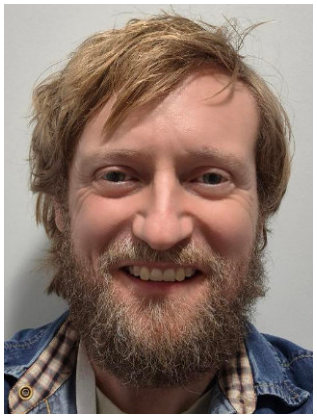
SWU Social Workers Union
The specialist union for social workers

e-BULLETIN | NOVEMBER 2026

SWU: Our future is shaped by the choices we make today



This month sees SWU's Annual General Meeting (AGM) return as your opportunity to once again be part of our union's vision and direction. I encourage you to join us online on 27th November for our AGM and help us shape SWU so that it can continue not only to support its members but also campaign on the issues that matter to you. SWU is a proud campaigning union, and I firmly believe SWU has even greater potential for activism in the workplace. With your support we can take that opportunity further. SWU's invitation to the Trades Union Congress this year is real evidence of this. At a time when social work faces significant challenges and change, it is more important than ever that our members have a strong voice in shaping the future of SWU. The decisions we make together today will influence how SWU grows, campaigns and supports members in the years ahead.

AGM Motions from members represent the democracy at the heart of our union and I am pleased to see Motions received from members this year that asks SWU to consider what the future may look like both in terms of our campaigns and our identity as a trade union. Further information is available in our upcoming Annual Report 2026, which will be emailed out along with the rest of the AGM information and documents. I hope to see you there.

The future of SWU will also be steered by an incoming Executive Committee following our AGM in November and I look forward to working with them all soon. The arrival of new executive members is an exciting time for SWU but one which inevitably invites us to say goodbye and more importantly to thank those members whose time in post concluded. It would be unfair of me not to acknowledge the hard work and commitment of all SWU Executive members here, which I have witnessed previously as Chair and now as General Secretary, but our AGM will equally recognise those leaving us this time. Please note that the closing date for applications for our Wales/UK Representative (2-year appointment) and Northern Ireland/UK Representative (3-year appointment) is 5pm on 9th November. More details can be found here https://swu-union.org.uk/work-with-swu

SWU was proud to join BASW at their "Social Work Live: Practice and Careers" conference in Birmingham on 27th October. All change begins with a conversation and in

this respect SWU was pleased to be part of the discussions that day with SWU members, but also future members who decided they now want the affordable and equally vital Advice and Representation Service that SWU offers. I would also like to acknowledge the feedback SWU received from members and future members at this event as it invited us to reflect again on what our future as a trade union could look like, both in terms of our strengths and the opportunities ahead.

This newsletter issue includes a tribute to our dear friend and SWU Executive member James Birchall who sadly passed away in September. Thank you to John McGowan, our former General Secretary, for a very personal message on his friendship with James. Many SWU members will have met James at some point, and I hope you will find John's words comforting in some way. My fondest memory of James was the moment he felt compelled to thank attendees at a meeting I was chairing, only for him to later feel the need to apologise for doing this, or as James put it

"I am sorry. I got carried away. It was inappropriate for me to thank everyone at the end of the meeting."

I don't think it was ever inappropriate James, and I cannot imagine who would feel that way, but you did make me smile, just as I am sure you did for so many others.

See you soon

Dave

Dave Callow
General Secretary
dave.callow@swu-union.org.uk



MORRISH SOLICITORS LLP
SWU Social Workers Union

Always there for you.

Parliamentary monitoring report - to 21st October 2026



Campaign Focus - Key Issues and Debates in Parliament

1. Anti-poverty

The Budget - scheduled for 28th October will enable us to assess the Government's approach to poverty, public-service funding and social care. SWU will be looking for measures that improve the lives of low-income families and reduce poverty. This includes decisions affecting local government, housing, employment support and family incomes that may have consequences for the ability of social workers to prevent problems escalating into statutory intervention.

2. Issues Affecting the Workforce

The Budget - The longer-term issue is whether the Government's commitments on the Casey Commission, the National Care Service and the social care workforce plan translate into measurable improvements in services and working conditions. Our test will be whether reform gives social workers the time, resources, professional autonomy and support needed to work safely and effectively.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) - the Commons Business and Trade Committee's inquiry into AI, business and the future of the workforce is still gathering material. SWU needs answers to four key questions:

- **Workload**: will AI reduce administrative burdens, or create additional checking, monitoring and recording work?
- **Professional judgement**: will social workers be expected to rely on automated assessments, risk indicators or recommendations?
- **Accountability**: who is responsible when AI-supported decisions contribute to a safeguarding failure?
- **Employment and skills**: will new systems change staffing levels, job descriptions, supervision and professional development?

We can look further at **'The Impact of AI on Social Workers'** with MPs and Peers from the UK Parliament's Cross-Party Group for Social Work on **Thursday 5th November, 3pm to 5pm** (please drop in as and when you can).

Link:

https://basw.co.uk/events/uk-parliament-cross-party-group-social-work-webinar-impact-ai-social-workers

3. Social Care Reform

Casey Commission - the final recommendations are now expected by summer 2027. The original two-phase approach has been replaced by a single accelerated process. The Health and Social Care Committee had already examined the commission and published its report on 3rd July 2026. The issue now is how the Government will translate its commitments into practical reform.

House of Lords Public Services Committee opened its Children's social care inquiry in September. The committee heard from two senior Department for Education officials and addressed outcomes for children in care, the residential care market, unregistered children's homes and the future of foster care.

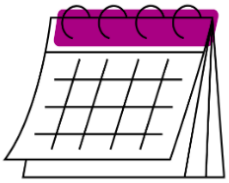
Written evidence from individual contributors can be submitted at Children's social care - Committees - UK Parliament until **26th October 2026**

A Department of Health and Social Care written statement - reported the findings of an independent review of mental health conditions. The review recommends strengthening prevention, early help, wellbeing support and practical interventions without making diagnosis the gateway to support. It highlights the need for improved integration between services.

