

People, Problems and Potential

A Framework for Understanding and Addressing the
Challenges Facing Social Work and Social Care

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Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction: A Sector Under Strain	4
People: The Human Cost of Workforce Pressures	5
Problems: Systemic and Structural Challenges	9
Potential: Moving from Crisis to Capability	13
Conclusion: A Framework for Moving Forward	16
About the Neil Thompson Academy	18
References	19



Executive Summary

Social work and social care are under extraordinary pressure. Chronic workforce shortages, escalating demand, rising levels of practitioner stress and burnout and persistent weaknesses in leadership development all threaten the quality of services that some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our communities depend upon. These are not abstract problems; they have serious human consequences for service users and carers, for practitioners and for the organisations tasked with supporting both.

This report examines these challenges through the 3Ps framework — People, Problems, Potential — a conceptual lens developed over more than four decades of practice, scholarship and teaching. The framework offers not only a way of making sense of these challenges but also a basis for responding to them with both rigour and practical effect.

The report argues that the problems facing the sector are deeply interconnected: workforce stress cannot be addressed without attending to leadership culture; leadership culture cannot improve without investment in targeted development; and sustainable improvement requires a shift from deficit-focused approaches towards approaches that recognise and build on the considerable strengths that exist across the sector.

Resources to support that shift — in continuing professional development, leadership education, workplace tools and scholarly reflection — are identified throughout the report. They are offered not as commercial products but as the practical expression of a sustained scholarly commitment to the wellbeing of professionals and the people they serve.



Introduction: A Sector Under Strain

Social work and social care occupy a distinctive and vital place in the landscape of public services. They exist to support people at points of vulnerability, crisis or disadvantage — and to do so in ways that affirm dignity, foster independence and promote social justice. Few professional endeavours carry a greater ethical weight or a greater potential for meaningful human impact.

Yet the sector finds itself, in the mid-2020s, under a degree of strain that is difficult to overstate. The workforce is stretched. Demand is rising faster than capacity. Staff morale is, by multiple measures, at or near historic lows. Leadership development — the very factor most consistently associated with organisational quality — has long been underprioritised in social care settings relative to other comparable sectors. And the intellectual and scholarly resources needed to address these challenges are not always reaching the practitioners and leaders who need them most.

This report does not pretend that any single framework or any set of resources can resolve problems of this magnitude. What it does offer is a way of thinking about these challenges that is both analytically clear and practically grounded — one rooted in 45 years of experience spanning direct practice, academic scholarship, consultancy and the development of professional education resources.

The 3Ps framework

The organising framework for this report is one that has informed my work across many years: the 3Ps framework of People, Problems and Potential. Its premise is straightforward: wherever there are People, there will be Problems, but there will also always be Potential. My work has focused on supporting, protecting and empowering People, addressing Problems and realising Potential. Professional practice — whether in direct social work, social care management or organisational leadership — operates in the space between problem and potential, and its effectiveness depends on how clearly we understand both.



The framework is elaborated in detail elsewhere (Thompson, 2024a; Thompson, 2025), but its application to the current state of the sector provides the analytical structure for the sections that follow. The People dimension addresses the human realities of working in the sector: the stress, the moral distress, the relational demands and the personal toll of sustained work with vulnerability, pain and suffering. The Problems dimension examines the systemic and structural challenges: leadership gaps, training deficits, organisational culture and the vicious circles that perpetuate difficulty. The Potential dimension considers what good practice looks like and how the sector can move from a position of crisis management towards sustainable capability and quality.

Throughout, resources and approaches that can support each dimension are identified — not as prescriptions but as possibilities, offered in the spirit of a scholar-practitioner whose life's work has been the attempt to make rigorous thinking genuinely useful to the people doing the most important work.

People: The Human Cost of Workforce Pressures

Any serious analysis of the challenges facing social work and social care must begin with the people who do the work. The professional and personal wellbeing of the workforce is not a secondary consideration — it is foundational to everything else. An exhausted, demoralised or poorly supported workforce cannot deliver the quality of care and practice that our citizens deserve, however strong the systems and structures around it.

Stress, burnout and moral distress

The evidence for high levels of stress and burnout across the social work and social care workforce is well established and deeply concerning. Research consistently finds that social workers report significantly higher levels of occupational stress than the general working population, with workload, organisational support and emotional demand identified as key contributory factors (BASW, Bath University and SWU,



2020; Community Care, 2024; Skills for Care, 2023). The emotional demands of working with trauma, loss, crisis and complex need take a considerable personal toll, particularly where supervision and reflective support are inadequate.

