



UNISON survey of social work
paraprofessionals

June 2023

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SUMMARY

Increased responsibilities

- 68% of paraprofessionals say their responsibilities have increased since they came into post;
- They frequently report taking over the duties of qualified social workers or doing the same job as a social worker: holding complex cases alone, having full responsibility for carrying out higher level assessments. For some this includes adult and child protection work.
- Paraprofessionals feel they are being asked to undertake duties for which they do not feel sufficiently trained or supported due to the shortage of social workers.
- They feel there is a need for clarity about the duties and pay grades of paraprofessionals relative to qualified social workers.

Workload issues

- The majority receive regular supervision but 1 in 4 say they do not and can be working unsupervised for long periods of the year.
- Workload is manageable for the majority (60%) but work intensity is high, and workload fluctuates between manageable and unmanageable.
- 4 in 10 say workload is quite or very unmanageable due to understaffing, high caseloads, greater complexity within caseloads, demands of duty cover, and lack of time for assessments and paperwork.

Career progression

- Members feel there is a lack of training opportunities and ways to progress within the role.
- Many feel there are insufficient 'work and study' pathways to obtain a social work qualification.

Pay

- Paraprofessionals feel they are doing most of a social worker role but without the pay.
- Staff are unhappy about the pay inequity not only with social workers, but between social work assistants and family support workers, and between other groups of paraprofessional staff within councils.
- Almost one quarter of survey respondents reported being part of regrading exercises and 41% of these, involving 9 local authorities, had been successful.

Regulation

- Paraprofessionals are split on whether they should be required to register with the SSSC and become a regulated profession. Just under half are in favour (49%), more than a third are uncertain (36%), while 15% are opposed.

Paraprofessional priorities

The experiences of the paraprofessionals who took part suggest the following priorities:

- Clarification of the role remit and responsibilities of paraprofessionals in relation to those of qualified social workers, both within and between councils.
- A review of pay grades to tackle inequities: (1) between social work assistants and family support workers; (2) between councils (3) in comparison to qualified social workers, and (4) in comparison to similar roles within education.
- Creation of career and pay progression pathways for paraprofessional staff including support to access a social work qualification and to advancement within a paraprofessional role.
- A guarantee of ongoing training, professional development and support for paraprofessionals.

INTRODUCTION

Paraprofessionals are skilled staff in social work teams who are not required to have a social work qualification. They include social work assistants (SWAs), family support workers (FSWs) and staff in other support roles including justice officers. The job titles in use and their remits vary between organisations. While social work is a regulated profession, this part of the workforce is not currently required to register with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC).

UNISON's Social Work Issues Group (SWIG) has been concerned for some time about the greater responsibilities being placed on this group of members. A well-attended online event was held in 2022 to discuss this, as part of SWIG's *Radical Social Work* lunchtime webinar series. Social work paraprofessionals said they were increasingly holding cases and doing assessments but with these greater responsibilities not matched in pay.

The Scottish Government intends to establish a National Social Work Agency. It's proposed remit includes workforce planning, training and development and pay and conditions for the workforce as a whole, including paraprofessionals. Linked to this, the SSSC is exploring the possibility of paraprofessionals joining social workers as part of the regulated workforce.

To gain a better overview of the issues, in January 2023 SWIG undertook a national survey of paraprofessional staff. An online questionnaire was circulated to social work assistants, family support workers and staff in other support roles in local authority social work services using UNISON's membership system and through local government branches, with a request for it to be shared with colleagues. The survey aimed to capture workforce experiences as well as views about registration.



“The only difference between me and a social worker is 12p per minute.” Anon

WHO TOOK PART?

A total of 134 social work paraprofessional staff from 21 local authorities responded to the survey:¹

- 58% were social work assistants
- 21% were family support workers
- 21% (n=29) had other job titles, including: family care worker, family key worker, family support practitioner, children's services worker, support worker, throughcare officer.
- 79% work full-time and 21% part-time.