The Government said its forthcoming Mental Health Strategy would address longer-term recommendations, including stronger partnerships with voluntary and community organisations and a shift towards needs-led support.

Implications to monitor as the strategy develops are the potential effects on referrals, thresholds for support, inter-agency working and the division of responsibilities between children's services, adult social care, health and community organisations.





SWU Social Workers Union Executive Committee call for Wales and Northern Ireland

We are looking for SWU members in Northern Ireland and Wales who are committed to social work and trade unionism, and who can represent the decision-making process covering members and offer insight and accountability.

SWU is now seeking nominations from members to fill vacancies on its Executive Committee. Executive Members play a key part in setting SWU's direction and overseeing its aims and mission, as part of SWU's three-year plan.

The General Secretary is elected by the membership and then provided with a mandate from the Executive to manage the union, the SWU staff and SWU's key functions and legal responsibilities. Executive members can take on responsibilities and activities relevant to their interests and expertise and may represent SWU externally.

The Executive Committee is made up of twelve members: at least two members from England; at least one member each from Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales (national representatives); a Student / NQSW Representative and up to six others (UK representatives). The Chair of the union is elected by the Executive from among the representatives.

The time commitment includes attendance at up to six Executive meetings a year (online or in person) and occasional additional days such as attendance at Annual General Meetings (AGMs). Attendance at Executive meetings is remunerated (if applicable) and expenses can be claimed for other SWU activity.

There are currently vacancies for:

- **Wales Representative / UK Representative*:** 1 position (2-year appointment)
- **Northern Ireland Representative / UK Representative***: 1 position (3-year appointment)

**As per SWU rule 6.1 - In the event that no representatives are nominated for one or more of the national seats, a corresponding number of additional UK Representatives shall be eligible to be nominated and elected instead.*

The successful candidates would take office from the conclusion of the 2026 SWU AGM (27th November 2026) for a 2-year term or 3-year term depending upon the position. Office holders may stand again for another consecutive term of 2 years.

Eligibility

All candidates for election must be a Member of the Union and have been a Member of the Union for a minimum of 1 year continuously immediately prior to nomination.

A candidate for election must be nominated by two Members of the Union. In the case of the National Representatives, nomination must be by two members within the relevant nation. Appropriate Executive applications will be reviewed by a SWU nomination committee for consideration and endorsement. The endorsement process will indicate whether an application is endorsed; however, applicants will still be entitled to stand for election where an election process is required. All candidates must meet the criteria set out in the relevant role description.

SWU encourages applications from Students / Newly Qualified Social Workers and Social Workers from ethnic minority backgrounds who are currently underrepresented on the Executive Committee.

Candidates must complete a nomination form.

The closing date for receipt of nominations has been extended to 5pm on Monday 9th November 2026.

- **SWU Executive Role Description 2026** (PDF)
- **SWU Executive Nomination Form 2026** for Northern Ireland and Wales (Word document)

Completed nomination forms must be accompanied by a head and shoulders photograph in a TIFF or JPEG format. These should be sent via email to: **joanne.marciano@swu-union.org.uk**

Please note that nominees need to provide full contact details including a telephone number and email address.

We say social justice is central to social work. But what does that actually mean when we are working inside systems that can reproduce inequality?

What Does Social Justice Look Like at 10.30 on a Tuesday Morning?

We talk about social justice as though it is something grand. Human rights. Equality. Anti-oppressive practice. Challenging discrimination. Structural inequality. These are big concepts the kind that appear in textbooks, policy documents and conference keynotes. They are also embedded within the profession itself. The BASW Code of Ethics places social justice, human rights and challenging discrimination at the heart of social work, while the Professional Capabilities Framework expects social workers to recognise and challenge the impact of inequality, discrimination and disadvantage in practice.

The question is what this looks like when they leave the page and enter everyday practice.

At 10.30 on a Tuesday morning, that might mean sitting opposite someone who cannot afford to heat their home and trying to work out whether the "support plan" you are about to write will change anything.

It might mean recognising that a person's distress is being interpreted as noncompliance and feeling the system beginning to close around them.

It might mean noticing how unconscious racial bias shapes the way someone's behaviour is understood how the same action can be described as "assertive" in one person and "aggressive" in another.

It might mean watching a disabled person repeatedly explain why they need an adjustment, and seeing the exhaustion build each time they are asked to "just clarify" their needs.

It might mean recognising when a woman is expected to provide unpaid care because "she has family" and seeing how gendered assumptions quietly steer the conversation.

It might mean knowing what would be better for someone; a different service, a different pathway, a different level of support but that service simply does not exist, the criteria exclude them, or the waiting list is measured in months rather than days.

This is not separate from social justice. This is social justice.

They ask us to look beyond the individual in front of us and consider the conditions surrounding them. Poverty, racism, sexism, ableism, austerity, housing shortages and unequal access to power do not sit neatly outside our practice. They shape the circumstances in which people live, the choices available to them and, sometimes, the way professionals understand them.

Social workers do not practice outside society. We practice inside it.

And this creates an uncomfortable tension. We are not simply observers of these systems we also exercise power within them. We assess, record, recommend, refer, allocate, advocate and sometimes make decisions that have a profound impact on people's lives.

We can be the person advocating for someone while also being the person completing the assessment that determines whether they meet the threshold for support. We can challenge discriminatory language while writing records that may shape how that person is

understood by the next professional. We can recognise the structural causes of poverty while still having to make decisions about what resources someone is eligible to receive.

Power does not disappear because our intentions are good.

In fact, some of the most difficult questions in social work sit precisely here. What happens when a profession committed to autonomy, dignity and social justice has to operate through systems of eligibility, thresholds, risk management and scarce resources? What happens when we genuinely want to offer choice, but the choices available to someone are already constrained by poverty, housing, disability, racism or the availability of services?

