

SWU is proud to feature the winners of our 2026 Essay Competition

The 2026 SWU Assignment was marked by a Panel including:

Allison Hulmes - is a Welsh Romani social work academic, activist and co-founder of the Romani & Traveller Social Work Association and sits on the SWU Executive Committee.

Ann Marie Hayes - is a Registered social worker who is also qualified as a systemic psychotherapist and sits on the SWU Executive Committee.

Narinder Sidhu - is an experienced Social Worker with a strong clinical background spanning forensic mental health, CAMHS, brain injury rehabilitation, higher education, and adult social care.

The criteria: a 750 - 1000 word assignment with the following title:

"How can the social work profession push back against far-right narratives of division, and how can social workers co-build solidarity and hope across communities?"

Who could take part: Social Work Students undertaking an Undergraduate or Post Graduate Social Work Degree in the UK, Social Work Apprentices and students undertaking specialist pathway routes.

The prize: Four prizes of £500

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"How can the social work profession push back against far-right narratives of division, and how can social workers co-build solidarity and hope across communities?"

Mercy Oluremi Akinfolurin - University of Hertfordshire

Far-right narratives gain force when social anxiety is translated into blame. They name real pressures, such as poverty, housing shortages, insecure work, strained services, and rapid social change, but redirect anger towards people with less power: refugees, migrants, racialised communities, Muslims, disabled people, people on benefits and families in poverty. This is why social work cannot treat such narratives as ordinary political disagreement. They can legitimise suspicion, reduce empathy, and make it harder for people to seek help or be seen as full members of the community. Research links far-right ideology with xenophobia and welfare chauvinism, while identity-based populism often imagines an innocent in-group under threat from a dangerous out-group (Mieriga and Korojeva, 2015; Bos et al., 2020).

The profession's first response must be ethical clarity. Social Work England requires social workers to recognise diversity and challenge the impact of disadvantages and discrimination (Social Work England, 2024). BASW similarly locates social work within human rights, social justice, and professional integrity (BASW, 2021). These duties mean social workers should be fair, evidence-informed, and reflective, but not neutral when people are dehumanised. Pushing back begins in routine practice: the assessment that avoids deficit language, the case notes that records discrimination accurately, the supervision discussion that challenges bias, and the multi-agency meeting where stereotypes are questioned rather than politely ignored.

My placement learning in refugee resettlement made this practical. In ESOL and community support work, I saw exclusion happen quietly. A person could be made vulnerable by a form they could not understand, a bill they could not challenge, a housing repair they could not report, or a professional conversation they could not enter confidently. Supporting a refugee mother with limited English meant using plain language, checking understanding

without embarrassment, pacing the discussion, and remaining attentive to her child's safety. That taught me that solidarity is not only a slogan. It can begin with tone, patience, and adjustment, so that someone is not made to feel small while learning how to belong.

This also challenges the far-right image of refugees as passive burdens. Many people I met were rebuilding independence after trauma, displacement, and unfamiliar systems. Empowerment theory is useful because it frames practice as supporting people to gain greater control over their lives rather than doing things for them (Rappaport, 1987). Opening a bank account, registering with a GP, attending ESOL or understanding housing rights may seem ordinary, but these are routes into dignity, safety, and participation.

However, resistance must operate at more than the individual level. Thompson's personal, cultural, and structural model shows that oppression is reproduced through attitudes, shared meanings, and social arrangements (Thompson, 2016). Dominelli's anti-oppressive practice similarly reminds us that institutions can reproduce exclusion through routine decisions, eligibility rules, and professional language (Dominelli, 2002). Therefore, social workers must challenge prejudiced comments but also question the conditions that allow resentment to grow poverty, austerity, poor housing, insecure immigration status, and overstretched services. Anxiety about housing shortages should be heard, but redirected towards fair policy and adequate resources, not towards scapegoating migrants or minoritised groups.

Pushing back also requires skill. If social workers only shame people who have absorbed divisive ideas, they may deepen defensiveness. Person-centred practice offers empathy and listening, while anti-oppressive practice prevents empathy from becoming collusion with racism, misogyny, ableism, or xenophobia (Rogers, 1957; Dominelli, 2002). The task is to hear fear without endorsing hate. A social worker can acknowledge that people feel abandoned, then ask what would improve

everyone's life: decent housing, safer streets, accessible services, fair benefits advice, and spaces where neighbours meet across differences.