Moral distress — the experience of knowing what good practice requires but being unable to deliver it because of organisational constraints, resource limitations or systemic pressures — has emerged as a particularly significant issue in recent years. Practitioners describe the corrosive effects of being required to cut corners, to close cases prematurely or to prioritise risk management over relationship-based support. This is not merely a matter of job satisfaction; it strikes at the professional identity and ethical commitments that drew many into the sector in the first place.

The consequences are serious and measurable. Sickness absence rates in social care are among the highest in any sector. High turnover compounds the problem: staff leave, taking accumulated expertise with them, and new staff arrive into systems already under strain. As I have explored in my own work on stress management (Thompson, 2024b), the key is not to exhort individuals to be more resilient — a response that risks individualising what are largely organisational problems — but to understand stress as a complex, multilevel phenomenon requiring responses at individual, team, managerial and systemic levels.

Stress is not primarily a sign of individual weakness. It is the predictable consequence of sustained, unsupported exposure to emotionally demanding work. Addressing it requires organisational as well as individual responses — a combination of better management practice, supportive supervision, realistic workload management and a workplace culture that normalises help-seeking.

Low morale and its consequences

Morale in the sector is a connected but distinct concern. Where stress relates primarily to the emotional and physiological impact of demanding work, morale relates to the sense of meaning, purpose and collective solidarity that sustains people through difficulty. A workforce can be under enormous pressure and yet



maintain high morale if it feels well led, properly supported and genuinely valued. Conversely, even manageable workloads can generate low morale in environments characterised by poor communication, weak leadership, a blame culture or a sense that the work one does makes no difference.

The available evidence suggests that both problems are present simultaneously across much of the sector. The causes are multiple: chronic underfunding, workforce shortages that place impossible burdens on those who remain, a regulatory environment that can feel more focused on audit and inspection than on practice quality, and a broader social context in which social care workers are neither well rewarded nor widely understood.

The practical consequences extend well beyond individuals. Low morale is closely associated with reduced quality of practice, lower engagement with service users, higher rates of sickness and turnover, and diminished capacity for reflection and learning (Thompson and Thompson, 2023). Organisations trapped in cycles of low morale and high turnover struggle to improve, because the very conditions needed for improvement — stable teams, accumulated experience, shared values and relational continuity — are precisely what low morale and high turnover destroy. This is a vicious circle in the truest sense and addressing it requires the kind of systemic analysis that the 3Ps framework supports.

Supervision, support and professional identity

A further dimension of the People challenge relates to the quality of supervision and professional support. Supervision in social work has always carried multiple functions — managerial accountability, professional development and personal support — and its quality has a direct bearing on both workforce wellbeing and the quality of practice (Davys and Beddoe, 2010; Thompson and Gilbert, 2019). Yet surveys consistently reveal that many practitioners receive supervision that is predominantly administrative in character, focused on case management rather than reflective learning (Ravalier *et al.* 2022; 2023).



The erosion of meaningful supervision is both a reflection of wider pressures and a cause of further deterioration. Without regular, high-quality reflection on complex, emotionally demanding work, practitioners become more vulnerable to burnout, to unhelpful professional habits and to the kind of unreflective practice that can, at its worst, lead to serious harm. Strong professional identity — a clear sense of what the work is for, what values underpin it and what good practice looks like — is an important protective factor, but it requires active cultivation through communities of practice, continuing professional development and engagement with the scholarly literature that informs the field.

Addressing the People dimension

Responding effectively to these challenges requires resources and approaches that take the human realities seriously — that go beyond bland reassurance or generic wellbeing initiatives to offer substantive, intellectually grounded support.

A number of relevant resources exist within the Academy's portfolio. For practitioners and managers grappling with stress and its management, the second edition of *Managing Stress* (Thompson, 2024a) offers a thoroughly updated framework that addresses individual, interpersonal and organisational dimensions. For those working in social work specifically, *How to Survive in Social Work* (Thompson and McGowan, 2024) addresses the distinctive pressures of the profession and the practical and conceptual tools available for handling them. Both are characteristic of an approach that takes theoretical rigour and practical accessibility with equal seriousness.

The *Avenue Subscription Service* — providing access to more than 60 online courses across management, leadership, social care and wellbeing — includes substantial provision focused on professional wellbeing, reflective practice and the development of the resilience and self-awareness that sustain effective practitioners. Critically, the self-paced, flexible format recognises the reality of practitioners' lives: learning must be possible in the spaces available, not only in protected blocks of time that rarely materialise.



