



National Care Service Bill Verdict from Social Work Staff

February 2023
A UNISON survey

Kick profit
out of care

Introduction

The National Care Service Bill introduced to Parliament in June 2022 has far-reaching implications for social work services. The transfer of legal duties and responsibilities from local authorities to Scottish Ministers will have an impact not only on service users and on how services are delivered, but also on the workforce. A [UNISON briefing](#) provides an overview of the main issues.

Taking responsibility for social services out of local councils will affect the viability of other council services. Social services account for one third of all local government spending, while social services staff are almost 30 per cent of the workforce.¹

There remains a huge lack of clarity about the government's plans. The bill itself contains very little detail as most aspects of what the NCS will look like are still to be worked out through a 'co-design' process and then set out in Regulations which the Parliament will not be able to amend.

UNISON Scotland surveyed its social work members in autumn 2022. We asked them for their views on the main proposals and what these will mean for social work practice.

Through our survey findings, social work staff across all 32 local authorities give their verdict on the National Care Service Bill.

Headlines:

- Just 13% of social work staff believe the government's plans are the best way to improve the quality and consistency of social work services
- Staff say what is really needed is investment in social work staffing and resources (94%), better pay, terms and conditions (85%) and enough time to build relationships with the people they support (72%).
- Staff say financial austerity is now the main barrier to improved integration and meeting the needs of individuals and their families
- Almost two thirds of staff working in children & families services (64%) and justice social work (65%) do not support these services being removed from councils.
- 71% think ending direct public provision by councils will have a negative impact on the people who receive a social work service.
- Insecurity about jobs, pensions and changes to terms and conditions are major concerns for staff. 77% say the changes will mean insecurity for staff and 64% are concerned about their pension.
- More than half of social work staff (54%) think removing social work and social care from councils will make their jobs more difficult.

1 - <https://www.gov.scot/publications/public-sector-employment-scotland-statistics-1st-quarter-2022/documents/>

Who took part in the survey?

An online survey questionnaire was emailed by UNISON local government branches direct to members working in social work services. Almost 1,082 members took part. For context, there are 5,300 wte social workers employed in local authorities (SSSC, 2021).

The social work staff who completed the survey work in all areas of social work: 60% work in adult services, 24% in children and families teams, 5% in justice social work, and 11% in other areas including addiction services and mental health.

Local authorities gained statutory duties and responsibilities for social work following the 1968 Social Work (Scotland) Act. The current duties on local authorities are wide-ranging; councils not only have a duty to provide or arrange for the provision of formal care, but also proactive preventative support, for example to parents and families. Care and support is provided to people in a very wide range of different circumstances and engagement can be either voluntary or compulsory.

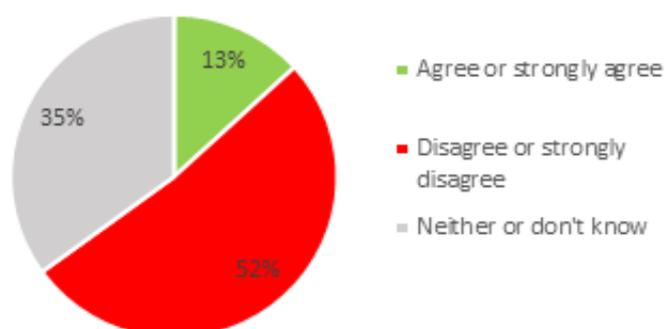
Our survey reflects this diversity. Participants work in a very wide range of job roles within social work services including mental health officers, social care workers, administrative assistants, family support workers, care at home/support workers, occupational therapists, community payback supervisors, day care coordinators, children's rights officers, residential workers, principal officers, drivers, planning and performance officers, as well as social workers.

Social work is a regulated profession and social workers must be registered with the SSSC. However more than a quarter of participants in our survey (27%) are not required to be registered with the SSSC – which means that they work in 'paraprofessional' social work, officer or support roles.

DO YOU AGREE WITH THE GOVERNMENT'S PLANS?

The government believes that the best way to improve the quality and consistency of social work services is through services being directly accountable to Scottish Ministers. The Bill centralises social work and social care by transferring statutory duties and responsibilities from local authorities to the Scottish Government.

Is centralisation to Ministers the best way to improve the quality & consistency of social work services?



We asked members if they agree this is the best way to improve things.