Co-building solidarity means replacing competition with connection. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory reminds us that people are shaped by families, services, schools, communities, and wider policy environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Social workers can strengthen these links through schools, ESOL classes, faith groups, food banks, refugee organisations, youth services, housing teams, and welfare advice. This is not an optional extra to casework. It is prevention. When people have social networks, local knowledge, and trusted relationships, they are less isolated and less available to narratives that tell them others are the enemy.

Trauma-informed practice also matters, provided it remains critical. People affected by displacement, racism, domestic abuse, or poverty may have good reasons to mistrust services. Trauma-informed approaches emphasise safety, trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural responsiveness (Sweeney et al., 2018; Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2022). In practice, this means using interpreters appropriately, avoiding unnecessary retelling of painful histories, explaining roles clearly, checking consent and protecting dignity. Yet hope is not built by avoiding difficult responsibilities. Social workers must still safeguard children and adults, challenge harmful behaviour, and use authority lawfully when needed.

The 2026 World Social Work Day theme of Harambee, understood as pulling together, captures the professional alternative to division. IFSW presents it as a call for unity, shared responsibility, dialogue, resilience and belonging in a divided world (IFSW, 2026). For SWU, this also connects with collective professional voice. Social workers should not only challenge exclusion one case at a time; they should use supervision, unions, campaigns, research, education, and public advocacy to defend rights and improve conditions that make division easier to sell.

Social workers push back by making the far-right story less convincing. They do this when they challenge dehumanising language, practise anti-oppressively, defend rights, name structural injustice, and create practical routes into belonging. Hope is

not a soft feeling here. It is professional action. It appears when a parent speaks confidently in a classroom, when a family understands its rights, when a child is safer, when neighbours meet across differences, and when communities learn that their struggle is not against one another. Far-right narratives ask, "Who should we fear?" Social work must help communities ask, "What can we build together?"

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"How can the social work profession push back against far-right narratives of division, and how can social workers co-build solidarity and hope across communities?"

Keleigh Smalley-Willows - University of Lincoln

The British Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (BASW, 2021) is clear: Social Workers have a duty to challenge discrimination and oppression, promote social justice, practice ethically and uphold human right. Pushing back against far-right narratives while co-building solidarity and hope sits within that duty requiring Social Workers to occupy a space that is both political and relational (Together Alliance, 2026). Far-right narratives are not distant concepts. They are in the news people read, the policies debated, the comments made at the school gate, offices or waiting rooms (Newth et al., 2025). In moments where differences of belief emerge, to say nothing is to act against the values of the profession. Social Work cannot be neutral in the face of injustice. Silence becomes complicity (Coconis, 2010; Dominelli, 2017).

Far-right narratives typically target groups perceived by them as "other," and when public systems come under strain such as pressures on the NHS, housing shortage, and insecure labour markets these narratives redirect frustration toward those already marginalised (Collins, 2023). Traction is gained in contexts of perceived scarcity, where insecurity is reframed in ways that blame groups rather than wider societal structures. Reflecting an ideological process of othering, in which these groups are constructed as fundamentally different from and often inferior to a dominant majority (Krueger et al., 2022). Difference is not recognised but produced and politicised. By positioning these groups as outsiders or threats attention is drawn away from structural inequality and political decision-making. In this way othering legitimises exclusion while maintaining existing power relations making collective understanding and solidarity more difficult (Maloney et al., 1994).

In periods of societal uncertainty, these explanations appear convincing. They offer simple answers and a sense of order, channelling feelings of frustration or insecurity towards groups or perceived threats. This



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sense of clarity
however masks
deeper structural issues redirecting attention away from broader political and economic factors reinforcing divide. Reflecting Gramsci's (1971) idea of cultural hegemony, where ideas that benefit those in power become accepted as the norm by encouraging division towards those marginalised. Social Work is positioned within these tensions and to accept them, even implicitly risks undermining the professions commitment to anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 2017; BASW, 2021).

