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# **Managing Change in Social Work and Social Care**

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**A Guide for Leaders**



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## Introduction

Change has become a defining characteristic of contemporary social work and social care practice. From regulatory reforms and technological innovations to evolving service user needs and shifting organizational structures, practitioners and managers face unprecedented demands for adaptation. This guide presents a comprehensive framework for managing change in social work and social care settings, drawing on established change management theory while addressing the unique challenges and ethical considerations inherent to these fields. Through examination of theoretical foundations, practical strategies and sector-specific considerations, this guide equips leaders with insightful approaches to managing organizational change while maintaining person-centred, trauma-informed practice that prioritizes service user wellbeing and staff resilience.

Social work and social care organizations operate within an increasingly complex and rapidly evolving landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated transformations that were already underway, including the adoption of digital technologies, the reorganization of service delivery models, and heightened awareness of systemic inequalities (Keuka College, 2023). Simultaneously, these sectors face persistent challenges including workforce shortages, rising demand for services, funding constraints and growing complexity in service user needs (Agents of Change, 2024).

The capacity to manage change effectively is no longer simply advantageous – it has become essential for organizational survival and service quality. Research indicates that approximately 70% of organizational change initiatives fail to achieve their intended objectives, often due to inadequate attention to the human dimensions of change (Barrow and Annamaraju, 2022; Phillips and Klein, 2023). In social work and social care contexts, where the stakes involve vulnerable individuals' wellbeing and safety, the consequences of poorly managed change are particularly acute.

Despite the prevalence of change in these sectors, the literature on change management has been dominated by business and healthcare perspectives, with limited attention to the distinct challenges facing social work and social care organizations. These settings present unique considerations: service users may be especially vulnerable to disruptions in care continuity; staff often work with trauma-exposed people while managing their own occupational pressures and potential stress; and the values-based nature of practice demands that change processes align with ethical principles of social justice, dignity and empowerment (Foster and Goddard, 2020; Knight, 2015).

This guide addresses this gap by presenting a comprehensive framework for change management tailored specifically to social work and social care contexts. Drawing on recent theoretical developments, empirical research, and sector-specific insights, it



offers leaders practical guidance for managing change successfully while upholding the core values of their professions.

## Theoretical foundations of change management

### ***Dominant change management models***

Contemporary change management theory draws from multiple disciplinary traditions, including organizational psychology, sociology and management studies. Kotter's (2012) eight-step model remains one of the most widely recognized frameworks, emphasizing the importance of creating urgency, building coalitions, developing vision and sustaining momentum throughout the change process. This diagnostic approach assumes that change can be planned, controlled and implemented through structured interventions.

However, recent scholarship has challenged the adequacy of purely diagnostic approaches, particularly in complex, people-centred organizations. Hastings and Schwarz (2022) contrast diagnostic change management (characterized by top-down planning and implementation) with dialogic approaches (emphasizing emergent, participatory processes in line with the emphasis on co-production). Their systematic review of healthcare transformation found that dialogic approaches achieved success rates as high as four in five attempts, compared to only one in three for diagnostic approaches. This finding has significant implications for social work and social care settings, where collaborative practice and service user participation are foundational values (Hastings and Schwarz, 2025).

## Change management in healthcare and human services

The healthcare literature provides valuable insights applicable to social work and social care. Silvola and Restelli's (2024) conceptual framework for change management in healthcare services redesign emphasizes the need to understand healthcare organizations as complex systems, where linear cause-and-effect relationships cannot be assumed. Similarly, research on organizational readiness for change highlights multiple factors that influence implementation success, including leadership engagement, resource availability, organizational culture and staff perceptions of change appropriateness (Geerligs et al., 2021; Peracca et al., 2023).

However, social work and social care settings have distinctive characteristics that warrant adapted approaches. Unlike many healthcare environments focused primarily on medical interventions, social work organizations operate at the intersection of multiple systems – legal, educational, housing, mental health and, of course, ethical – requiring coordination across boundaries (MyHomeLife, 2014). Additionally, social work's explicit commitment to social justice and structural change



creates potential tensions when organizational changes conflict with these values (Foster and Goddard, 2020) – for example, when the adoption of risk-averse approaches stands in the way of dignity.

## Implementation science perspectives

Implementation science offers frameworks for understanding how evidence-based practices become embedded in organizational routines. This literature emphasizes the importance of considering multiple levels of influence – individual practitioner, team, organization and broader system – and attending to contextual factors that facilitate or hinder adoption (Damschroder et al., 2022). For social work and social care, implementation science highlights the need to address not only technical aspects of change (new protocols, technologies or structures) but also challenges of adaptation that require shifts in values, beliefs and professional identity.