	Children & Families	Adult Services	Justice Social Work	Other area	Total
Social work assistants	28 (37%)	26 (34%)	13 (17%)	9 (12%)	76 (100%)
Family support workers	28 (100%)	-	-	-	28 (100%)
Other job titles	10 (35%)	12 (41%)	3 (10%)	4 (14%)	29 (100%)
Total	66 (48%)	38 (28%)	16 (12%)	13 (12%)	134 (100%)

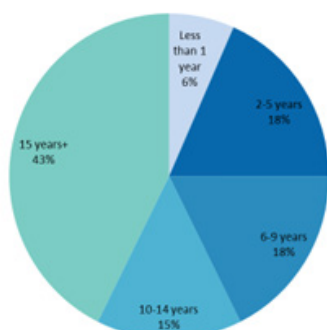
In which areas do they work?

- 48% work in children & families social work; 28% in adult services
- 12% in Justice social work
- 12% in other areas including mental health and addictions.

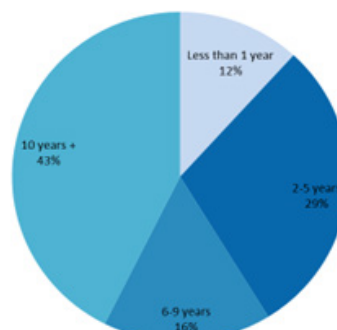
How long have you worked as a paraprofessional? (current and any previous posts)

- 58% (n=78) had worked as a paraprofessional for 10+ years.
- 18% (n=24) for 6-9 years, and 24% for less than 5 years.

In total, how long have you worked in a paraprofessional role?



How long in total have you worked in your current post?



¹ Because the survey link was shared as well as sent directly to members it is not possible to give a response rate.

INCREASED RESPONSIBILITIES

Overall, more than two-thirds (68%) say the responsibilities of their role have increased since they came into post.² Those agreeing with this include:

- 68% of social work assistants
- 78% of family support workers

These increased responsibilities were linked to the shortage of and high turnover of qualified social workers and rising demands on the service. Social Work Assistants, Family Support Workers and other paraprofessionals all reported similar changes.

How roles have changed:

- *Now carrying either some of the responsibilities of a qualified social worker, or doing the same job as a social worker*
- *Holding own caseload and leading on cases rather than supporting others.*
- *Increased caseload (in one case doubled) and managing more complex cases.*
- *Carrying out greater number of assessments and a higher level of assessment for child protection or self-directed support purposes.*
- *Writing reports and attending case conferences*
- *Taking on responsibilities within adult and child protection usually done by social worker, such as attending and contributing at children's hearings or adult protection case conferences alone.*
- *Taking part in the frontline duty rota*

Paraprofessionals in their own words

“When I first started in post we were expected to support social workers with cases they had or hold a caseload of simple cases. We now have a high caseload with cases that hold the same difficulty level of social workers. I have cases that I need to manage who require psychiatric input, police involvement and am required to work/have knowledge in current and previous legislation for court orders etc. I am also now required to be the second worker for adult protection cases involving initial visits, note taking and writing reports of initial AP visits. I have also previously been expected to write IRDs for AP cases. When I first started in my role SWAs were not involved in any adult protection issues.”

“SWAs are now working as unqualified workers, the only cases we don't carry are CPOs. We are expected to write reports not just contribute to them. Expected to take cases to Reporter and LAC reviews. In [council name] we are a pay grade below family support workers and two pay grades below SWkrs”.

“Came into post 2000 in a role which was more about early intervention/practical support with lower level family cases. Now also doing assessments, disabilities, life story work, overnight shifts, attending court etc., with most being at the higher level of cases”

“We have to work with high risk cases, hold complex cases, compile lengthy reports for Court, Children's Reporter. I attend complex joint police forensic medical examinations for children who have come to significant physical or sexual harm. I do the same job as a social worker other than compile child protection case conference reports and interview children on camera. I still interview children, just not on camera as this has to be a person who holds a social work qualification.”

² “Since they came into post”: for 43% of respondents the period this relates to is 10+ years. For 59% of respondents this relates to more than 5 years, and for 41% of respondents it relates to a period of up to 5 years.

