughout the focus groups these challenges were reflected in how respondents saw themselves as leaders in their work. Key leadership qualities of autonomy, self-directedness, confidence, and decision-making were not identified and there was a sense of respondents waiting for permission to lead rather than stepping in and beginning to do so. Professional and leadership confidence are complex issues to address and any recommendation in this area will be necessarily partial. Consideration should be given to building a **clear and compelling story of the value of social work and social work leadership** both at local and national level.

As has been shown through the focus group findings, and within these recommendations, it is impossible to explore leadership in social work without considering the wider system that social work operates within. There need to be concurrent interventions that support the whole system sustainably; governance/structures, recruitment/retention, training, leadership, improvement, and culture cannot be tackled in isolation.



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