- Just over 1 in 10 do agree (13%).
- However over half (52%) do not. The social work staff who took part in our survey do not think the NCS plans are the best way to improve services.

Comments include:

“I am really concerned about this and would like unison to do all in their power to stop this”

“There have been too many changes, too many cuts to make a radical change like this with out fully informing staff. We are on our knees and that is no exaggeration of how bad it is.”

“My concern is that these changes are about saving money and will level down services. I’ve not seen any concrete plan about what the NCS would do for children and family social work, how it would be funded? How pay will be awarded equally? The long term plan to retain social workers?”

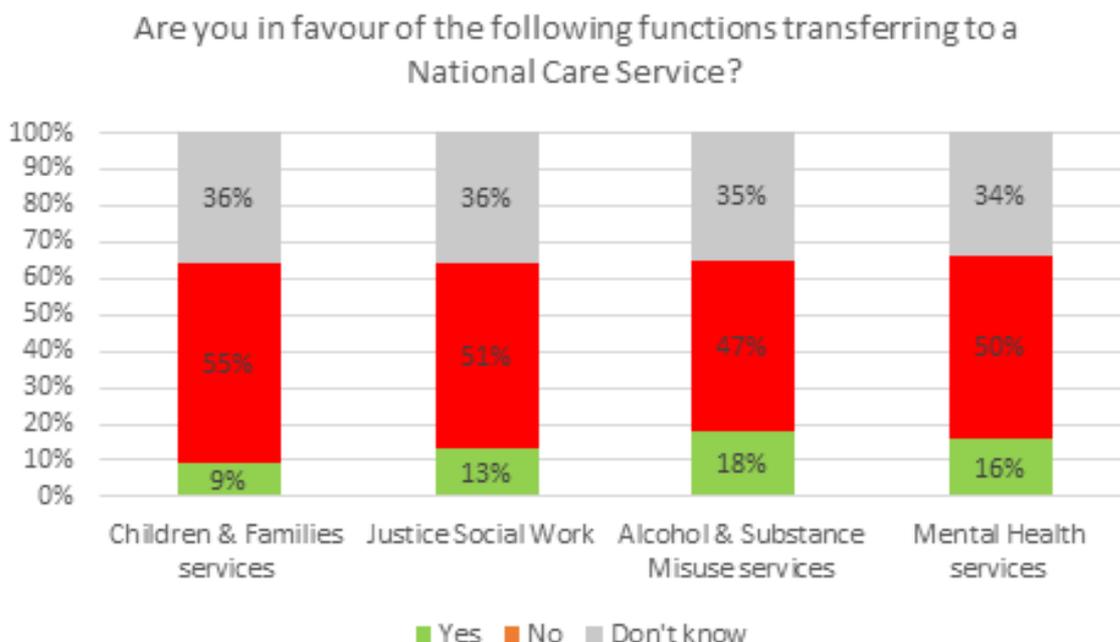
Staff do not feel well informed about the government’s plans for social work. The government has not provided any information about what a NCS will look like. Unsurprisingly, around one third of responses to this and other questions in the survey were ‘don’t know’. This is consistent across all of the survey questions.

HOW WILL SERVICES BE AFFECTED?

The National Care Service Bill gives Scottish Ministers powers to transfer a broad range of social care, social work and community health functions to the National Care Service using future secondary legislation. The government has said there will be further public consultation before decisions are made about including children’s services and justice social work services. Mental health services are currently being consulted on.

We asked, *“Are you in favour of the following functions transferring to the National Care Service?”*

Most members do not agree with functions being removed from councils. Overall, opposition is highest for Children’s services (55%) and Justice social work (51%). Opposition is even higher amongst the social work staff who work in these services:



- 64% of Children & families staff do not agree with their service being transferred (55% of all survey respondents).
- 65% of Justice Social Work staff do not agree with their service being transferred (51% all respondents).

The government has not prepared a business case for changing the way these services are provided. It has commissioned research to look at the evidence for transferring these functions, but these findings are not available yet. More than third of members therefore did not feel able to take a view.

Undermining Integration

Members highlighted ways in which the transfer of functions could make things worse. Staff have particular concerns that the bill will undermine integrated working and undo close working relationships that have taken years to achieve on the ground.

“At present joint working between social work and education is more effective than between social work and health. This is due to education and social work being employed by the same organisation. Removing this impacts on the ability to share information, communicate, build relationships and advocate for service users.”