Pushing back against these narratives requires more than rejection, it involves challenging them in ways that avoid provoking defensive reaction or shutting down opportunities for conversation. This aligns with Freire's (1970) idea of praxis, where reflection and action are inseparable. In practice, this may involve challenging assumptions in conversation, helping others see the bigger picture behind perceived problems and actively refusing to describe people and communities as lacking or broken. For Social Workers, this makes it harder to oppose far-right ideology. If one only tries to challenge or correct unfair comments these risks overlooking the conditions that oppress marginalised communities and could make individuals feel attacked and defensive (Carroll, 2025). A more effective approach involves holding two positions at once, acknowledging experiences of uncertainty and loss, while refusing to validate explanations that place blame on marginalised communities, this creates space to reframe concerns as structural inequality opposed to blame (Hoggett et al., 2013).

Building solidarity requires moving from opposition to creation (Malherbe, 2025). While challenging harmful narratives is necessary, this does not generate alternative ways of relating. Utilising a framework such as contact theory (Allport, 1954), which suggests that interactions between groups can reduce division, but

only under conditions such as shared goals, equal status, and institutional support. These shared experiences can provide a basis for connection without erasing difference. Community work that brings together groups who might be positioned in opposition can begin to unsettle narratives of division. However, without attention to power imbalance these opportunities may reinforce existing tension (Gilchrist, 2019). Solidarity is therefore not an outcome of diversity, but something that needs active facilitation.

The role of Social Work is not to simply encourage contact, but to shape the conditions in which it takes place, creating spaces for dialogue and ensuring participation is not dominated by more powerful voices. Social Workers do not create solidarity but support the conditions in which it can emerge. Beresford and Carr (2012) argue that genuine co-production of safe spaces for marginalised communities involves redistributing power, this however sits within wider societal and organisational demands and time pressures, as a result engagement can become tokenistic through the systems in which practice takes place. Recognising these limitations is part of resisting far-right narrative.

Hope is less about optimism and more about persistence, Freire (1970) argues that hope is a political act embedded in the refusal to accept the present conditions as fixed, sustained through experiences of connection and fairness including listening, recognising need and validating lived experience, while these moments may appear small, they are times in which dominant narrative can be challenged. Thompson (2016) argues that Social Work must focus on the structural causes of harm rather than blaming individuals for their problems. To bring hope is not to simply restate the values of Social Work, but to embody them within the tension of practice. Hope may be sustained not as a certainty, but as an ongoing commitment to act within and against the systems that shape Social Work (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2014).

What remains unresolved is the boundary between professional responsibility and political engagement. To what extent should Social Workers position themselves within explicitly political spaces embedded in everyday practice? The challenge is less about whether far-right narratives can be

challenged, whether hope and solidarity can be embedded in society, but more about whether practitioners are willing to do so. Solidarity is not without consequence. It requires reflexion, reflective action, and a willingness to navigate discomfort and risk. It is through this willingness that Social Work pushes back against narrative of division and supports co-production of solidarity and hope within communities. Silence becomes complicity and it is in the decision to speak, act and stand alongside others that Social Work resists division, builds solidarity and sustains hope.

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"How can the social work profession push back against far-right narratives of division, and how can social workers co-build solidarity and hope across communities?"

Laura Barr - Queen's University Belfast

Across the UK and Northern Ireland, far-right rhetoric, anti-immigration discourse, online radicalisation, and racial hostility have contributed to wider social division and extremist mobilisation (Andell, 2025; White et al., 2024). This presents challenges for social work practice, particularly regarding safeguarding, risk management, and practitioner safety. Such narratives take advantage of growing fears around economic insecurity and political distrust, often scapegoating migrants, ethnic minorities, asylum seekers, and other marginalised communities for wider structural failures (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018). Given that social work as a profession is keenly rooted in anti-oppressive practice and the promotion of human rights, practitioners must act in solidarity as advocates against oppression and facilitators of hope within divided communities.