## Understanding the social work and social care context

### ***Unique characteristics and challenges***

Social work and social care organizations share several distinctive features that shape their approach to change management:

- ***Values-based practice:*** Both professions are grounded in explicit ethical frameworks emphasizing human dignity, social justice and empowerment. Any change initiative must be evaluated not only for its efficiency or effectiveness but also for its alignment with these core values. This creates the possibility of legitimate resistance when proposed changes conflict with professional ethics (Foster and Goddard, 2020; Sahay and Goldthwaite, 2024).
- ***Relationship-centred work:*** Practice in both fields relies fundamentally on therapeutic relationships and trust-based engagement with service users. Changes that disrupt established relationships or undermine continuity of care may have profound negative consequences, necessitating careful attention to maintaining relational integrity throughout transitions (MyHomeLife, 2014; Knight, 2015).
- ***Vulnerable people*** Service users in social work and social care settings often experience multiple disadvantages, including poverty, trauma, disability, mental health challenges and social marginalization. These individuals may be particularly sensitive to changes in routine, staff or service structures. A trauma-informed approach recognizes that change itself can be retraumatizing and requires careful planning to ensure safety and predictability (Knight, 2015; Raja et al., 2020).



- *Complex professional autonomy:* Both social workers and social care practitioners exercise considerable professional judgement in their work. While this autonomy is essential for responsive, individualized practice, it can also create challenges for standardization initiatives. Change management must balance the need for consistency with the necessity for professional discretion (Antwi and Kale, 2014).
- *Resource constraints:* Chronic underfunding affects many social work and social care organizations, limiting capacity for change implementation. Staff may be asked to adopt new practices without adequate training time, technological infrastructure or additional personnel to manage the transition (Skills for Care, 2023).

## Sector-specific change drivers

Contemporary social work and social care face several major change drivers:

- *Digital transformation:* The rapid adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs) represents one of the most significant changes in recent years. Virtual appointments, electronic case management systems and digital communication platforms have become standard, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic (Keuka College, 2023; Agents of Change, 2024) and now, of course, we have the additional changes brought in by artificial intelligence. While these technologies offer benefits, including improved access and efficiency, they also present challenges related to digital literacy, privacy and the maintenance of therapeutic relationships.
- *Demographic shifts:* Ageing populations in many countries create growing demand for social care services and require workforce adaptation to specialized gerontological practice (Keuka College, 2023). Simultaneously, increased recognition of diverse family structures, gender identities and cultural backgrounds necessitates culturally competent, anti-discriminatory practice approaches.
- *Policy and regulatory changes:* Evolving legislation, inspection frameworks, and quality standards require ongoing organizational adaptation. These externally imposed changes may be particularly challenging when timelines are compressed or when regulations conflict with professional judgement.
- *Evidence-based practice:* Growing emphasis on demonstrating outcomes and implementing evidence-based interventions requires changes in practice approaches, documentation and methods of evaluation. Balancing fidelity to evidence-based models with the flexibility needed for individualized practice presents ongoing tensions.
- *Workforce challenges:* Staff recruitment and retention difficulties create instability that compounds the challenges of implementing change. High turnover disrupts



institutional knowledge, places additional pressures on remaining staff and complicates training efforts (Agents of Change, 2024; Skills for Care, 2023).

## Core principles for change management in social work and social care

Drawing on the theoretical foundations and context factors outlined above, the following six core principles should guide change management in social work and social care settings:

### 1. *Person-centredness throughout the change process*

Person-centred approaches that prioritize individual dignity, choice and self-determination are foundational to both social work and social care practice (MyHomeLife, 2014; Raja et al., 2020). This principle extends beyond direct practice to encompass change management itself. Specifically:

- *Service user involvement:* Where feasible, involve service users in change planning and implementation. Their lived experience expertise provides invaluable insights into how proposed changes may affect care experiences and outcomes.
- *Minimal disruption to care:* Design change implementation to maintain continuity of relationships and routines wherever possible. Schedule transitions during periods of relative stability rather than crisis.
- *Communication with service users and families:* Provide clear, accessible information about changes, their rationale and expected impacts. Create opportunities for questions and concerns to be addressed.

### 2. *Trauma-informed approaches*

Given the high prevalence of trauma among service users in social work and social care settings, change processes must be trauma informed (Knight, 2015; Raja et al., 2020). Key considerations include:

- *Safety and predictability:* Establish clear timelines, expectations and support structures. Reduce uncertainty wherever possible.
- *Choice and control:* Provide options and respect service user preferences throughout the change process.
- *Trustworthiness and transparency:* Communicate honestly about both the benefits and challenges of proposed changes. Acknowledge limitations and uncertainties.