I think this is where social justice becomes more than a value. It becomes a practice of paying attention to power including our own.

Social work has always sat in this uncomfortable space between the individual and the structural. We meet people at the point where wider inequalities become personal: poverty becomes debt, poor housing becomes illness, discrimination becomes exclusion, lack of support becomes crisis, and years of unpaid care become exhaustion.

Yet there is a danger that once inequality arrives at our desk, it can become reframed as an individual problem.

We assess the person. We assess their needs. We assess their risks. We assess their capacity to cope. We create a plan.

But sometimes the question we need to ask is not simply, “What is wrong here?” but, “What has happened around this person, and what structures have contributed to where they are now?”

That matters. It changes the conversation from fixing people to understanding the conditions in which people are trying to live.

Social justice isn’t just about having the right values. It is about what happens when those values encounter limited resources, organisational pressure, professional hierarchies and our own assumptions. It is about the moments when we notice something isn’t right and the moments when we realise we didn’t notice soon enough.

So this is the question I want to keep returning to: What does social justice actually look like in everyday social work?

Not in policy documents. Not only in professional codes. Not as an abstract commitment.

What does it look like in the assessments we write, the language we choose, the decisions we challenge, the assumptions we notice and the people whose voices we choose to hear?

What does it look like in the quiet conversations, the rushed home visits, the multidisciplinary meetings where one person’s narrative dominates, the supervision sessions where we try to make sense of competing demands?

And what does it look like when we are the ones who need to acknowledge that our own practice has contributed to the problem?

There isn’t a neat answer and perhaps there shouldn’t be.

Social justice asks us to remain uncomfortable enough to keep questioning the systems we work within, including the parts we have become accustomed to. It asks us to notice when something feels off, even if we can’t fix it immediately. It asks us to stay alert to the ways power moves through our work, and to the ways people experience that power.

But noticing is only the beginning.

If we notice that poverty is shaping someone's choices, what do we do with that knowledge? If we recognise racism in a professional conversation, do we challenge it? If we see that a policy is creating barriers for disabled people, do we accept that as inevitable? If we know that social workers are being asked to carry more and more responsibility without the resources to do the work safely, do we describe that as individual burnout or do we recognise it as a collective problem?

Social justice requires more than kindness. It requires challenge, solidarity and sometimes dissent.

That can feel uncomfortable. We are often encouraged to be collaborative, professional and solution focused. Those qualities matter. But professionalism should not mean becoming comfortable with injustice, and collaboration should not mean avoiding disagreement.

Sometimes the most professional thing we can do is ask a difficult question.

I don't think social workers can individually dismantle poverty, racism, ableism, sexism or austerity from an assessment room. We cannot fix every broken system from a case conference or change every outcome through advocacy alone.

But we can choose whether we become invisible within those systems or whether we keep making inequality visible.

We can question the language that becomes accepted as normal. We can challenge assumptions that have gone unexamined. We can listen differently. We can make space for voices that have been overlooked. We can ask who benefits, who carries the cost and whose perspective has become the default.

And sometimes, perhaps most importantly, we can refuse to accept "that's just how the system works" as the end of the conversation.

So, what does social justice look like at 10.30 on a Tuesday morning?

Sometimes it might look like listening differently.

Sometimes it might look like questioning a decision, challenging a piece of language, recognising our own assumptions, or making space for a voice that has been overlooked.

Sometimes it might simply mean refusing to accept that the inequalities we encounter are inevitable.

Perhaps social justice starts with noticing.

But it cannot end there.

About the author

Keleigh Smalley-Willows *is a SWU member, a social work apprentice working in hospital-based adult social care, and a winner of the SWU Assignment: World Social Work Day 2025 essay competition.*



Labour Party Conference 2026, Liverpool - Fringe Event: Social Care and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Event report written by SWU Executive Committee Member Edith Till



The fringe event on 28th September 2026 explored the challenges facing adult social care in England and the need for meaningful, long-term reform. Speakers discussed the development of a National Care Service, financial pressures on individuals and families, workforce challenges, and the importance of better integration between health and social care.

A central theme was that reform must move beyond policy commitments towards practical delivery. Speakers acknowledged that social care reform has been delayed for many years and emphasised the importance of laying the foundations for lasting change while the Casey Commission develops its recommendations.

Social Care Reform and Financial Security

Speakers described the current social care system as fragmented, inconsistent and difficult to navigate. Individuals and families can struggle to access support, understand who is responsible for providing it, and manage the financial consequences of care needs.

The discussion highlighted the importance of developing a more accessible and consistent system, with support based on individual needs rather than the ability to pay. A future National Care Service was discussed as a potential way to improve fairness and coordination.

Financial insecurity was another important theme. The cost of care can place considerable pressure on individuals and families, particularly when income, savings and assets influence access to support. Caring responsibilities can also affect people's ability to remain in employment, pursue career opportunities and maintain financial stability.

Speakers raised concerns about inconsistencies in how people's financial circumstances are assessed when determining contributions towards care. The discussion highlighted the need to consider whether current arrangements distribute costs fairly and adequately protect those requiring support.

Workforce Challenges and Unpaid Carers

The social care workforce was identified as essential to successful reform. Speakers discussed recruitment, retention, pay, training and the need to support care workers appropriately.

They also recognised the substantial contribution of unpaid family carers, who often balance demanding caring responsibilities with employment, financial pressures and their own personal needs.

A sustainable social care system must therefore support both paid professionals and unpaid carers. Long-term workforce planning, appropriate resources and opportunities for skills development were identified as important foundations for improvement.

Integration of Health and Social Care

Speakers highlighted the difficulties caused when health and social care services operate separately. Individuals and families can struggle to navigate different organisations, while administrative delays can prevent people from receiving timely support.

Hospital discharge was discussed as an example of these challenges, particularly when disagreements or unclear responsibilities delay arrangements for ongoing care.