Far-right ideologies rely on a "us versus them" narrative, portraying minority communities as threats to social identity, security, and economic stability (Oshri et al., 2024). According to Eatwell and Goodwin



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(2018), backing for populist movements is often driven by feelings of cultural insecurity, loss of identity, and declining trust in established institutions. The recent race riots in Ballymena reflect these tensions, as migrant communities were targeted due to fear around housing and community safety. In Northern Ireland, where sectarian divisions continue to shape social relations, these dynamics are particularly significant. Despite the Belfast Agreement (1998) creating pathways for peace, tensions remain around race, migration, and identity. Hope Not Hate (2026) documents growing far-right mobilisation across the UK, through online misinformation and anti-migrant rhetoric. Social workers, therefore, operate in contexts where prejudice can become normalised unless actively challenged.

Dominelli (2017) argues that anti-oppressive social work requires critical engagement with power, inequality, and structural discrimination. Social workers cannot be passive and neutral when encountering racism or exclusion, as silence in itself

can reinforce oppression. Practitioners must advocate for inclusive policies, challenge misinformation, and strengthen marginalised voices. UK political and media narratives often stigmatise disadvantaged groups while hiding structural inequalities (Jones, 2011). Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) further argue that societies with higher levels of inequality have greater distrust, hostility, and division. Social workers often see the impact of this firsthand through poverty, deprivation, and social exclusion.

In Northern Ireland, trauma-informed practice is essential given that intergenerational trauma linked to sectarian conflict continues to shape community identities and fears (Downes et al., 2013). Trauma-informed systems recognise how unresolved fear, instability, and exclusion affect behaviour and relationships (Bloom and Farragher, 2013). Whilst prejudice may stem from such insecurities or fears, this does not excuse discrimination. Rather, it enables critical and compassionate responses grounded in anti-racist and anti-oppressive values, as social workers must balance empathy with accountability.

If division is shaped by fear and isolation, solidarity is built through relationships, participation, and shared humanity (Freire, 1970). Relationship-based practice approaches should be central to challenging stereotypes and reducing prejudice (Ruch et al., 2018). Community development approaches are also vital, as social workers must move beyond individual interventions to address wider structural inequalities and collective action (Ferguson, 2008). Community-based social work creates cooperation on shared concerns such as poverty, housing, mental health, youth provision, and unemployment (Pawar, 2020). This can be seen in the historical cross-community initiatives in Northern Ireland, which supported peacebuilding and reconciliation (Knox, 2011). By encouraging open discussion, participation, and collaborative problem-solving, social workers can help communities move beyond division towards shared goals and mutual support (Dominelli, 2010). Allport's (1954) contact theory suggests that meaningful interaction reduces prejudice when grounded in equality and cooperation. Social workers are positioned well within communities to facilitate such engagement through schools, family support, and community organisations. Hope is not passive optimism but stems from a practice of collective empowerment. Hope is essential to liberation and transformation within

communities, and is created when communities recognise their strengths, challenge injustice, and participate in collective change (Freire, 1970).

Modern far-right narratives operate within digital environments, with social media platforms allowing misinformation, conspiracy theories, and hate speech to spread rapidly, particularly among young people experiencing isolation and uncertainty (Kakavand, 2024). Reports from Ofcom (2025) highlight these concerns around online radicalisation and extremist content, consistent with broader research showing how digital platforms can promote extremist network-building and ideological exposure (Conway, 2017). Consequently, digital literacy must become part of social work practice, as practitioners must support service users in critically evaluating online information, recognising harmful narratives, and engaging safely in digital spaces. This aligns with calls for 'digital social work' approaches that integrate technology into ethical and anti-oppressive practice (Mishna et al., 2012). However, we must be mindful that technology itself can reinforce structural inequality through biased systems and digital exclusion, as algorithms and search engines can reproduce racial and social inequalities online (Eubanks, 2018; Noble, 2018). Social workers, therefore, require critical awareness of both online extremism and how wider systems can marginalise vulnerable communities.

Far-right narratives cannot be challenged solely through interpersonal interventions, as structural advocacy is equally essential (Dominelli, 2018; Lavalette, 2011). Practitioners must advocate for policies that reduce poverty, improve housing, strengthen welfare systems, and promote equality, as inequality can aggravate social division (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). Without addressing structural injustice, the conditions which create division remain intact. Moral courage enables practitioners to challenge oppressive systems even within difficult organisations and political contexts (Fenton, 2016). Such courage is vital in defending professional ethical commitments to human dignity and social justice.