- *Recognition of staff trauma:* Social work and social care practitioners frequently experience vicarious trauma and occupational stress. Change initiatives can exacerbate these challenges. Provide adequate support, supervision, and self-care resources for staff navigating change (Knight, 2015).

### **3. Participatory and dialogic engagement**

Research demonstrates that dialogic, participatory approaches to change achieve substantially higher success rates than top-down diagnostic models (Hastings and Schwarz, 2025). In social work and social care contexts, participation aligns with professional values of partnership and empowerment. Effective participation requires:

- *Genuine influence:* Ensure that staff input meaningfully shapes decisions, not merely serves to rubber-stamp predetermined conclusions. Sahay and Goldthwaite's (2024) research warns that superficial participation can increase resistance when staff perceive their involvement as tokenistic.
- *Diverse representation:* Include voices from across hierarchical levels, professional disciplines, and demographic backgrounds. Frontline practitioners often possess crucial insights that may not be visible to senior management.
- *Safe spaces for dissent:* Create forums where concerns and critiques can be expressed without fear of reprisal. As Foster and Goddard (2020) argue, resistance to change may reflect important ethical concerns that warrant serious consideration.
- *Iterative refinement:* Build in mechanisms for ongoing feedback and adjustment as implementation proceeds. Acknowledge that initial plans may require modification based on emerging challenges and insights.

### **4. Cultural competence and anti-discriminatory practice**

Change initiatives can inadvertently perpetuate or exacerbate inequalities if not carefully designed with attention to power, privilege and structural oppression (Agents of Change, 2024). This requires:

- *Equality impact assessment:* Systematically examine how proposed changes may differentially affect service users and staff from marginalized communities.
- *Culturally adapted implementation:* Recognize that 'one size fits all' approaches may not work across diverse cultural contexts. Allow for flexibility in how changes are operationalized.
- *Addressing systemic barriers:* Use change processes as opportunities to dismantle rather than reinforce organizational barriers related to racism, disablism, ageism and other forms of discrimination.

### **5. Evidence-informed practice**



Whilst respecting professional autonomy and context-based variations, change initiatives should draw on the best available evidence regarding effective practices (Skills for Care, 2023). This includes:

- *Systematic literature review*: Examine research evidence regarding proposed changes, including effectiveness studies, implementation research and relevant theoretical frameworks.
- *Local data utilization*: Collect and analyse organizational data to identify needs, establish baselines and monitor implementation progress.
- *Practice wisdom integration*: Recognize practitioners' accumulated knowledge and experience as a valuable evidence source. Create mechanisms for capturing and incorporating practice wisdom into change planning.

## **6. Sustainability and embedding**

Research consistently finds that initial enthusiasm for change often wanes without deliberate efforts to embed new practices into organizational routines (Kotter, 2012; Phillips and Klein, 2023). Sustainability requires:

- *Systems alignment*: Ensure that policies, procedures, supervision structures, and performance management systems support rather than undermine new practices.
- *Ongoing training and support*: Provide refresher training, coaching, and resources beyond the initial implementation phase.
- *Monitoring and continuous improvement*: Establish feedback loops to identify challenges and refine approaches over time.
- *Leadership modelling*: Leaders must consistently embody and reinforce new practices to signal their importance and legitimacy.

## **A comprehensive framework for change management**

Building on these principles, we propose an eight-phase framework adapted from Kotter's (2012) model but enhanced with insights from dialogic change theory, implementation science and considerations specific to social work and social care.

### **Phase 1: Establish context and need**

*Activities:*

- Conduct comprehensive needs assessment drawing on multiple data sources: service user feedback, staff input, outcome data, regulatory requirements and environmental scanning



- Analyse the drivers of change: Are changes internally initiated (e.g., quality improvement) or externally imposed (e.g., regulatory compliance)?
- Examine alignment with organizational vision, values and strategic priorities
- Assess readiness for change at individual, team and organizational levels using validated tools (Geerligs et al., 2021)

*Key considerations for social work and social care:*

- Ensure that the change rationale focuses on service user benefits rather than solely organizational efficiency
- Consider timing in relation to other organizational pressures and service users' current level of stability
- Evaluate equality implications: Who stands to benefit? Who might be adversely affected?