The event explored how closer collaboration between the NHS, local authorities, GPs and community organisations could improve coordination. Examples of local working demonstrated that services can cooperate effectively when professionals communicate and establish shared approaches.

However, speakers emphasised that successful integration requires more than goodwill. Systems, commissioning arrangements and responsibilities must enable professionals to work together effectively, while recognising the distinct roles of health and social care.

Person-Centred Care and Individual Choice

The discussion emphasised that services should be designed around people's individual circumstances, preferences and needs rather than existing organisational structures.

Speakers highlighted the importance of dignity, independence, choice and control. They also stressed that care should respond to individual needs rather than relying primarily on age or diagnosis to determine support.

The experiences of working-age disabled people were considered alongside those of older people. Technology was identified as having potential to support independent living, but it should complement appropriate human care and support rather than replace it.

Public Awareness and Future Reform

Speakers observed that public understanding of social care remains limited, with many people becoming familiar with the system only when they or someone close to them requires support.

Improving public awareness was considered important for building a shared understanding of social care's contribution to society and the need for reform. Greater public engagement could help establish a stronger foundation for future changes.

The Casey Commission was discussed in relation to developing recommendations for future reform. However, speakers also stressed that practical improvements should begin now, particularly in workforce development, service coordination and public engagement.

Conclusion

The event highlighted the need to address the financial, organisational and workforce challenges facing adult social care in England. Discussions focused on supporting individuals and families, improving conditions for care workers, recognising unpaid carers, and creating better connections between health and social care services.

The development of a National Care Service was presented as an opportunity to improve fairness, consistency and coordination. Achieving meaningful change will require sustained political commitment, adequate resources, a supported workforce and effective collaboration across services.

Ultimately, social care should be recognised as an essential part of the country's social infrastructure. Reform must place people at the centre of decision-making and promote dignity, independence and access to appropriate support.

When Social Work Starts to Feel Heavy

Social work is something I care deeply about. I chose this profession because I wanted to help people, to listen when they felt unheard and to make a difference, even if that difference was sometimes small.

But there are days when the job feels heavy.

Social work can be incredibly rewarding, but it can also be emotionally exhausting. We hear people's stories, sit with them during some of the most difficult moments of their lives and sometimes have to make decisions that we know may not make everyone happy. We carry concerns about children, families and adults with us, even after we have left work.

Sometimes, it can be difficult to switch off.

There are days when I finish work feeling completely drained. Not just physically tired, but mentally and emotionally tired too. I might still be thinking about a difficult conversation, worrying about a person I support or wondering whether I could have done something differently.

I think this is something many social workers experience, but we do not always talk about it.

There can be an expectation that because we are professionals, we should be able to cope with everything. We are often very good at encouraging the people we support to ask for help, take care of themselves and recognise when they are struggling. Yet we can find it much harder to do the same for ourselves.

Burnout does not necessarily happen overnight.

Sometimes it is the small things that build up: a busy caseload, constant deadlines, difficult meetings, paperwork, staff shortages and not having enough time to properly process what we have experienced.
Eventually, you notice that you are tired before the day has even started.

For me, recognising this is important. Feeling overwhelmed does not mean that I am not committed to social work. It does not mean that I care any less. It simply means that I am human.

Self-care is important, but I also think we need to be honest about what self-care can and cannot fix. Taking a break, spending time with family, going for a walk or doing something we enjoy can help, but social workers also need supportive teams, good supervision, realistic expectations and workplaces where it is safe to say, "I'm struggling."

Sometimes the most helpful thing is simply having someone listen without trying to fix everything.

We also have a responsibility to look out for each other.

A genuine "How are you?" can mean a lot, especially when someone is having a difficult week.

Social work will always have challenging days. That is part of the profession. But we should not have to become exhausted to prove that we care.

We are allowed to rest. We are allowed to ask for help. We are allowed to have difficult days.

Most importantly, we need to remember that supporting ourselves does not make us less caring social workers. It helps us continue to care.

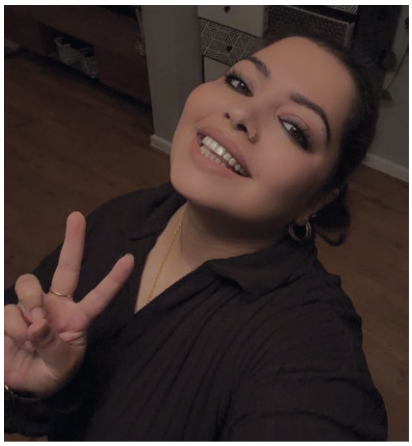
If you're a social worker who is struggling, please remember that you don't have to deal with everything on your own. It's okay to say you're finding things difficult, to ask for help and to admit when things feel too much. The **Social Workers Union (SWU)** can offer advice, support and representation when you need someone in your corner.

So, please check in with yourself and with each other. **Reach out to SWU if you need support, speak up when things become overwhelming, and take a moment to check in on a colleague who might be struggling.** We spend so much of our time caring for others, but we matter too. We deserve to be listened to, supported and reminded that we are not alone.

Because social workers need support, too.

About the author

Sadia Rashid *is a Social Work Student at the University of Winchester, a SWU member, and a BASW Student Ambassador.*



Social Media

If you have not done so then please follow us on Social Media - we post regular updates about the work and developments of the Social Workers Union.

Monthly Newsletter
Monthly newsletters are emailed to all SWU members. If you are not receiving this then please check what email address we have. The newsletters are also published on the web site.

SWU can be found on the following:

Internet: https://swu-union.org.uk
Twitter: https://twitter.com/SWU_UK
Facebook: www.facebook.com/socialworkersunionuk/
YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/@socialworkersunion
Instagram: www.instagram.com/socialworkersunion
LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/company/social-workers-union
Bluesky: https://bsky.app/profile/swu-uk.bsky.social

In Memory of James Birchall

Social work leader, campaigner and dear friend



It is with great sadness that I write of the passing of my dear friend, James Birchall, who died at home on 11th September 2026. James made an enormous contribution to social work, the Social Workers Union (SWU) and the wider trade union movement. He was also a real character, with strong opinions, a wonderful sense of humour and more stories than could ever be told in one obituary.