“More responsibilities, Working later at night to accommodate service users who are in employment/ Home visits done in the evening. Alone Home visits to Register Sex Offenders. Higher caseloads. Assisting Social Workers: joint working clients assisting with welfare issues. Undertaking Environmental Risk Assessments on behalf of the police for unallocated justice social work cases for registered sex offenders. Working within Courts. Working more with families of the service user at times of crisis. Additional duties: diversion assessments, structured deferred sentence programmes, Fiscal Work Order assessments. Managing a caseload of in the region of 25/30 clients.”

“...Our Duty system is going to change from 2 qualified Social Workers and 1 Social Work Assistants per day to 1 Social Worker and 1 Social Work Assistant which can only mean an increase in our workload again most probably dealing with more complex cases. Our allocated cases can be outwith the council area (throughout Scotland and cross border placements). Current training does not reflect the level of work we are expected to carry out. Recognition of the role we do on a day to day basis in relation to our clients, managing every aspect of their lives if they do not have capacity, putting in and managing supports, managing finances and dealing Adults With Incapacity etc. as our cases are often people who do not have the capacity to make decisions for themselves and the Council have Guardianship. We therefore are the first point of contact for managing any issues. Our pay grade does not reflect our workload and responsibilities.”

SUPERVISION

77% of respondents say they receive regular supervision, usually by a team manager or senior practitioner and the most common frequency was between 4 weekly/monthly to every 6-8 weeks. In contrast, almost one quarter - 23% say they are not supervised regularly. Many said they had received supervision only 1-3 times over the past year. A few said they had received no supervision for a year.

“*“Should be 6 to 8 weeks but cancelled often by management due to work load pressures on them”*

“Twice at start of last year ! That's it ! Left to your own demise! Raised issues continual and nothing gets done!”

“My last supervision was about 4 months ago.”

CONCERNS ABOUT WORKLOAD

More than two thirds of respondents provided written comments about the management of their workload highlighting the importance of this issue.

A majority of respondents (60%) said their workload was manageable while also describing the intensity and pressures of work. A key theme was how workload pressures constantly fluctuated between manageable and unmanageable depending on factors beyond their control. Another was the high degree of 'self-management' expected, which often required working beyond their contracted hours.



"Although I ticked "quite manageable", it is an immense amount of work and I am very busy trying to get everything done on time."

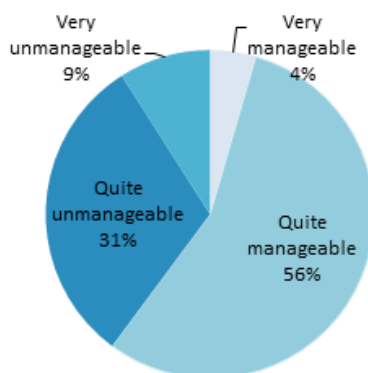
"At times this can all be manageable if things are slow moving but when you are allocated a lot of people at once due to new hospital admissions and your community cases require attention - this can be quite unmanageable and very stressful."

"Currently my workload is manageable however, I have at some stages held cases for up to (and sometimes over) 20 children."

"It was very stressful and unmanageable at times however has improved over the past few months. being on duty with an allocation is hard to manage."

In contrast almost 1 in 10 said their workload was 'very unmanageable', while 3 in 10 said it was 'quite unmanageable'.

How manageable is your workload?



The most common themes relating to the unmanageability of workloads are similar to those reported by UNISON's social worker members.^{3/4}

- Understaffed and overstretched teams
- High caseloads and more complex cases
- Lack of time to undertake assessments
- Large numbers of unallocated cases
- The pressures of combining duty rota with a caseload
- Insufficient time to spend on face-to-face work with individuals
- Amount of paperwork and lack of admin support

The intensity of workload pressures was acknowledged as an issue for the whole social work team along with an emphasis on team working and support to manage this. The constant turnover of qualified staff was frequently mentioned as a source of workload pressures.