“It would destroy all the hard work we workers have already done in making links with other agencies. It’s taken years to make these links and this proposed change would be detrimental to social work services as a whole.”

“Social work works hand in hand with housing, education and all other services. If working with adult with learning difficulties it would be important to work with housing and education if they are leaving education to understand needs currently LA have systems in place for this and put clear systems in place, to remove social work erodes this. Likewise working with families will include housing, justice, education and we must have a whole system approach”

There were also concerns about the wider impact and costs on local government:

“Services in my area are supplemented by LA reserves and I fear that there will be a reduction in resources. This will result in poorer services and outcomes for individuals and this will lead to more complex cases and complaints for social workers.”

“Removing SW from LA’s will decimate LA’s and destroy the joint working arrangements we have now.”

Implementing The Promise

The National Care Service Bill is focused on adult social care. But what about children? Reform of the care system for babies, children and young people is already underway and is now 3 years into a 10 year change programme. This is the outcome of a separate Independent Care Review whose report, The Promise, was published in February 2020.

More than half of the staff in Children and Families services who responded (54%) think the removal of social work from councils will have a largely negative impact on implementation of the Independent Care Review. Almost a third of staff didn't feel able to give a view.

“The Promise should involve partnership, I strongly believe this is likely to lead to de-skilling, de-motivation and ultimately a loss of time and resource to those who need it most.”

WHAT WILL COUNCILS BECOMING CONTRACTORS MEAN FOR SOCIAL WORK?

The National Care Service Bill means in future councils may need to bid for contracts to provide Social Work and Social Care services to Care Boards in competition with the voluntary and private sectors. The Bill has a strong emphasis on procurement.

Members taking part in the survey perceive the Bill as an outsourcers' charter – it's about removing service provision from the public sector (local authorities) with its higher employment standards – and giving it to lower cost third sector providers. In other words a 'levelling down'.

“Councils are not for profit organisation and should therefore not be bidding for social care. they should be providing what is in the communities best interest”

“I think the NCS will continue the process of privatisation by the back door, dressing it up as a positive change in Social Work, when in fact it's fundamentally all about saving money, and contracting out as much social work-related functions as possible. As a Social Worker, I have never felt so scared or depressed about the future of my profession and the implications for both the workforce and the people that we serve.”

“We have historical evidence that moving towards privatised, financial competition leads to poor service, poorly paid staff, lowering of standards, greater insecurity among staff and low morale. Detracts from the purpose of social work.”

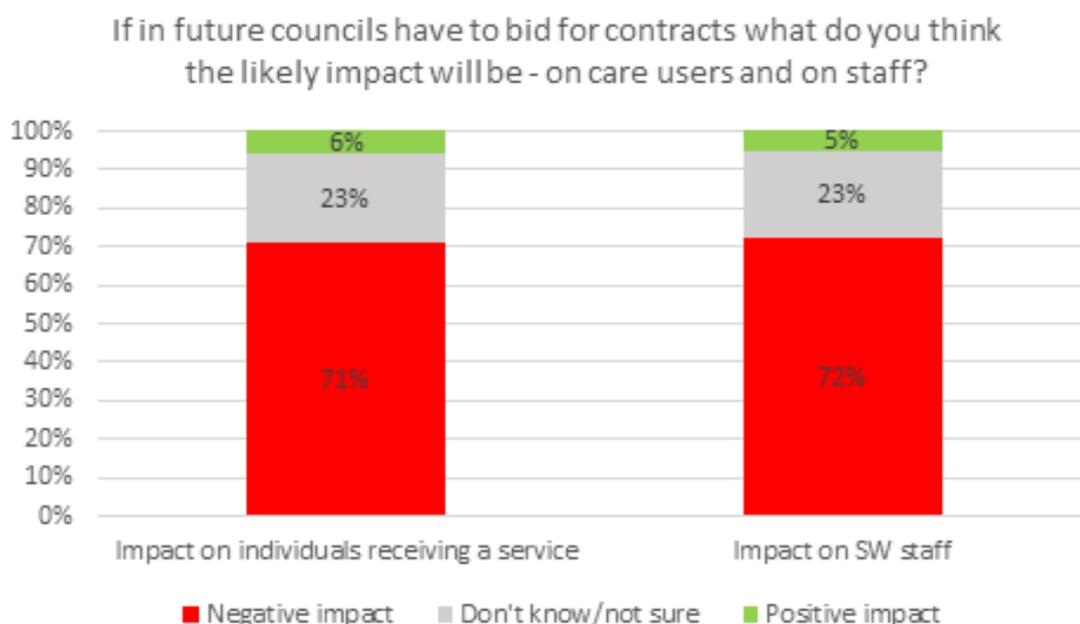
They say replacing direct public provision of public services with a market system will divert resources away from service improvement.

