



UNISON Scotland response: SSSC Revised Social Work Assistant Role Profile

March 2026

Introduction

UNISON is the trade union for all social work staff. We represent front-line workers in all areas of social work, all grades of staff, and all roles including social care workers, social work paraprofessionals, occupational therapists and administrative staff as well as registered social workers.

In early 2025 the SSSC consulted on a proposal to expand the Register to certain groups including Social Work Assistants (an umbrella term for social work paraprofessionals). It asked for views on the [proposed role descriptors and the core tasks and functions](#) of the paraprofessional role along with the qualification requirements, proposed fee levels and Continuous Professional Learning requirements. UNISON's consultation response is [available here](#).

The SSSC has now invited comments on a revised version of its role profile for Social Work Assistants, focused solely on the role descriptor and core tasks and functions.

Revised SWA job role and function

We note the difficulty of developing a profile that captures a role which varies not only between local authorities and the voluntary sector, but between and within local authorities of varying sizes and between different practice settings. In addition, integration has had an impact on practical management arrangements for these roles.

We understand the immediate purpose of the job profile is to identify the group of workers who in future will require to become registered and that we are being asked to comment on this basis. As the qualifications part of the profile has been omitted, we assume we will hear separately from you about this, although the two are integral to each other.

Our view, after consultation with members, is that in general terms the revised profile captures all the main aspects of the role with no obvious omissions.

However we have some outstanding concerns:

1. **More clarity is needed about the limits of the paraprofessional role.** The changes made to the profile (both the preamble and bullet points) to acknowledge and reflect current practice, accentuate the need for clarity on this. The revised version acknowledges the greater degree of responsibility, complexity and autonomy of SWA roles in practice; that SWAs directly undertake tasks including the assessment of needs and risks, participate in decision-making forums, carry caseloads, coordinate and manage cases etc. However, *what* degree of complexity and level of risk can a worker who is not a QSW be responsible for assessing and managing within a caseload? What determines which cases can be carried by a SWA and at what point must a case be handed over to a QSW? Not only are the qualification requirements of the role key to this but

also the management and supervision arrangements. This clarity is needed to support social service employers to meet the standards in the SSSC Code of Practice (2016: 1.4).

2. **There is a need for greater clarity around the management and supervision of SWAs.** This is critical to the question of accountability both in terms of professional practice/standards and responsibility for statutory intervention, accountability for which distinguishes the registered social worker role (QSW).

The 2010 Guidance states, “Registered social workers are accountable for their own competence and that of those they line manage. Where they don’t have line management responsibility for others who may be involved [i.e. in tasks that are part of statutory interventions] accountability for competence and performance remains with the individual and their employer.” (2010:11).

It also states “It is for Chief Executives, elected members, Chief Social Work Officers and line managers to ensure that...only registered social workers are delegated accountability for the exercise of these particular (statutory) functions. This should be the case even where some tasks within the function may be carried out by other staff, the employer retains overall responsibility for the competence and performance of such staff” (2010:23).

The concern we conveyed in last year’s consultation is that with the introduction of registered professional status with a qualification requirement, SWAs will be regarded as registered and qualified workers and, as such, may be required to take on more aspects of the QSW role. In the current highly pressured social work environment, this will place them in an even more vulnerable position and now, additionally, being subject to a fitness to practice regime.

3. **The job profile is drawn so broadly that it will pull into scope Occupational Therapy Assistants**, including those with that job title and others with different job titles but who mostly perform OT related tasks. There are differing views as to how this should be managed, whether OTAs (the job title or specific responsibilities) should be excluded as their professional lead would be an Occupational Therapist who is not registered with the SSSC or whether they should be included as they are working in a social work context. The bullet points below about working under direct guidance and support of a social worker and having access to professional supervision should be considered. This should be further explored.

The specific comments below relate to these three points.

First bullet point

- ‘Always work under the direct guidance and support of a registered social worker and/or supervising manager.’ The revised job profile is vague on this. Who is eligible to be a supervising manager, if this is someone other than a registered social worker? This needs clarification as it matters greatly in the context of regulation. The common experience of SWA members is of distance between their day-to-day practice and access to a QSW, who may be a second or even third tier manager.
- We propose that this first bullet be reframed to read: “**has access (or alternatively, has a right) to professional supervision from a registered social worker**”. This change helps define who belongs (and doesn’t belong) to this group of staff and reflects the significance of supervision for professional practice and identity. It also reflects employers’ existing responsibilities and the standards they are required to meet under the SSSC Code of Practice (2016). The current regulatory framework sees professional/reflective supervision as essential to accountability, professional

standards, and service quality for individuals and families. While this has resource implications not least the workload burden on QSWs, it reflects existing requirements and expectations of employers (SSSC Code of Practice 2016: 2.2 and 3.5).

Second paragraph

- *“SWAs will directly undertake some tasks required in respect of statutory interventions in line with current national guidance. However, a registered social worker must retain accountability for final recommendations and decision making in respect of statutory intervention.”*
- We think it would be useful to reframe this in terms of the employers’ responsibility to allocate suitable workers to discharge their (employers’) duties. So for instance, **“Employers will allocate suitably qualified staff to undertake tasks in respect of statutory interventions and SWAs may be directed to do so, in line with current national guidance. However, a registered social worker must retain accountability for final recommendations and decision making in respect of statutory interventions.”**

Finally, in our consultation response last year, we proposed that arrangements be put in place to monitor and enforce the distinction between the SWA and QSW roles, either by the SSSC or the Care Inspectorate. We asked for this proposal to be considered and responded to but have not yet received this.

Stephen Smellie
Chair, Social Work Issues Group
UNISON Scotland
14 West Campbell Street
Glasgow G2 6RX

For further information contact:
Susan Galloway
Bargaining & Campaigns Team
UNISON Scotland
s.galloway@unison.co.uk