**Phase 2: Build a guiding coalition**

*Activities:*

- Assemble a diverse implementation team including:
  - Senior leadership with decision-making authority and resources
  - Frontline practitioners with detailed knowledge of current practices
  - Service user representatives (where appropriate and feasible)
  - Representatives from key stakeholder groups (e.g., families, partner organizations)
  - Change management expertise
- Clarify roles, responsibilities and decision-making authority
- Provide the coalition with training in change management principles

*Key considerations for social work social care:*

- Ensure representation across professional disciplines, seniority levels and demographic diversity
- Consider power dynamics within the coalition and create structures for ensuring less powerful voices are heard
- For service user involvement, provide support, compensation and accessible formats for participation



### ***Phase 3: Develop a shared vision***

*Activities:*

- Articulate a compelling vision of the desired future state that:
  - Is grounded in organizational vision and values
  - Clearly describes benefits for service users, staff and the organization
  - Is aspirational but also achievable
  - Is memorable and easily communicated
- Translate the vision into concrete, measurable objectives
- Identify key success indicators

*Key considerations for social work and social care:*

- Ground the vision in professional values: dignity, empowerment, social justice
- Explicitly address how change will improve service user outcomes and experiences
- Acknowledge potential challenges and limitations honestly
- Ensure vision reflects diverse stakeholder perspectives, not only leadership's

### ***Phase 4: Communicate for understanding and buy-in***

*Activities:*

- Develop a multi-channel communication strategy utilizing:
  - Team meetings and forums for dialogue
  - Written materials (emails, newsletters, updates)
  - Visual tools (infographics, videos, demonstrations)
  - One-to-one conversations with key stakeholders
- Tailor messages for different audiences (service users, families, staff external partners)
- Create opportunities for questions, concerns and feedback
- Address resistance constructively (see Section on Understanding and addressing resistance)

*Key considerations for social work and social care:*

- Use accessible, jargon-free language



- Provide translated materials and alternative formats as needed
- Recognize that people need to hear messages multiple times and through multiple channels
- Be transparent about the challenges and limitations, not only the benefits
- Frame communication as a dialogue rather than simply providing information

### ***Phase 5: Assess and build capacity***

*Activities:*

- Conduct skills gap analysis to identify training needs
- Design and deliver comprehensive training that:
  - Accommodates diverse learning styles and accessibility needs
  - Provides both conceptual understanding and practical application
  - Offers ongoing coaching and support, not just one-off sessions
- Ensure adequate resources are available: time, technology, materials, personnel
- Address structural barriers to implementation

*Key considerations for social work and social care:*

- Recognize time pressures on frontline staff and design training to be as efficient as possible while remaining thorough
- Provide protected time for learning and practice
- Offer peer learning and mentoring opportunities
- Address emotional dimensions of change, not only technical skills
- Ensure training reflects cultural competence and anti-discriminatory practice principles

### ***Phase 6: Enable action and experimentation***

*Activities:*

- Remove obstacles to implementation (policies, procedures, systems)
- Encourage innovation and adaptation within the framework of the change vision
- Create 'safe-to-fail' spaces where staff can try new approaches and learn from mistakes



- Provide rapid-cycle feedback to refine implementation based on early experiences

*Key considerations for social work and social care:*

- Balance fidelity to evidence-based models with necessary flexibility for individual service user needs
- Support professional judgement and autonomy
- Recognize that implementation may look different across teams or settings while maintaining core elements
- Address risk management concerns without stifling reasonable innovation

***Phase 7: Generate and celebrate short-term wins***

*Activities:*

- Identify and publicize early successes
- Acknowledge individual and team contributions
- Use wins to build momentum and maintain engagement
- Learn from both successes and setbacks

*Key considerations for social work and social care:*

- Define 'wins' broadly: improved service user outcomes, smoother processes, staff satisfaction, as well as quantitative targets
- Share service user testimonials (with consent) about positive change impacts
- Celebrate learning and improvement, not only perfection
- Ensure recognition includes frontline staff, not only leadership

***Phase 8: Sustain and embed change***

*Activities:*

- Update policies, procedures, and documentation to reflect new practices
- Integrate new expectations into supervision, performance review, and induction processes
- Continue monitoring implementation quality and outcomes
- Refresh training for new staff and provide boosters for existing staff



- Address emerging challenges and refine approaches based on ongoing learning

*Key considerations for social work and social care:*

- Plan for leadership transitions: ensure that change doesn't depend entirely on specific individuals
- Build new practices into organizational culture, not just formal systems
- Maintain feedback loops with service users and staff
- Continue communicating about change even after initial implementation
- Recognize that embedding takes longer than initial implementation – plan for multi-year timelines

## Understanding and addressing resistance to change

### ***Reconceptualizing resistance***

Traditional change management literature often portrays resistance as an obstacle to be overcome – a problem residing in individuals who are 'change resistant' by nature or disposition (Oreg, 2003). However, contemporary scholarship offers more nuanced understandings that are particularly relevant to social work and social care contexts.