A friendship and a lifetime of memories

I was first introduced to James in 2006, shortly before my very first BASW Council meeting in Birmingham. As luck would have it, we met in one of his favourite Birmingham bars, enjoying his favourite drink, a pint of Stella. From that moment, we hit it off and remained good friends. Over the years, I discovered more about James through countless conversations, shared experiences and plenty of laughter.

James was one of the founding members of SWU and served as its President for five and a half years between 2012 and 2020, when the President also held the role of Chair. He was subsequently appointed the union's first Honorary President. He served on BASW Council for over a decade, was a former Honorary Treasurer and spent many years as Vice-Chair of the BASW Oxford branch.

Having trained and worked as a journalist, James entered social work in 1970. He brought his experience, determination and campaigning spirit to the profession, working tirelessly to improve social workers' working conditions. He helped lead the SWU/BASW Working Conditions Campaign to Parliament in 2016, and together we presented this work at the International Federation of Social Workers conference in Vienna. He was also a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

During his time as SWU President and Chair, James worked alongside all four SWU General Secretaries and served during the tenures of six BASW Chief Executives. His commitment to both organisations was exceptional, and he cared deeply about their work and the people they represented.

A man with many interests

James was never conventional. Privately educated but critical of public schools, he was once described as the sort of socialist who believed everyone should have a Ferrari. That rather sums him up! He loved talking about his two Turkish Van cats, a rare and beautiful breed, and had served as Vice-Chair of the Turkish Van Cat Club. Its President at the time was none other than Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber. James also had an impressive knowledge of motor racing and Formula One.

We shared a love of curry and occasionally challenged ourselves with a Phall, matching each other for heat. He enjoyed his weekly visits to his favourite Wetherspoon's in Oxford and was one of the few people I knew who could drink ten pints of Stella and still hold a conversation!

James was enjoying retirement and had recently discovered a love of cruises. After a lifetime of hard work and campaigning, it was good to know he was enjoying new experiences and making the most of his time.

A final message

One of my last memories of James is a text he sent me at 11.08 pm after his final session in his local Oxford bar the night before he died. It simply read: “Good heavens, I am a Rabbit.”

I have absolutely no idea what he meant, but somehow, it perfectly captures James's humour and his ability to leave you smiling, bemused and wondering what on earth was going through his mind. I suspect I will never solve the mystery, but I will always treasure that message.

James was a committed campaigner, an independent thinker, a loyal friend and a man who lived life entirely on his own terms. His contribution to social work, SWU and BASW deserves lasting recognition, but I will remember him just as much for our friendship, our conversations, our curries, beers together and the laughter we shared.

Goodbye, James. Thank you for your friendship, your commitment and the memories. You will be greatly missed and fondly remembered.

And James, I still wish I knew what it meant to be a rabbit.

John McGowan
BASW and SWU member



John McGowan and James Birchall

Co-Developing Good Recruitment and Retention of Social Workers in Coastal Areas



Left to right: Prof Jermaine Ravalier, Dr Joe Hanley, interim SWU Chair Chrissie Beatty, Dr Nazm Berry, Dr Paulina Wegrzynek, Dr Ciarán Murphy, SWU General Secretary Dave Callow, and Marria Riaz

SWU was pleased to be invited to the Coastal Social Work Conference in Bournemouth on 13th October. This research dissemination event celebrated the culmination of a major two-year research project led by SWU Ambassador Professor Jermaine Ravalier at Buckinghamshire New University and was funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR).



Former SWU General Secretary John McGowan, interim SWU Chair Chrissie Beatty, SWU General Secretary Dave Callow, and SWU Communications Officer Dr Shawn Major

At the conference we heard from coastal social workers about the specific difficulties they face - from challenges integrating into the community to lack of funding. Many agreed that it was the little things employers and managers could do that made a big impact to improve working conditions such as providing a detailed induction, individual troubleshooting and support, being contactable at all times for emergencies, committing to a year of support, offering an interest-free loan scheme for social workers to set up their lives in the community, being honest about the area during recruitment, and providing winter coats to social workers arriving in winter from countries with a warmer climate.

The Challenge

The social work workforce in England is in crisis. Coastal communities face additional challenges including higher deprivation, limited resources, and fewer educational opportunities. These communities also disproportionately experience many of the social issues that social workers support, including high levels of crime, mental and physical health conditions, deprivation, social isolation, housing issues, unemployment, child poverty, substance use, and disabilities. This research addresses a critical knowledge gap by exploring what works for recruitment and retention in these communities and in these contexts.



The Approach

The research team worked with social workers, employers, educators, and service users to understand current practices and co-develop Best Practice Guidance for improving recruitment and retention in coastal areas. They examined the factors that shape recruitment and retention and, importantly, what good practice looks like in responding to these challenges.



Best Practice Guidance

The culmination of this research is a co-produced Best Practice Guidance for recruitment and retention of social workers in coastal areas which includes:

- Practical strategies for individual social workers
- Employer-focused recommendations
- Professional organisation guidance
- Evidence-based interventions
- Reflective supervision frameworks



This guidance will be available in multiple formats: digital, print, accessible versions (large print, BSL, Braille). In the meantime, the project has now launched a new Coastal Social Work research project website where you can explore the team's work and learn more about recruitment and retention in these communities. There will be lots of findings and publications upcoming so be sure to watch this space: https://www.bucks.ac.uk/coastal-social-work

The team's article "Not just a day at the beach: challenges experienced by social workers in England's coastal communities" has now been in the *British Journal of Social Work* and can be read here: https://academic.oup.com/bjsw/advance-article/doi/10.1093/bjsw/bcag231/8865242

Have questions about the research? Want to get involved? Need the Best Practice Guidance? You can contact the team at: SWRRCoastalStudy@bucks.ac.uk

We're calling on Prime Minister Andy Burnham to deliver a 'Right to Food'

Over the last six months, the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU) has toured the country, taking evidence from communities as part of the work of the Right To Food UK Commission, backed by Right to Food Campaign, the University of Westminster, BFAWU, and the Food and Work Network. SWU and BASW back UK Right To Food Commission which was launched in Westminster in November 2025.

