

A National Social Work Agency



BARGAINING BRIEFING

Introduction

The proposals for a National Care Service (NCS) include the setting up of a National Social Work Agency (NSWA). The current thinking is that this will be created within government as a unit contained within the NCS.

It is proposed that the NSWA will support and invest in the social work profession by providing national leadership and oversight in the areas of professional development, education (pre- and -post qualifying), training, improvement (by establishing a Centre of Excellence) and scaling up good practice.

The NSWA would also be responsible for workforce planning, and the government proposes it should also have a remit for the pay, terms and conditions of social workers and other fieldwork staff such as para-professionals (Social Work Assistants, Family Support Workers, etc). These staff would therefore be removed from local government pay bargaining arrangements.

It is worth noting that the creation of a NSWA is not part of the NCS Bill and that some local government officers and Social Work senior managers argue that even if we do not have a NCS, we would still need a NSWA. It is important that UNISON considers the proposals and engages in the processes set in train by the Scottish Government.

NSWA Advisory Group

The first meeting of an Advisory Group to develop plans for the NSWA was held in January 2023. UNISON was invited to be part of this group and Stephen Smellie, Depute Convenor and Chair of our Social Work Issues Group attended the meeting. A small core group, consisting of the Office of the Chief Social Work Adviser (OCSWA), Social Work Scotland (SWS – the organisation of social work senior managers) and the Scottish Association of Social Work (SASW - the Scottish arm of the British Association of Social Work) has been meeting regularly since October and now meets weekly to take forward the programme.

The role of the Advisory Group is to advise the Chief Social Work Adviser on the structure, governance and policy for the NSWA. It is made up of civil servants and representatives from CoSLA, SWS, SASW, SSSC, Care Inspectorate and SW Education, with UNISON being the only union represented. It will meet quarterly.

KEY POINTS:

- It is proposed to create a **National Social Work Agency within government as part of the National Care Service.**
- Its remit would include **national workforce planning and the pay, terms and conditions of social workers and para-professional staff.**
- These social work staff would be removed from local government pay bargaining which means the NSWA is of importance to the entire local government sector.
- UNISON is represented on the Scottish Government's NSWA Advisory Group and its workstreams and representing members in these processes.



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Workstreams

Groups have been established to work on 5 different workstreams. There is also an Anti-racism Expert Reference Group. UNISON has 2 representatives on each of these, nominated by the Social Work Issues Group (SWIG). The remit of each is described below.

Governance and Structure - ensure appropriate governance and oversight is in place for the establishment of the National Social Work Agency (NSWA) and also for the role of social work within the National Care Service (NCS) and local Care Boards – ensuring appropriate professional oversight arrangements are in place both nationally and locally.

Workforce – develop national workforce planning, based on projected demand for services. Develop a national approach to supporting the social work workforce including consideration of options for a national pay structure for social workers, focusing initially on the local authority workforce.

Leadership and Culture – ensuring appropriate national leadership within the NSW/NCS to raise the profile of social work and to ensure appropriate support in place to develop leadership capacity at all levels across the sector. It will also include development of appropriate training and support to support leadership at all levels.

Education and Training - ensuring improvements in social work education both pre and post qualification and ensuring the development of a national approach to post qualifying training to support appropriately funded career pathways and routes into social work.

Quality and Improvement - ensuring that quality and improvement underpins the ongoing approach to social work practice. Driven by the development of a Centre for Excellence for Social Work.

Anti-racism Expert Reference Group - in addition to the Workstream groups this group will meet to consider how to ensure anti-racism is embedded into the structures, practice and governance of a NSW and how to ensure anti-racist practice in SW, recruitment and staff development. UNISON is represented on this group also.

Policy on a NSW

UNISON does not have policy on a NSW. There is a case that many of the proposed responsibilities of a NSW require some national coordination, cooperation, planning and resourcing.

However there is controversy around the idea of national pay and conditions for social workers and paraprofessionals and what this would mean. Would pay be levelled up or down? What does it mean for members of the workforce who are not included, such as Occupational Therapists and Admin staff? And for the 'Whole Team' approach? Will this be seen as divisive? What are the implications for Equal Pay? UNISON's Local Government Committee will consider the issues involved and develop policy. Meanwhile UNISON's representatives on the NSW Advisory Group and its Workstreams will report back regularly to SWIG and to the Local Government Committee.

Action for branches:

- Local government branches are asked to use this briefing to alert their social work members to these developments.
- Branches are asked to engage with their members outwith social work to consider the wider implications.

Additional reading

- **A National Social Work Agency is discussed in the Scottish Government Policy Memorandum accompanying the National Care Service Bill. [See paragraphs 73-91.](#)**
- **SPICe Spotlight [Social Work and the National Care Service](#)**



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