The *Centre of Excellence*, the Academy's online professional community, offers an additional dimension: the opportunity for structured reflection, peer dialogue and direct engagement with the ideas and frameworks that can rekindle the sense of professional purpose that demanding practice can erode.

Problems: Systemic and Structural Challenges

Alongside the human challenges addressed in the previous section, social work and social care face a set of systemic and structural problems that require equally serious attention. These are the organisational, cultural and institutional features of the sector that shape the conditions in which practice takes place. They are, in important ways, the problems that create the people problems: poor leadership generates low morale; inadequate training generates unsafe practice; dysfunctional organisational cultures generate the vicious circles that trap individuals and teams in cycles of difficulty.

The leadership development deficit

The quality of leadership is the single most important factor in determining organisational effectiveness in social work and social care settings (Hafford-Letchfield *et al.*, 2014; Skills for Care, 2023). The evidence for this claim is extensive and consistent: well-led organisations have lower staff turnover, better outcomes for service users, higher levels of practitioner confidence and satisfaction, and greater capacity for learning and improvement. Conversely, poor leadership is implicated in the overwhelming majority of significant failings in care quality. This has certainly been the case in my own consultancy and expert witness work.

Given this, the relative neglect of leadership development in the sector — particularly in social care, as distinct from the NHS or other public sector contexts — is difficult to understand and harder still to justify. Many social care managers arrive in leadership roles on the basis of practice excellence rather than management or leadership preparation and then receive limited structured development. The tacit assumption — that good practice naturally produces good management — is not supported by



evidence and leads to a generation of well-intentioned leaders struggling unnecessarily with challenges that structured development could address.

A further problem is that much available leadership training is generic — drawn from business and commercial contexts that do not adequately reflect the distinctive features of social care: the values base, the complexity of vulnerability and need, the regulatory environment, the particular challenges of managing staff in emotionally demanding roles. Nor does it recognise the particular strengths of the social work and social care workforce that can be harnessed and developed as a basis for leadership excellence. Leaders in social care benefit most from development that is both intellectually rigorous and contextually grounded — that takes the distinctive character of the work seriously.

Training and continuing professional development

The broader picture in relation to training and CPD is similarly concerning. While there are significant statutory training requirements in certain parts of the sector, the overall investment in continuing professional development — particularly for experienced practitioners and middle managers — is highly uneven. Budget pressures frequently lead organisations to treat training as a discretionary expenditure rather than a core investment, with predictable consequences for practice quality, workforce confidence and the capacity to respond to change.

The problem is compounded by the nature of the challenges practitioners face. Social work and social care operate at the intersection of complex legal, ethical, psychological and social questions. Practitioners are required to exercise professional judgement in conditions of uncertainty, to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously and to handle difficult conversations with skill and sensitivity. These are capabilities that develop through sustained learning, reflective practice and engagement with the scholarly and professional knowledge base — not through one-off training events or brief mandatory modules.



At the same time, the practical constraints on CPD in the sector are real and must be respected. Practitioners cannot routinely take days out of service to attend training. Development must be flexible, accessible and directly applicable to the contexts in which people work. The challenge is to find formats that are academically serious without being inaccessible and practically applicable without being superficial. That tension has been a defining preoccupation of my work across more than four decades.

Organisational culture and vicious circles

Beneath the specific problems of leadership development and training lies a deeper challenge: the organisational cultures that shape how people think, behave and relate to one another within social care settings. Culture — the shared assumptions, values and unwritten rules that govern how things are done — is both the most powerful influence on organisational behaviour and the most difficult to change deliberately.

Many social care organisations are characterised by cultures that, however well-intentioned in their origins, now actively impede quality: blame cultures that inhibit honest learning from mistakes; silo cultures that prevent effective collaboration; cultures of learned helplessness in which individuals feel that nothing they do will make a difference; and cultures of chronic busyness in which reflection is perpetually deferred in favour of doing.

Particularly significant is the phenomenon of the vicious circle: the self-reinforcing dynamic in which problems generate responses that exacerbate rather than resolve the original difficulty. I have explored this concept extensively in my work on *System3V* — the learning system at the heart of the Academy's approach to people management development. A typical example in social care: staff shortages lead to increased workload; increased workload leads to higher stress and lower morale; lower morale leads to higher turnover; higher turnover leads to further staff shortages. Each element of the circle drives the others and attempts to address any single element in isolation typically fail because the circular momentum of the system is more powerful than any linear intervention.