“The workload for social workers and support workers, senior social workers and team leader in our team is too high across all workers. We work well as a team to try to manage this as best we can and as a support worker I have to say no to allocation of new work on a regular basis but there is still too much work for it to feel or be possible to fulfil what is requested in terms of completing records, plans, training, visits, referrals, applications for funding; joint working with other agencies; duty work rota; cover for colleagues' etc .”

For paraprofessional staff there is the additional stress of being asked to undertake responsibilities above and beyond their own role, and for which they do not feel sufficiently trained or supported, due to a lack of social workers. These have been detailed already but include:

- Being allocated complex, high tariff cases, which should be worked together with a qualified social worker.
- Involvement in child protection cases without proper training
- Having full responsibility for assessments
- Chairing meetings attended by professionals including headteachers and paediatricians
- Lone working with individuals who should be 2-to-1
- Working with individuals with additional needs such as children with autism, without any training or support or access to services.

“Some of my work involves working alongside allocated social workers but much of the work is solo”
 “Duty cover can be very overwhelming as there are numerous concerns and conflicting priorities to be investigated and recorded and limited support available from team leaders or colleagues”

Children and families social work example

“Children & Families SW is always unpredictable so you never know what is going to happen, my case load can be 20-25 some co worked with SW some I hold. I feel that due to shortage of SW nowadays we are expected to take on more responsibility and manages cases or fill the gaps until a SW is identified or the case becomes to complex and we are not qualified to hold it in our own right.”

Justice social work example

“My workload is very full and does not differ from a fully qualified Social Worker. Professionals meetings, report writing, high level/impact clients, appointeeships, mental health issues, jail visits, moving clients on an emergency, substance misuse, child protection, vulnerable adult protection. There are many more roles, situations and problem solving that I have to deal with on a daily basis.”

Team-specific issues

Many people commented on how supportive their managers were and the good relationships held with them. Others did not feel well supported.

“I would like to add though that my manager and team are very supportive. They are there on hand with help.”

“Lack of leadership and panic from managers who will allocate work without clear thought or direction. Their choice of priorities does not take consideration of our own priorities and level service to our own allocated cases.”

³ [Save from harm - UNISON Scotland survey of social work teams - UNISON Scotland \(unison-scotland.org\)](#)

⁴ [Keeping the promise: what's needed to deliver change - UNISON Scotland \(unison-scotland.org\)](#)

Some issues are local authority-specific:

“My workload is currently affected due to a lack of staff. We recently lost 7 members of the team who all joined [another council] for more money and Mon to Fri 9 to 5. My team work a flexible rota. 5 over 7 and between 8am and 9pm. We have been unable to retain staff for a number of years now. This is due to the hours the team works as there is no work life balance. Also we only get a rota for 6 to 8 weeks in advance which means we can't plan our lives. This has been raised over and over with Management who have buried their heads in the sand over this and will not acknowledge this is an issue.”

INCONSISTENCIES IN DUTIES AND PAY GRADES

- (1) **There is inconsistency in what paraprofessional job roles involve, and the pay grade, both within as well as between councils, even when the job title is the same.**

Key issues highlighted by paraprofessionals are:

- There can be substantial differences in roles and responsibilities of social work assistants and family support workers between different teams within social work, with the expectations of individual managers felt to be a factor.
- At an individual level, some workers are doing more complex, higher-level responsibilities while others may not.
- Inconsistencies in duties and grades were reported between different types of paraprofessional role, e.g. between SWAs and education-based pupil support workers, who are felt by some to have higher pay but lesser challenges and responsibilities. In one authority, justice officers are on different grades depending on whether they are based in youth justice or adult justice services.

“Family Support workers that we hand lower tariff cases to for universal support are a pay grade above Social Work Assistants. Most team managers fully recognise the need for a job sizing exercise but service management level and above have blocked this.” (social work assistant)

“As a SWA we are paid £7000 lower than our partners in family support as they are under the bracket education. However the work load and severity of cases are far less than what SWAs manage daily. ...I have seen 7 staff members leave with several going to family support for better pay, less work and less danger.” (social work assistant)

- (2) **There is a need for clarity about the duties and pay grades of paraprofessionals relative to qualified social workers, including newly qualified social workers.**

A clearer delineation is needed between the duties of qualified social workers and those of paraprofessional staff.