Foster and Goddard (2020) argue from a social work social justice perspective that resistance may represent a legitimate response to proposed changes that conflict with professional values or threaten service quality. Rather than viewing all resistance as illegitimate obstruction, leaders should consider whether resistance signals important ethical concerns requiring serious attention. This reframing aligns with social work's tradition of critical reflection and speaking truth to power.

Sahay and Goldthwaite's (2024) research on participatory change processes reveals that resistance is often developed through communication practices. When leaders equate participation with compliance – seeking input primarily to secure buy-in for predetermined decisions – staff may resist not the change itself but the inauthentic engagement process. Their study found that change implementers often felt vulnerable when genuinely opening decisions to employee influence, leading them to use communication techniques that shaped and constrained participation.

Similarly, Geerligs et al. (2021) emphasize that resistance may reflect inadequate organizational readiness rather than individual deficiency. Factors such as insufficient resources, lack of leadership support, poor communication and misalignment with existing workflows create legitimate barriers to change adoption.



## Common sources of resistance in social work and social care

Understanding the specific factors that generate resistance in social work and social care settings enables more targeted and empathic responses:

- *Values conflicts:* When proposed changes appear to prioritize efficiency, standardization or cost reduction at the expense of individualized, holistic care, practitioners may resist based on ethical concerns. For example, technology adoption that reduces face-to-face contact or caseload increases that compromise relationship quality, may conflict with core professional values (Foster and Goddard, 2020).
- *Threat to professional identity:* Changes that alter fundamental aspects of professional role, status or autonomy can generate resistance. Social workers and social care practitioners have invested significantly in developing professional identity and expertise; changes that undermine this investment may be experienced as deskilling or deprofessionalization.
- *Fear and uncertainty:* Change inevitably involves uncertainty. For staff already working in demanding, emotionally challenging roles, additional uncertainty about their ability to meet new expectations, job security or work relationships can be overwhelming (Barrow and Annamaraju, 2022).
- *Previous negative experiences:* Repeated exposure to poorly managed or unsuccessful change initiatives creates cynicism and scepticism about future changes. Staff may resist not the current proposal specifically but based on learned mistrust of change processes generally (Phillips and Klein, 2023).
- *Workload concerns:* When change requires learning new systems, attending training or adjusting established workflows, staff legitimately worry about the burden this adds to already heavy workloads. Resistance may reflect a realistic assessment of capacity limitations rather than unwillingness to change (Skills for Care, 2023).
- *Loss and grief:* Even positive changes involve loss – of familiar routines, valued relationships, comfortable competence. Acknowledging and processing these losses are essential (Barrow and Annamaraju, 2022).

## Strategies for addressing resistance

- *Distinguish between different types of resistance:* Not all resistance requires the same response. Technical concerns (e.g., inadequate training) require different solutions than values-based objections (requiring discussion about ethical implications) or emotional resistance (requiring support and processing).
- *Engage with resistance respectfully:* Rather than dismissing concerns, create forums for expressing and exploring resistance. Ask: What specifically concerns



you about this change? What would need to be different for you to feel more comfortable? What alternative approaches might achieve similar objectives?

- *Provide psychological safety:* Staff must feel able to voice concerns without fear of being labelled as 'resistant' or facing negative consequences. Leaders should model openness to critique and demonstrate willingness to modify plans based on legitimate concerns (Sahay and Goldthwaite, 2024).
- *Address 'WIIFM' (What's in it for me?):* Help staff understand how change benefits them personally, not only service users or the organization. Benefits might include improved work processes, professional development opportunities or better alignment between values and practice.
- *Offer choices within constraints:* Even when overall direction is non-negotiable (e.g., imposed regulatory changes), providing choices about implementation details can enhance a sense of control and ownership. For example, while all teams must adopt a new assessment tool, teams might have flexibility in how they integrate it into their workflows.
- *Provide adequate support:* Ensure that staff have the time, training, resources and encouragement needed to make the transition successfully. Resistance often diminishes when people feel adequately supported rather than abandoned to struggle alone.
- *Work with influential staff members:* Identify respected informal leaders and address their concerns directly. When these influential figures become advocates for change, they can help shift the broader organizational culture (Phillips and Klein, 2023).
- *Acknowledge and process losses:* Create space for staff to express what they are losing through change and to grieve these losses appropriately. This acknowledgement validates experience and helps people move forward rather than remaining stuck.
- *Be willing to modify plans:* Genuine participation requires willingness to change course based on feedback. When resistance reveals serious flaws in proposed approaches, demonstrating responsiveness builds trust for future change initiatives.