Breaking vicious circles requires the kind of systemic analysis and cyclical thinking that the 3Ps framework supports — understanding not just what is happening, but why, and how the different elements of a problem are mutually reinforcing.

Addressing the Problems dimension

The leadership development deficit is, in my view, the highest-priority structural problem the sector faces, and it is one that can be addressed with appropriate resources. The Chartered Management Institute qualifications offered through the Academy — from Awards and Certificates through to full Diplomas at Level 5 and Level 7, and Chartered Manager status — are specifically developed for social care and social work contexts. They carry the professional credibility of CMI accreditation while being contextually grounded in ways that generic management qualifications cannot be. Critically, they require no attendance and no fixed deadlines, recognising the practical realities of managing and developing staff in demanding environments.

For managers and leaders at different career stages, the *Leading for Success* programme provides structured, accessible development grounded in the realities of social care management. For those at more advanced levels, *System3V* offers a sophisticated learning programme built around the core insight of converting vicious circles into virtuous ones — an approach that addresses organisational culture change at the level of the underlying dynamics rather than the surface manifestations.

Across the broader workforce, the Avenue Subscription Service provides organisations with a cost-effective vehicle for sustained CPD that can be embedded in everyday working life rather than concentrated in occasional training events. Its range — more than 60 courses across management, leadership, social care and wellbeing — reflects the breadth of learning need in a sector that cannot afford narrow provision.



For organisations concerned with culture and the quality of their people-management systems, the Academy's Development Tools offer structured, practical resources: the TOPPER set for improving organisational culture, the Company Health Review for assessing and improving 30 aspects of people management and the Wellbeing Champions Resource Pack for embedding wellbeing into organisational life at team level.

Potential: Moving from Crisis to Capability

The People and Problems dimensions of the analysis so far could, if left unbalanced, paint a picture of unrelieved difficulty. That would be both analytically incomplete and practically unhelpful. The third dimension of the framework — Potential — exists precisely to correct that imbalance: to insist that where there are people and problems, there is also always possibility.

Social work and social care are not failing sectors. They contain, at their best, some of the most skilled, committed and morally courageous professional practice in the public sector. The challenge is not to rescue the sector from itself but to create the conditions in which the excellence that already exists can be more widely realised — and the obstacles to that excellence more systematically addressed.

Strengths that exist and can be built upon

The sector has significant strengths. It has a strong and coherent values base, articulated in professional standards and codes of practice, that provides a shared ethical foundation for practice. It has a long tradition of reflective practice, rooted in the recognition that professional judgement in complex human situations cannot be reduced to technical procedures. It has a workforce that, despite the pressures described above, continues to demonstrate remarkable commitment to the people it serves.

It also has, in recent years, seen significant growth in the evidence base for effective practice: in systemic approaches, in trauma-informed care, in strengths-based and



asset-based frameworks, in our understanding of the neuroscience of adversity and resilience. These are rich intellectual resources, and they are resources that practitioners are entitled to engage with in forms that are accessible, relevant and usable.

This is where the concept of antifragility — developed by Taleb (2013) and explored in relation to social care and leadership in my own recent work — becomes relevant. Antifragile systems are those that do not merely survive difficulty but are strengthened by it: they develop new capabilities, perspectives and forms of resilience through the encounter with adversity. The question for the sector is not simply how to reduce the pressures that practitioners face, but how to ensure that the experience of working with those pressures develops, rather than depletes the individuals and organisations involved.

Leadership as the key lever

If one factor above all others determines whether the sector's potential is realised or frustrated, it is the quality of its leadership. This is not simply a claim about the importance of leaders as individuals, though individual leadership quality clearly matters enormously. It is a claim about the conditions that good leadership creates: the cultures of psychological safety that enable practitioners to raise concerns, learn from mistakes and engage in genuine reflective dialogue; the developmental relationships that help practitioners grow rather than merely survive; the organisational climates in which service users are genuinely central rather than instrumentally managed.

I have argued at length, in *Authentic Leadership Revisited* (Thompson, 2025a) and elsewhere, that effective leadership in human services contexts requires a commitment to authenticity — to leading from values rather than from position or procedure, and to building organisational cultures that reflect those values in everyday practice. This is not a counsel of idealism; it is a practical insight about what works. Authentic leaders, in the sense I describe, are more effective at



retaining staff, at building high-performing teams, at managing change and at maintaining quality under pressure.

Empowerment and the virtuous circle

At the heart of the Potential dimension is the concept of empowerment: the process of enabling individuals, teams and organisations to build on their strengths, address the obstacles that hold them back and develop the confidence and competence needed for sustained effectiveness. Empowerment is not a technique or a programme; it is an orientation towards people that shapes every aspect of professional practice and organisational life.