Over the last six months, BFAWU have toured the country, taking evidence from communities as part of the work of the Right To Food UK Commission which backed by the Right to Food Campaign, the University of Westminster, BFAWU, and the Food and Work Network. The community evidence found:

- Food insecurity is as much about **dignity as it is about food**
- Food insecurity is a **problem of income and affordability not food availability**
- Food insecurity **reflects wider inequalities**
- The food system is propped up by **waste and ultra processed foods**
- The food system is **shaped by the wider social environment**
- **Prevention and income adequacy** are more effective than crisis response
- Legal recognition of the right to food **must be backed by clear action and accountability**

You can read the Commission's full report "A Roadmap to Delivering Food Security for All by 2035" here: https://actionnetwork.org/user_files/user_files/000/150/433/original/rtfuk-final-report.pdf

Acute food insecurity **has reached crisis levels, affecting more than 14 million people in 2026** (as measured by Trussell Trust), a number which continues to rise.

The latest estimates of the **total health-related hidden costs of the UK's dysfunctional food system amount to £298 billion per year**, up by 10% since 2024.

Sign the petition to Prime Minister Andy Burnham: https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/prime-minister-make-a-right-to-food-a-reality-2



SWU at the BASW UK Conference 2026

It was a privilege for SWU to attend BASW's conference "Social Work Live - Practice and Careers 2026" in Birmingham on 27th October. SWU were delighted to welcome current members to our stall as well as prospective SWU members who in many cases requested the important "opt in" option to add discounted SWU membership to their existing BASW membership.

We were also pleased to have been visited at the SWU stall by new BASW Chair Priscilla Kurewa who we look forwards to working with, and Fran Fuller who held the dual role of first SWU President and BASW Chair when the Social Workers Union was formed in 2011.



BASW Chair Priscilla Kurewa and SWU Communications Officer Dr Shawn Major



SWU General Secretary Dave Callow and Former SWU President & BASW Chair Fran Fuller



SWU GS Dave Callow, BASW Head of Professional Practice Kate Cuthbertson, BASW Professional Practice Leads Christian Beech and Denise Monks, and SWU Assignment 2025 winner Wisdom P. Mensah

The benefits of BASW/SWU joint membership were a reoccurring theme throughout the day where BASW supports you as a social worker and SWU supports you as a worker. This joint approach gives our members practice support, workplace protection, and a collective voice to improve both the profession and the conditions in which social workers work.

It was a pleasure for SWU to work with BASW colleagues as this event as well speak to attendees with our much-valued Advice and Representation Officers. Pictured right are BASW/SWU Advice and Representation Trade Union Officers Lyse Hurd and Lynne Gargiulo.



Presenting a session on challenging far-right narratives from a social work perspective was an opportunity for SWU General Secretary Dave Callow and BASW Professional Practice Lead Denise Monks to explore some of the issues facing both our profession and wider society. At a time when fear and division are propagated by the far right, particularly during periods of economic uncertainty and social change, our presentation focused on the importance of social work's core values of social justice, human rights and anti-oppressive practice.



Collective action, solidarity (belonging) and trade union organising were presented as essential tools for creating meaningful change, whether at an individual level or for systemic change. Drawing on radical social work traditions, trade union values and the work of thinkers such as Gramsci, our session explored how divisive ideas can become accepted as "common sense" and why social workers have a responsibility to challenge narratives that divide communities and marginalise groups of people. SWU's message was one of optimism and action where social workers are not passive observers of social change but instead active participants in collective action and union activism.

The session concluded with Denise, who highlighted the important role that BASW continues to play in providing professional leadership, policy influence and practical support for social workers across the UK. Her presentation highlighted ways in which members can find a sense of belonging in special interest groups as well as a range of resources to support social workers who may find themselves working in hostile environments where far right narratives are present.



Dave was also a judge for this year's BASW Social Work Journalism Awards which celebrate nuanced, informed, and balanced reporting that demonstrates a keen understanding of the profession and the people who use social work services. The awards were launched in 2022 after SWU and Campaign Collective published the Guidelines on media reporting of social workers.



He announced the winning entry for the National Broadcasting category - Nick Martin, Fiona Mackie and Andrew Brown from Sky News. The subjects of adoption and fostering featured prominently in this years' entries, reflecting the wider media focus on this area of social work.

Ask the Prime Minister to deliver the dinners so that no child is left behind



A school dinner for every primary school child would ease financial pressure for hundreds of thousands across the country.

The National Education Union, alongside SWU and **370+ civil society organisations and public figures**, is fighting to ensure every child has the basics to learn, thrive and go on to a bright future. Our movement has already secured hot, healthy school dinners for every primary child in London - and won Free School Meals for half a million more children on Universal Credit.

Add your name to the No Child Left Behind petition if you think every child should have a hot, nutritious meal at school: **https://deliverthedinners.org.uk**

Talk to SWU webinar recording: What we do at SWU and how to get more involved



This Talk to SWU webinar session held on 15th September was an opportunity to meet new General Secretary Dave Callow and interim SWU Chair Chrissie Beatty who recorded the webinar live at the TUC Congress 2026 in Brighton. Additional guests included SWU Treasurer and Northern Ireland Representative Gerry Madden, representatives from Dains Accounting, and Campaign Collective founding member Simon Francis.