## Leadership in times of change

### ***The critical role of leaders***

Leadership is consistently identified as the most critical factor influencing change success or failure (Kotter, 2012; Hastings and Schwarz, 2025; Barrow and Annamaraju, 2022). In social work and social care contexts, effective change leadership requires balancing multiple, sometimes competing demands: maintaining quality and safety while implementing new approaches; supporting staff while holding them accountable; honouring professional autonomy while ensuring



consistency; and managing in an upward direction to secure resources while managing downwards to implement change.

## Key leadership competencies for change

- *Authentic sponsorship*: Senior leaders must visibly champion change initiatives, not merely delegate implementation to middle managers. This includes allocating resources, removing obstacles, participating in communications and modelling new behaviours (Kotter, 2012; Phillips and Klein, 2023).
- *Emotional intelligence*: Change generates strong emotions – anxiety, excitement, grief, anger, hope. Leaders must recognize and respond to these emotional dimensions, providing containment and support while maintaining focus on change objectives (Barrow and Annamaraju, 2022).
- *Strategic and systems thinking*: Effective change leaders understand that their organizations are complex adaptive systems where interventions in one area create ripple effects elsewhere. They anticipate potential unintended consequences and plan accordingly (Silvola and Restelli, 2024).
- *Communication skills*: Leaders must translate vision into compelling narratives that connect with diverse stakeholders' values and concerns. This requires not only clarity but also adaptability – adjusting messages and channels for different audiences while maintaining consistency in core messages (Skills for Care, 2023).
- *Resilience and persistence*: Most significant changes encounter setbacks and challenges. Leaders must maintain commitment and optimism while remaining realistic about difficulties. This 'tempered radicalism' – combining ambition with pragmatism – sustains momentum through inevitable difficulties (Hastings and Schwarz, 2025).
- *Collaborative and participatory practice*: Dialogic change leadership involves sharing power, soliciting genuine input and remaining open to influence. This can feel uncomfortable for leaders accustomed to more directive approaches but is essential for sustainable change in social work and social care contexts (Hastings and Schwarz, 2025; Sahay and Goldthwaite, 2024).

## Challenges facing social work and social care leaders

- *Competing pressures*: Leaders must navigate tensions between multiple accountability systems – upwards to boards and funders, downwards to staff and outwards to service users, families, regulators and the public. These stakeholders may have competing priorities and expectations regarding change.



- **Resource constraints:** Leading change with inadequate resources requires difficult decisions about priorities and compromises. Leaders must advocate for resources while being realistic about what can be achieved within constraints.
- **Managing across professional boundaries:** Social work and social care organizations often employ multiple professional groups with different training, values and perspectives. Leading change across these boundaries requires cultural competence and bridge-building skills.
- **Personal impact of change:** Leaders are not immune to the emotional toll of change. They may experience their own uncertainty, exhaustion and grief while needing to maintain confidence and stability for others. Accessing peer support and supervision is essential.

## Organizational culture and readiness

### ***The foundation of successful change***

Organizational culture – the shared values, beliefs, norms and practices that characterize 'how we do things round here' – profoundly influences change implementation (Geerligs et al., 2021). Some organizational cultures are characterized by openness to innovation, psychological safety and collaborative problem solving; others by risk aversion and defensiveness, hierarchy and resistance to questioning established practices. While culture evolves slowly, understanding and working with existing culture while intentionally shaping it in desired directions is crucial for change success (Thompson, 2025).

### ***Assessing readiness for change***

Before launching major change initiatives, assessing organizational readiness provides valuable intelligence for planning. The systematic review of Geerligs et al. (2021) identified key factors influencing readiness:

- **Leadership support and priority:** Do senior leaders genuinely prioritize this change, allocating time, attention and resources accordingly? Or is it one initiative among dozens competing for attention?
- **Resource availability:** Are adequate financial resources, staffing, training capacity, technology and time available to support implementation?
- **Organizational climate:** Is there psychological safety for experimentation and learning from mistakes? Or is there a blame culture where errors are punished?
- **Change history:** Have previous change initiatives been positive experiences that increased trust or negative experiences that generated cynicism?



- *Staff attitudes*: What are staff perceptions of change appropriateness, feasibility and benefits? (Neves, 2009, found that perceived appropriateness strongly predicts commitment).
- *Competing demands*: What other priorities or pressures might divert attention from this change initiative?