To conclude, far-right mobilisation, both online and offline, presents a complex challenge to the ethical foundations of social work practice. This analysis demonstrates that division is not only ideological but structurally produced through inequality, exclusion, and historical trauma. Social workers occupy a critical position in responding to these dynamics, and

effective practice requires a multi-level approach to address structural injustice, engage in trauma-informed and relationship-based practice, support digital literacy, and challenge discriminatory narratives. While interpersonal practice remains essential, it is insufficient without a broader structural advocacy and political awareness. Ultimately, through critical analysis, ethical commitment, and collective action, practitioners can actively resist division while co-creating solidarity, resilience, and hope across communities.

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"How can the social work profession push back against far-right narratives of division, and how can social workers co-build solidarity and hope across communities?"

Judith Nkwopara - Cardiff University



Far-right political ideology is characterized by exclusionary nationalism, anti-immigration sentiment, and the belief that certain groups threaten national identity and social cohesion (Jones et al., 2017). Within the United Kingdom, far-right narratives increasingly shape public discourse around migration, race, welfare and belonging, often portraying migrants, racialized communities and other marginalized groups as threats to society (Jones et al., 2017). Recent anti-migrant protests demonstrate how such narratives fuel exclusion and social tension. As these narratives influence policy, institutional practice and lived experience, social work occupies a critical ethical role. Grounded in human rights, social justice and anti-oppressive practice, the profession is well placed to challenge harmful narratives while co-building solidarity and hope across communities (Banks, 2020).

Far-right narratives are often constructed through processes of "othering," where certain groups are portrayed as threats to society. From a social constructionist perspective, which views social realities as shaped through language, culture and social interaction, such narratives influence understandings of belonging and exclusion (Burr, 2015). Reinforced through media, politics and institutions, they contribute to stigma and marginalization. Contemporary anti-migrant rhetoric demonstrates how public anxieties can be redirected towards vulnerable groups.

These narratives are reflected in policy approaches such as deterrence-based asylum systems and elements of the hostile environment, which prioritize immigration control over inclusion (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). Such approaches can restrict access to housing, healthcare and education while fostering fear, uncertainty and mistrust of statutory services.

As someone with lived experience of seeking asylum, I understand how these dynamics operate in practice.

Beyond structural barriers, exclusion can involve misinformation, mistrust of institutions, restricted participation, and ongoing negotiations of dignity and belonging. Lived experience offers valuable knowledge that can illuminate the gap between policy intentions and everyday realities and reinforces the importance of reflexive social work practice (Fook, 2022).

In contrast to some UK-wide immigration approaches, Wales has articulated a more inclusive vision through its Nation of Sanctuary commitment (Welsh Government, 2019). This is reinforced by the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which emphasize participation, voice, wellbeing and social justice. The Code of Professional Practice for Social Care Workers requires practitioners to uphold dignity, rights and anti-discriminatory practice (Social Care Wales, 2026). Despite tensions with restrictive immigration systems, Wales offers a useful policy counter-narrative to exclusion.

The implications for social work practice are significant. Social workers must navigate systems influenced by exclusionary narratives while maintaining commitments to human rights and social justice. This requires critical reflexivity to recognize how dominant narratives may shape professional judgement, organizational cultures and service responses (Fook, 2022). Social workers can play an important role in challenging far-right narratives and promoting more inclusive communities.

Social workers can challenge far-right narratives through the dissemination of accurate information. Misinformation surrounding migration, welfare and asylum often fuel public anxiety and reinforces stereotypes. By promoting evidence-based understanding, social workers can challenge misconceptions and support informed public discourse.

Social workers can also advocate for equitable access

to services, challenge discriminatory assumptions, and amplify lived experience voices. This helps shift people from passive subjects of policy discussion to active contributors who challenge dominant narratives.

Social work also has a collective role in co-building solidarity. More than tolerance, solidarity involves shared responsibility and collective action against exclusion. Co-production and community-based initiatives can foster inclusion, dialogue and trust by shifting practice towards shared power (Beresford, 2016). Meaningful co-production can strengthen empowerment, social connectedness and inclusion when lived experience is genuinely valued rather than tokenised (Beresford, 2016).