“Preparing to launch a bid for a major contract is a distraction from the day to day work of helping to improve people's lives. Many jobs will depend on winning or losing a contract. Such insecurity is bad for the service. ”

The impact of ending direct local authority provision

We asked, “If in future councils have to bid for contracts to provide social work and social care services to Care Boards, what do you think the impact of this is likely to be for the individuals to whom you provide a service?” And also, “what kind of impact do you think this will have on staff?”

Most staff taking the survey think that replacing direct public provision with contracting will have a negative impact both on those receiving services and on the staff providing them.



Social work staff said:

“This is treating Social Work/Care services like a business. Our most vulnerable members of society are not businesses, they are human beings and deserve that dignity and respect.”

“this is the start of privatising social work and the end of relationship based care.”

More than half of social work staff (54%) think that removing social work and social care from councils will make their jobs more difficult. Less than 1 in 10 disagree (9%) although a substantial minority (37%) are unsure or don't know.

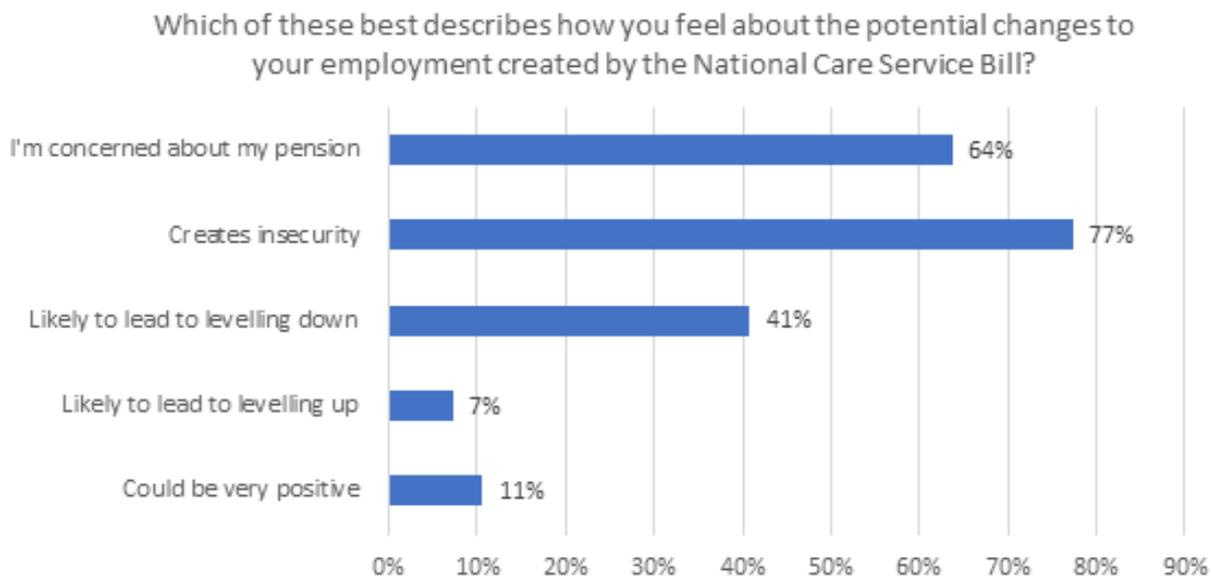
WHAT DOES THE NCS MEAN FOR THE WORKFORCE?

The Bill means that around 75,000 Social Work and Social Care staff could transfer under TUPE from councils to either Care Boards or providers in the third or private sectors. Social Work pay, terms and conditions including pensions will be determined by a National Social Work Agency to be set up within the Scottish Government.

There is currently no certainty about the future of pensions for a workforce that is predominantly female. TUPE does not provide protection for pensions. The Government introduced the NCS bill without considering this and is only now seeking expert advice.