## Building a change-capable culture

While organizational culture cannot be changed through decree, leaders can intentionally cultivate characteristics that support ongoing adaptation:

- *Foster psychological safety*: Create environments where staff can voice concerns, admit mistakes, ask questions and experiment with new approaches without fear of punishment or humiliation. Google's research on team effectiveness identified psychological safety as the most important factor (Hastings and Schwarz, 2025).
- *Promote learning orientation*: Frame challenges as opportunities for learning rather than failures. Implement regular reflective practice, debriefs, and feedback loops that help teams learn from both successes and setbacks.
- *Build collaborative relationships*: Strengthen connections across teams, departments, and hierarchical levels. These relationships become crucial conduits for communication and problem solving during change.
- *Develop distributed leadership*: Rather than concentrating change leadership in senior management alone, cultivate leadership capacity throughout the organization. Frontline practitioners, when empowered and supported, become powerful change agents.
- *Align systems and structures*: Ensure that policies, procedures, reward systems, and performance expectations support rather than undermine desired cultural characteristics. Mixed messages—espousing collaboration whilst rewarding individual competition, for example—create cynicism and confusion.

## Technology and digital transformation

### *The accelerating pace of digital change*

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically accelerated digital transformation in social work and social care, making virtual service delivery, electronic case management, and digital communication standard practice virtually overnight (Keuka College, 2023; Agents of Change, 2024). While these changes offered benefits, including improved access, efficiency, and flexibility, they also revealed significant challenges regarding digital literacy, privacy, therapeutic relationship maintenance and equality of access (Agents of Change, 2024).



## **Benefits and opportunities**

- *Improved access:* Virtual appointments enable service users to access support from home, reducing transport barriers, time constraints, and geographical limitations. This particularly benefits individuals with mobility limitations, rural residents and those with caring responsibilities (Keuka College, 2023).
- *Enhanced flexibility:* Digital tools allow more flexible scheduling and communication between formal appointments, supporting responsiveness to emerging needs.
- *Efficiency gains:* Electronic record keeping, automated reminders and digital forms can reduce administrative burden, theoretically freeing time for direct practice.
- *Data for quality improvement:* Digital systems can generate data on service patterns, outcomes and equality gaps to inform quality improvement.
- *Innovation in practice:* Emerging technologies like virtual reality (VR) therapy show promise for treating phobias, processing trauma and developing social skills in controlled, safe environments (Agents of Change, 2024).

## **Challenges and risks**

- *Digital divide:* Not all service users have reliable internet access, appropriate devices or digital literacy skills. Relying heavily on digital service delivery may exacerbate inequalities (Agents of Change, 2024).
- *Privacy and confidentiality:* Digital communication and electronic records raise important questions about data security, confidentiality and service user privacy. Robust safeguards and clear policies are essential.
- *Relationship quality:* Many social work and social care practitioners express concern that virtual contact lacks the richness and nuance of face-to-face interaction, potentially compromising relationship building and assessment accuracy. Research findings are mixed, with some studies suggesting service users appreciate the intimacy of virtual home visits whilst others prefer in-person contact (Keuka College, 2023).
- *Staff capacity and training:* Implementing new technologies requires substantial investment in staff training and ongoing technical support. Under-resourced implementation can lead to frustration, inefficiency and abandonment of new systems.
- *Deprofessionalization concerns:* Over-reliance on standardized digital tools may undermine professional autonomy and judgement, reducing practice to box ticking rather than nuanced, relationship-based intervention.



## Principles for managing digital change

- *Co-design with end users:* Involve both service users and practitioners in selecting and configuring digital tools to ensure they meet actual needs rather than imposing solutions that work poorly in practice.
- *Hybrid models:* Maintain options for face-to-face contact alongside digital alternatives. Different service users and situations require different modalities.
- *Substantial training and support:* Provide comprehensive, ongoing training that addresses not only technical skills but also adaptation of practice for digital contexts (e.g., building rapport via video, assessing risk remotely).
- *Address equity explicitly:* Monitor who is and is not accessing digital services. Provide alternative pathways and support (e.g., device lending, digital literacy training) for those who face barriers.
- *Robust governance:* Establish clear policies regarding data security, confidentiality, appropriate use and ethical boundaries in digital practice.
- *Evaluate critically:* Systematically assess impacts on service quality, equality, outcomes, staff wellbeing and efficiency. Be willing to modify or discontinue digital approaches that prove problematic.

## Evaluation and continuous improvement

### *The importance of learning from implementation*

Even well-planned change initiatives rarely unfold exactly as anticipated. Systematic evaluation provides essential feedback for refining implementation, identifying unintended consequences and demonstrating impact. In social work and social care contexts, evaluation should attend to multiple dimensions: service user outcomes and experiences, staff wellbeing and performance, equality impacts and organizational functioning.