Intergroup contact theory also offers insight into reducing division. Allport (1954) argued that meaningful engagement between groups can reduce prejudice when based on equal participation, shared goals and cooperation. However, contact alone may not reduce prejudice where power imbalances or hostile environments persist. More recent evidence suggests that sustained structured contact can positively influence attitudes across difference (Mousa, 2020). Social workers can apply this theory through community dialogue, co-produced projects and shared activities that promote cooperation and understanding.

Educational access initiatives can also foster belonging, empowerment and social participation, enabling people affected by exclusion to contribute meaningfully within communities (Beresford, 2016).

Hope is equally important. Freire (1970) conceptualised hope as active, collective and rooted in transformation. For individuals experiencing exclusion, hope may emerge through accurate information, participation, trusting relationships and opportunities for meaningful contribution. Social workers can nurture hope through trauma-informed, culturally responsive and relationship-based practice.

Everyday social work practice matters here. Person-centred and co-produced approaches that prioritise listening, participation and shared decision-making can challenge paternalistic responses and model the inclusive values that divisive narratives seek to undermine (Beresford, 2016). Even within statutory settings, relational practice can become a form of resistance.

Professional solidarity also matters. Defined as a collective commitment to shared ethical values and social justice, it extends beyond individual practice to collective advocacy against policies and practices that harm marginalised communities. Social workers may therefore act not only as practitioners, but as collective voices defending public services, ethical practice and social justice.

However, this role is not without limitations. Restrictive immigration systems, limited resources and organisational pressures may constrain opportunities for advocacy and community engagement. Ethical tensions may arise between statutory responsibilities and challenging unjust systems, reflecting the enduring care-versus-control dilemma within social work.

There is also a risk that social workers may unintentionally reproduce the narratives they seek to challenge. Yet these constraints should not result in passivity. Through advocacy, partnership working and ethical challenge, practitioners can work creatively at the margins. Courageous practice requires critical consciousness, collective commitment and relational courage.

As a Black student social worker, race, belonging and exclusion are not abstract concepts but lived realities. This reinforces the importance of anti-racist social work as central to ethical practice.

In conclusion, far-right narratives of division threaten social cohesion, wellbeing and justice. Grounded in anti-oppressive and rights-based principles, social work has a vital role in challenging harmful narratives while co-building solidarity and hope. Through critical reflexivity, advocacy and relationship-based practice, social workers can help create more inclusive communities and challenge the structures that sustain exclusion.

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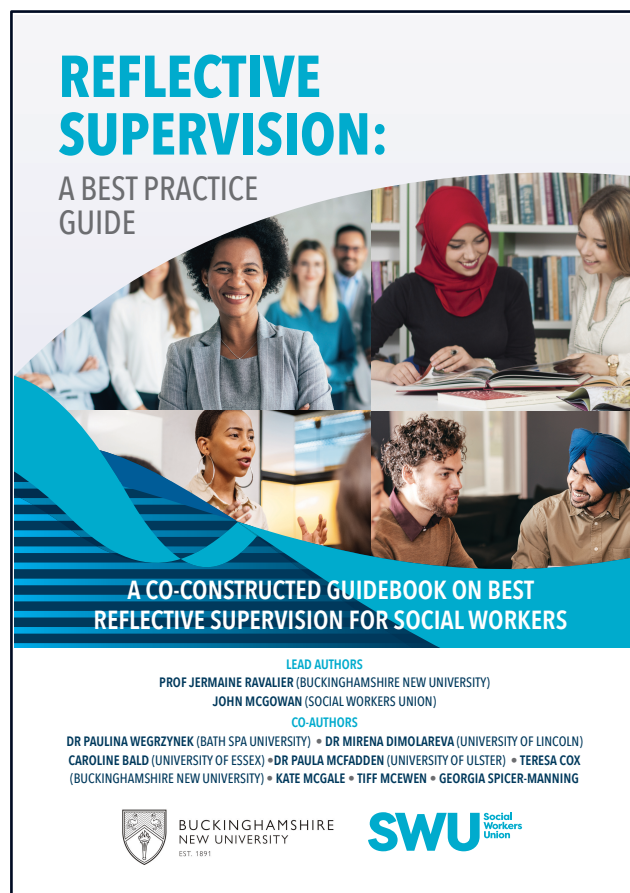
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