Social Workers will be removed from local government collective bargaining arrangements and their pay, terms and conditions including pensions determined in future by a National Social Work Agency to be set up within the Scottish Government. The government's intentions for the rest of the social work workforce have not been made clear.

- Insecurity (77%) and pensions (64%) are the two biggest concerns held by staff.
- A small minority (11%) think the National Care Service could bring very positive changes to their employment.
- More staff believe the NCS is likely to lead to a levelling down of employment conditions (41% agree) rather than a levelling up (7% agree).



Social work staff think the NCS Bill creates additional stress and insecurity for a workforce already over stretched and struggling to cope with demands resulting from the public health emergency. Social work staff shared their concerns for the future:

“if this proposal goes through staff are going to feel concerned about their jobs, and their wages and pensions etc, the whole thing is so unsettling I know of people already looking for jobs elsewhere. I wanted this job till I retire now I’m not so sure, I don’t like uncertainty!!”

“i have been working with local council for the last 25 years. I worry about my pension when I retire”.

“Stability is key for staff and clients. This is added stress in an already extremely stressful role and the significant stresses of clients who need continuity.”

“Will we be made redundant? Will we still have a salary will it affect our pension? “

“There will be constant uncertainty for staff. There is likely to be a decline in people training to be social workers.”

“My main concern is about my pay and pension. As Glasgow pay more than other LA, does this mean that my wages will reduce in line with other LA’s? Would the wages be ‘frozen’ at its current rate until my retirement? If we are TUPE’d for a year, will they reduce thereafter?”

WHAT THINGS WOULD IMPROVE SERVICES?

Social work staff have very clear ideas about what things would make a difference to social work practice and provide a better quality of service to those they support.

We asked, “In your opinion what key things are needed to improve the quality and consistency of social work services?” A majority of respondents agree that the priorities are investment in staffing (94%) and employment conditions (85%). This is necessary not just to tackle the recruitment and retention crisis. Investment in capacity is also vital to improve the quality of services, freeing up time for relationship-based practice and for supervision. The need for a change of culture and ethos in social work is also recognised. Social workers want to see a shift away from managerialism and towards community based social work practice.



Members are clear on the need to properly resource services. They told us financial austerity is now the main barrier to improved integrated working and meeting the needs of individuals and their families

“Everything comes down to a battle for resources.”

“In my local area I feel we have good networking with colleagues from housing, community nursing etc but feel that services are still disjointed despite integration being in place for several years, largely due to lack of funding and reduction in services available. I do not think this will change if responsibility is moved to the National Care Service”

“Joint working has become fragmented due to individual workloads and budgets across all sectors.”

“Bidding for lottery money and seeking 3rd sector investors should not be what we depend on to run a service.”

“what is needed is proper reform of local authority care. Investment and funding to make better choices”

CONCLUSION

“Centralising social work will not improve the service - properly funding and staffing it will!”

Social work services have been under enormous pressures for many years and austerity has made this worse. UNISON’s 2019 [Save from Harm](#) research found that social work staff are exhausted, undervalued, and struggling to cope with the demands placed upon them.

As these survey findings show, the National Care Service Bill creates additional pressures. Large numbers of staff are concerned about the insecurity created for their jobs, pay and pensions.

For many the upheaval and uncertainty of a major restructure involving staff transfers could be the final straw. The uncertainty caused by the Bill risks making far worse the existing difficulties with staff recruitment and retention. And it risks affecting the service received by the children, families and adults who need social work support

This is a risk the government needs to consider seriously. Particularly when few social work staff in our survey believe the plans will actually achieve the government’s goal of improving services. Instead they believe major investment in staffing and resources is needed. As the Financial Memorandum to the Bill² points out, there is no guarantee that the NCS will even deliver extra investment in services. No assessment of unmet need in social work has been undertaken.

The lack of detail in the plans - and clarification from government - is a further driver of insecurity. In a major public service reform it is vital to take the workforce with you. It is clear from these findings that many staff are unsure what is happening.

UNISON believes spending over £500m on creating new structures is not the right priority. We are campaigning for the bill to be withdrawn and a process of grassroots engagement begun to develop the kind of National Care Service we can be proud of.

More information about UNISON’s National Care Service Campaign [here](#).

**National Care
Service** *Watch*

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² <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/legislation/bills/s6-bills/national-care-service-scotland-bill/introduced/financial-memorandum-accessible.pdf>