### *Evaluation frameworks*

- *Process evaluation:* Monitors implementation fidelity and identifies facilitators and barriers. Questions include: Were planned activities actually delivered? With what quality? What obstacles emerged? What adaptations were made and why?
- *Outcome evaluation:* Assesses whether intended benefits were achieved. This includes both quantitative indicators (e.g., service user outcomes, efficiency metrics) and qualitative dimensions (e.g., relationship quality, staff satisfaction, service user empowerment).
- *Impact evaluation:* Examines broader effects beyond immediate objectives, including unintended consequences. Were there unexpected benefits or harms? Who was affected, and how?
- *Economic evaluation:* Considers costs and cost effectiveness. Were resources used efficiently? Did benefits justify investments?



## Methods and approaches

- *Mixed methods*: Combine quantitative data (outcomes, service statistics, survey responses) with qualitative data (interviews, focus groups, observations, case examples) to provide rich, nuanced understanding.
- *Participatory evaluation*: Involve service users, practitioners and other stakeholders in designing and conducting evaluation. This enhances relevance, credibility and utilization of findings.
- *Developmental evaluation*: In complex, uncertain contexts, developmental evaluation provides real-time feedback to guide ongoing adaptation rather than summative judgement at conclusion (Geerligs et al., 2021).
- *Equality-focused evaluation*: Systematically examine whether changes affected different groups differently. Disaggregate data by demographic characteristics to identify equity gaps.

## Using evaluation for improvement

Evaluation only improves practice if findings inform action. Create structured processes for:

- Regularly reviewing evaluation data
- Discussing implications with stakeholders
- Identifying needed modifications
- Implementing refinements
- Re-evaluating to assess whether adjustments had intended effects

This continuous improvement cycle embeds learning into organizational culture, supporting ongoing adaptation and development.

## Conclusion

Change management in social work and social care requires careful attention to both generic principles of organizational change and the distinctive characteristics of these sectors. The framework presented in this guide integrates established change management theory with sector-specific insights regarding values-based practice, person-centred approaches, trauma-informed care and the complex needs of vulnerable service users.

Several key themes emerge from this analysis. First, effective change leadership requires moving beyond purely diagnostic, top-down approaches toward dialogic,



participatory processes that genuinely engage staff and service users in shaping change. Research demonstrates that such approaches achieve substantially higher success rates, while also aligning with social work and social care values of empowerment and collaboration (Hastings and Schwarz, 2025; Sahay and Goldthwaite, 2024).

Second, resistance to change should not be dismissed as mere obstruction but examined as potentially legitimate response to ethical concerns, inadequate support or poor planning. Creating psychological safety for voicing concerns, addressing underlying issues respectfully and remaining willing to modify plans based on feedback builds trust and improves outcomes (Foster and Goddard, 2020; Sahay and Goldthwaite, 2024).

Third, leadership at all levels plays a crucial role in change success. Senior leaders must provide authentic sponsorship, resources and visible commitment. Middle managers translate vision into operational reality while supporting frontline staff. Practitioners themselves become change agents when empowered and supported. Cultivating distributed leadership capacity throughout organizations creates resilience and sustainability (Kotter, 2012; Barrow and Annamaraju, 2022).

Fourth, digital transformation presents both significant opportunities and substantial challenges. Technology adoption must be managed thoughtfully, with attention to equality, relationship quality, privacy and adequate support. Hybrid models that preserve face-to-face contact options whilst offering digital alternatives may serve diverse needs most effectively (Keuka College, 2023; Agents of Change, 2024).

Successful change requires sustained attention beyond initial implementation. Embedding new practices into organizational culture, policies, and routines; providing ongoing training and support; and maintaining feedback loops for continuous improvement are essential for long-term sustainability (Kotter, 2012; Phillips and Klein, 2023; Geerligs et al., 2021).

Change is inevitable in contemporary social work and social care. The question is not whether organizations will change but how they will manage change – whether change occurs reactively, chaotically and with unintended harms or whether it unfolds thoughtfully, inclusively and with sustained focus on service user wellbeing and staff support. The framework presented here offers a roadmap for the latter approach, grounded in both theoretical foundations and practical wisdom. By attending to both the technical and human dimensions of change, honouring professional values while embracing necessary adaptation and maintaining commitment to the core purpose of supporting vulnerable individuals and communities, social work and social care leaders can manage change successfully while upholding the dignity and quality at the heart of their professions.



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