Many feel they are doing most of the duties of a qualified social worker, and much more than a newly qualified social worker. Comparisons were made with the rules in place for newly qualified social workers whose caseloads are limited to 10 during their first year of practice. In comparison, “... support assistants new in post have around 17-20 cases.”

“There are no clear boundaries of when a case becomes too complex for a family support worker and requires a social worker unless there is a legal order in place.” (family support worker)

“The job role I hold in comparison with a social worker has minimal differences. We have the same case loads and the same level of work is expected. The only difference is that a social worker will progress the adult protection once the IRD has been completed to say investigation required..” (social work assistant)

PARAPROFESSIONAL PAY

Participants said there is a need for a review of pay grades for paraprofessionals. They feel that current pay grades do not reflect their responsibilities, knowledge and experience.

- Pay is poor in comparison with very similar roles within education.
- Social work assistant pay is poor relative to family support workers.

LACK OF TRAINING & PROGRESSION PATHWAYS

Paraprofessionals reported a lack of training opportunities. Responses referenced having no training opportunities for as long as 5 years.

“There is a lack of training and support within the social work sector that allows practitioners to feel both adequate and valued within their posts.”

Many felt there was little encouragement or opportunities for career progression. The key issues raised were:

- Pathways are often not there for paraprofessionals to become qualified social workers while in post, with funding and support to enable study to be combined with work.

“...such a waste some of us have been doing the job for 20 years and can't progress without internal support.”

“I have dedicated my working career to [council] and would continue to do so if given the opportunity to do my S/W degree.”

“There was a recent email looking to support two council employees to undertake the S/W Degree, I was immediately interested but was unable to apply as it was open to Post Graduates only and although I have SVQ 4 and HNC this was not recognised, I have looked at undertaking the Degree privately but unfortunately financially this is not an option.”

- Lack of structured progression available within paraprofessional roles to recognise and reward advanced skills and experience.

“It would also be useful to have a senior support worker role and for the skills and role and career path of support work to be recognised rather than being seen as a 'trainee social worker'”
 “In many respects I am and have been doing a senior support worker role for many years but this title has not existed”.

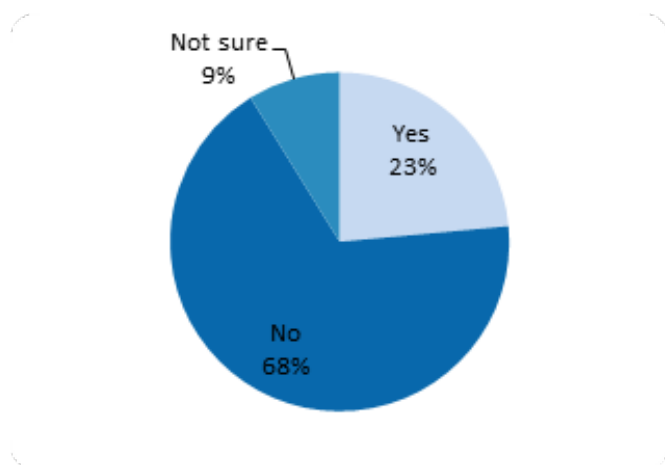
EXPERIENCES OF REGRADING

Almost a quarter of paraprofessionals responding said they had been involved in a regrading exercise in their current role. Of those who had:

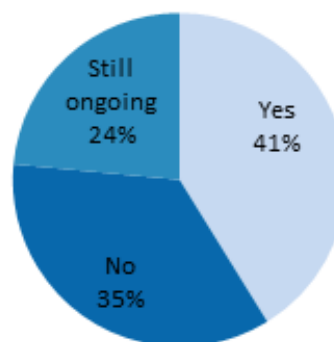
- 41% said the regrading had been successful – this relates to 9 local authorities.
- 24% said it was still ongoing.
- In just over one third of cases the regrading was unsuccessful.