Empowering approaches generate virtuous circles. When practitioners feel genuinely supported, their confidence grows; when their confidence grows, their practice improves; when their practice improves, outcomes for service users improve; when outcomes improve, practitioners derive greater meaning and satisfaction from their work; when they derive greater meaning, their commitment and engagement increases. This is the mirror image of the vicious circles described in the Problems section, and it is achievable — but only through deliberate, sustained and well-informed effort.

Addressing the Potential dimension

Realising the sector's potential requires investment in both the intellectual resources and the practical frameworks that enable sustained improvement. The scholarly literature on social work, social care and leadership is extensive but not always accessible to practitioners in forms that are usable in everyday professional life. A central purpose of my work — through more than 50 published books and through the resources of the Academy — has been to bridge that gap: to make rigorous thinking genuinely available to the people doing the work.

The *System3V* programme represents one of the most ambitious expressions of this aim: a learning system designed not merely to convey knowledge but to develop the



analytical capability and the practice habits needed to address organisational problems at the level of their underlying dynamics. It is, in that sense, a vehicle for releasing the potential that already exists within leadership teams — for converting the energy currently consumed by vicious circles into the momentum of virtuous ones.

More broadly, the Centre of Excellence provides a professional community in which sustained reflection, peer learning and engagement with emerging ideas can become a regular feature of professional life rather than an occasional luxury. The ability to put questions directly to an experienced scholar-practitioner, to share dilemmas with peers facing similar challenges, and to access structured exercises in reflective practice represents a form of professional nourishment that is too rarely available in the everyday pressures of social care work.

Conclusion: A Framework for Moving Forward

The challenges facing social work and social care are real, serious and, on any honest assessment, likely to intensify rather than diminish in the years ahead. Demographic change, rising complexity of need, continuing resource constraint and the accelerating pace of technological and regulatory change all point in that direction. A sector that responds to these challenges by working harder within existing frameworks is unlikely to achieve the improvements in quality and sustainability that both practitioners and service users deserve.

What is needed, instead, is clearer thinking: frameworks that enable practitioners, managers and leaders to understand the problems they face at the level of their underlying dynamics, rather than simply managing their surface manifestations. The 3Ps framework — People, Problems, Potential — is offered in that spirit. It is not a magic solution, but it is a coherent, experience-based lens that can sharpen analysis, identify pivotal points for effective action and maintain a focus on possibility even in the most difficult conditions.



Several specific implications follow from the analysis in this report. Investment in leadership development must be treated as a strategic priority, not a discretionary expense — and that development must be contextually grounded in the realities of social care rather than imported wholesale from business settings. The wellbeing of the workforce must be addressed at organisational and systemic levels, not merely through individual resilience programmes. Continuing professional development must be genuinely sustained, not limited to statutory requirements. And the intellectual and scholarly resources needed to support all of this must be made available in forms that are practically accessible to the people who need them. The Academy exists to contribute to all of these imperatives — not as a commercial provider but as the practical expression of a lifetime’s scholarly commitment to the proposition that good theory makes better practice, and that practitioners deserve access to the best thinking available on the work they do and the people they serve.



About the Neil Thompson Academy

The Neil Thompson Academy is a professional development organisation founded on a single conviction: that rigorous scholarship and genuine practical accessibility are not in tension but are, at their best, mutually reinforcing. Its resources are developed by, and under the editorial direction of, Neil Thompson — author of more than 50 books, Visiting Professor at the Open University and a practitioner and educator with more than 45 years of experience in social work, social care and management and leadership education.

The Academy's current portfolio includes:

- *The Avenue Subscription Service* — more than 60 online courses across management, leadership, social care and wellbeing, available through a single subscription
- CMI-accredited qualifications in management and leadership from Level 3 to Level 7, developed specifically for social care and social work contexts, with no attendance requirement and flexible pathways
- *System3V* — a sophisticated learning programme for experienced managers and leaders focused on converting organisational vicious circles into virtuous ones
- *Leading for Success* — a structured leadership development programme for those at Level 5 or entering management for the first time
- *The Centre of Excellence* — an online professional community offering structured reflection, development resources and direct access to Neil's thinking and expertise
- *Development Tools* — including TOPPER, the Company Health Review and the Wellbeing Champions Resource Pack
- More than 50 published books, the majority available through major publishers and booksellers

Further information about all Academy resources is available at:

www.NeilThompson.info



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