Members can now watch the recording and learn about:

- How SWU and BASW work together through our Co-operation Agreement
- How SWU supports its Union Contacts
- What General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) courses and training are available to SWU members
- What funding is available through the SWU Campaign Fund and how to create your own campaign
- How SWU finances are managed and audited every year
- How to create a Motion for the SWU Annual General Meeting 2026
- And more!

Click here to watch the webinar: https://youtu.be/GS415Bx3ZVU



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Upcoming Events

Islamophobia Awareness Month



The theme for IAM 2026 is “Don’t Let It Slide”, focusing on how Islamophobia isn’t only what happens to someone, it’s also what others allow to happen.

Don’t Let It Slide is calling to action, courage, and everyday responsibility. Acknowledging discrimination and working to tackle it, rather than allowing it to be normalised.

Visit the IAM website for resources and help make a difference in your community: https://www.islamophobia-awareness.org/resources



Thursday 5th November, 3 - 5pm, online (Microsoft Teams)

We invite SWU and BASW members to attend this online consultation for the UK Parliament Cross Party Group for Social Work and share your experiences of using Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the workplace with MPs.

We are holding this online session so that MPs who support social workers can hear directly from you about how AI is being introduced into your work. They want to hear what you think is positive about AI and how it can help you to do your job and they want to hear your concerns about the impact of AI now and in the future.

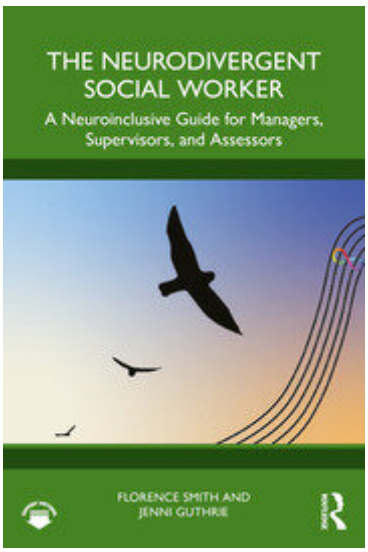
This session will directly inform our work with the UK Parliament Cross Party Group for Social Work in Westminster and will focus on listening to what social workers have to say.

Book your free place today: https://basw.co.uk/events/cross-party-group-social-work-webinar-impact-ai-social-workers

If you are unable to attend this webinar we would still like to hear your views! We invite our members to email us before November 5th about their experiences of using AI in the workplace to: campaigns@swu-union.org.uk

Meet the authors of [The Neurodivergent Social Worker: A Neuroinclusive Guide for Managers, Supervisors and Assessors]

Tuesday 10th November, 1 - 2pm, online



Meet authors Florence Smith and Jenni Guthrie, multiply neurodivergent social workers who have written a new book aimed specifically at managers, supervisors and assessors who work in social work and social care contexts.

Using a strengths-based and neuro-affirming perspective, this book shows how managers and supervisors can understand, value, and utilise the knowledge skills and values of neurodivergent social workers within teams and services. Offering frameworks, ideas, and advice on specific social work contexts such as supervision, organising, and planning work, enabling a sensory-affirming workplace, as well as developing trusted and empathic working relationships, it will help social work professionals to practice inclusively and anti-oppressively with their neurodivergent colleagues.

This book will be a useful resource for social work managers and supervisors, as well as practice educators and the wider organisation. Neurodivergent social workers will also find the information useful in terms of their own working strategies and approaches.

https://basw.co.uk/events/meet-authors-webinar-florence-smith-and-jenni-guthrie



Saturday 14th November , 11am - 12pm, online

The Digital Threat Intelligence for Social Workers online workshop is a free event for social work students which will introduce online harms, digital safeguarding and digital footprint awareness, with a focus on their relevance to social work.

Details and free registration: https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/digital-threat-intelligence-for-social-workers-tickets-2003556397118



Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) Trade Union Conference

Saturday 14th November, London

Join the PSC conference for trade unionists on Saturday 14th November in Central London, where you can continue to plan, network and organise BDS campaigns for Palestine in your workplace and in your trade union.

Register here: https://palestinecampaign.org/events/workers-organising-for-palestine

BASW Diaspora Special Interest Group (SIG) Mentoring Café

Thursday 19th November, 7 - 9pm

The Diaspora SIG, formed by and for Global Majority social workers and leaders, recognises the unique challenges we face in our professional journeys.

We are hosting a Mentoring Network to share experiences, build connections, and explore support that can help make our journeys lighter and easier.

Together, we can learn, grow, uplift one another, and thrive.

Please scan the QR code to join in. The event is free.

We look forward to connecting with you!



SWU Annual General Meeting 2026

Friday 27th November 2026 from 2 - 4pm, online

The SWU Annual General Meeting (AGM) is an event for SWU members only. This online event is free to attend and voting facilities will be provided during the meeting.

This AGM is a chance for you to share your views on the future and direction of your union. Please do register to be a part of it and say hello.

More details and the registration link are available on the SWU website:
https://swu-union.org.uk/2025/10/swu-annual-general-meeting-2026

Social Workers in England - registration renewal deadline:

30th November

The Social Work England registration renewal takes place between 1st September and 30th November every year. you must complete and submit the application form, pay the registration fee, and record a minimum of two pieces of CPD - at least one piece of CPD must include peer reflection.

March Against the Machines

Saturday 5th December, London, BBC Portland Place, 12 - 4pm

Pull the Plug is organising to unite people in a major national demonstration for all organisations and individuals concerned about the impacts of AI:

"We believe decisions about AI should not be left to governments and Big Tech companies alone. We are calling for greater democratic oversight and regulation of AI."

AI is already having significant effects on our lives, communities, and environment: misinformation and surveillance, environmental impacts, the rapid expansion of data centres, and leaving workers at risk. AI systems carry deep-seated biases with real-life consequences for women, for racialised people, for trans people, and for people navigating our social care and justice systems.