Members said regrading exercises often took a long time, 2 years or even more with one uncompleted regrading exercise of 7 years duration reported.

Have you been involved in a regrading exercise?



If yes, please say if it was successful and the outcome



One comment about a successful regrading claim: *“After last grade evaluation that's when everything dropped on our laps to do!”*

BECOMING A REGULATED PROFESSION

Views about registration

The survey asked: “At the moment there is no requirement for paraprofessionals to register with the SSSC. Are you in favour of SSSC registration for social work paraprofessionals?” Opinion was divided, with over a third of respondents expressing uncertainty:

49% - Yes, in favour of registration

36% - Don't know/unsure

15% - No, opposed to registration

Advantages

Sixty-two paraprofessional members gave their views.

While a small number said they had been registered in a previous role, the majority had no personal experience of registration. The responses therefore give an idea of workforce **expectations** about the benefits of registration.

The most common perceived **BENEFITS** of registration were:

- **Recognition** of the value and professionalism of the role
- **Protection** for both the worker and for vulnerable individuals receiving care
- **Support** from SSSC for the training & professional development of the workforce
- **Standards** – ensuring consistency across the profession
- **Accountability** for upholding professional standards (relates to both standards and protection of persons receiving care)

Disadvantages

Seventy-two paraprofessional members gave their views. Seventeen (24%) of those who gave views said they couldn't think of any disadvantages.

Of those who reported disadvantages, the most common mentioned were:

- **Costs of registration** – concerns about individual workers rather than employers carrying the cost, particularly given the cost of living
- **Obligations on the workforce** to schedule training and achieve qualifications in their own time, and without any link to pay, particularly for those who are part-time, have other responsibilities, or are nearing the end of their working life. There are concerns that experience gained on the job will not be valued/recognised, and the onus instead placed on formal qualifications
- **Workload implications** – registration is seen as likely to result in even more responsibilities being placed on paraprofessionals
- **Punitive regime** – potential to be investigated (mentioned by several respondents with previous experience of being registered or having observed the experiences of their social work colleagues).

That social work paraprofessionals may feel vulnerable is understandable given the working environment. One in which they are being allocated responsibilities for which they do not feel well trained or supported.

“I think higher management would chuck a family support worker under the bus in a heartbeat if a complex case became dangerous and registration would be at risk as well as reputation and potential to move on to another role.”

“I feel that the council uses me as a 'cheap Social Worker' there is no protection in this role. I am constantly dealing with situations and a role that is above my pay scale and 'qualifications'.”

CONCLUSIONS

Social work assistants, family support workers and other paraprofessionals are the backbone of social work teams. The budgetary, staffing and workload pressures in statutory social work services are already well evidenced. These survey findings highlight the specific impact of these factors on the paraprofessional members of social work teams. While the survey included participants from just 21 of Scotland's 32 local authorities, the findings indicate a shift in workload from qualified social workers to paraprofessionals. They also highlight pay, training, and professional and career development concerns specific to this group of staff.

The experiences of the paraprofessionals who took part in this survey indicate the need for strong workplace organisation. In particular it is clear that the following are needed:

1. Collective regrading claims with the support of UNISON branches, building upon what has been effective in other local authorities.
2. Clarification of the role, remit and responsibilities of paraprofessionals in relation to those of qualified social workers, both within and between councils.
3. A review of pay grades to tackle inequities: (1) between different groups of paraprofessionals (2) between councils (3) in comparison to qualified social workers (4) and in comparison to similar roles within Education.
4. Fairness in terms of the expectations of paraprofessionals new in post, in comparison to expectations of newly qualified social workers.
5. Creation of career and pay progression pathways for paraprofessional staff including support to access a social work qualification and to advancement within a paraprofessional role.
6. Provision of ongoing training, professional development and support for paraprofessional social work staff.

⁵ [Setting the Bar: towards an indicative maximum caseload for Scotland's public sector social workers - Social Work Scotland](#)