Sign up for the march here: https://pulltheplug.uk/forms/sign-up-to-march-against-the-machines

Radicalised Twice

The girl behind the harlequin and the social worker I am becoming - written by Social Workers Union member MJ Lace after attending the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) Summer School 2026.



From a £70 Baxi wall heater in Thatcher-era South Yorkshire to the women of the miners' strike: a lifetime of disability, resistance, solidarity and three careers committed to social justice.

My first cost-benefit analysis was worth £70

I was radicalised at 11 years old. Not by a political party. Not by a university lecturer. Certainly not by a social work textbook. I was radicalised by a £70 Baxi wall heater, a Christmas I could not spend at home, and a system whose arithmetic made no sense to a child.

I was born with a rare and complex kidney dysfunction. I underwent **bilateral ureteric reimplantation**: major reconstructive surgery involving both ureters, the tubes that carry urine from the kidneys to the bladder. In the language of an 11-year-old, I needed to be replumbed. Seriously replumbed.

The surgery was followed by months and months of rehabilitation. Hospital became a significant part of childhood. I wanted what other children seemed able to take for granted: to go to school, play with my friends, be with my family and live an ordinary life. I wanted my body to work as well as it could. Most of all, I wanted to go home.

My surgeon was Mr McKinnon, affectionately known as **Mac the Knife**.

A memorable nickname for a surgeon, although perhaps not the most reassuring when you are the child on the operating table.

As Christmas approached, going home became a possibility. There was just one obstacle: my mother needed a Baxi wall heater to make our home suitable for my return. It cost £70. She sought welfare assistance and was refused.

So I asked Mr McKinnon: 'Do you earn more than £70?' He said yes. 'Does it cost more than £70 to keep me on this ward?' Again, yes. 'Well, do me a favour then. Give my mum £70 and we can all go home.'

There it was: **my first cost-benefit analysis**. No degree in economics. No assessment framework. Just a child who understood that keeping her in hospital cost more than helping her return to her family.

I was not questioning the care I had received. I was questioning the logic of a system that could support extensive medical treatment but would not provide the modest practical help needed to make that treatment count in everyday life.

At the time, I did not know the language of the social model of disability, structural inequality or joined-up services. I only knew that I had endured surgery and rehabilitation, yet an environmental barrier and a funding decision still stood between me and home.

The surgeons had worked to give me a functioning urinary system. Yet a £70 heater was still standing between me and Christmas with my family. I understood the contradiction long before I learned the theory. Perhaps that was my first moment as a radical social worker. I simply had another forty-odd years and three careers to get through before someone gave me the title.

South Yorkshire: where politics entered the front room

I grew up in Rotherham in the 1970s and 1980s. Margaret Thatcher's Britain was not an abstract period of political history to me. It was the world around my family, my school and my friends. Industrial change, conflict and public spending decisions reached into ordinary homes.

The welfare decision about our heater taught me that power can be exercised through something as unremarkable as a refusal letter. Somebody far from the hospital ward could make a decision that shaped whether I went home. That is a lesson about policy, yes; but first it is a lesson about childhood, belonging and who gets heard.

I was not born with a sophisticated political vocabulary. I learned by noticing. I noticed who was allowed to make decisions. I noticed whose needs were treated as reasonable. I noticed who had to keep asking.

CND, Sheffield and Threads

At 11 I joined the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. I was frightened of nuclear war and I wanted to do something about it. I marched

through Sheffield, the city just next door to Rotherham, alongside people who believed our futures were worth defending.

Then, in 1984, when I was 13, the BBC broadcast **Threads**, written by Barry Hines and directed by Mick Jackson. Its Sheffield setting made the imagined nuclear catastrophe feel terrifyingly close. These were streets and communities I recognised.

What stayed with me was not only the destruction. It was the collapse of the things that hold life together: healthcare, food, housing, communication, relationships, community. The title itself was an image of interdependence. Pull enough threads apart and the whole fabric tears.

Social work is concerned with those threads. A person's wellbeing cannot be understood in isolation from family, income, housing, education, public services or political decisions. A crisis in one part of life can spread into every other. I did not know ecological systems theory then, but I was learning to see the connections.

The miners' children were my friends

When the 1984-85 miners' strike arrived, it did not arrive as a distant headline. Many of the miners' children were my friends. We knew one another. We shared a community. I saw the hardship around us and, as Christmas approached, I wanted my friends to have presents.

I approached Woolworths for jigsaws that could be wrapped and given to children at the Christmas party. I helped wrap gifts. I raised money in Rotherham town centre dressed as a harlequin.

That detail sounds cheerful. It was cheerful in part. But there was another reason for the costume, one that changes the story.

I was hiding. I had recently left hospital. My father, who struggled with alcoholism, had separated from our family. I wore the harlequin costume because I did not want him to recognise me.

Imagine that for a moment. A child making herself conspicuous in a town centre to raise money for other children, while hoping to remain invisible to one person. I was visible for a cause and concealed for myself.

Looking back through the eyes of a therapist, teacher and trainee social worker, I see how easily an observer could have misunderstood me. They might have seen confidence, initiative and an unusually resourceful child. Those were real strengths. But they would not necessarily have seen the fear, uncertainty and family circumstances beneath the costume.

The harlequin was visible. The frightened child underneath was not. Both were me. That is why assessment must be curious, relational and attentive to context. A person's presentation is never their whole story.

I was not standing above my friends and handing down charity. I was standing beside them. They were not a category of need; they were people I loved. That, to me, is the beginning of solidarity.

Rose Hunter and the Iron Ladies: history walks into the room

In July 2026, the Social Workers Union supported my attendance at the General Federation of Trade Unions summer school. I was 55, a disabled and neurodivergent woman, and a final-year social work student approaching the last stage of qualification.

There I met **Rose Hunter,** Chair of the North Staffordshire Miners' Wives Action Group, whose activism is represented in Daniel Draper's documentary I**ron Ladies**.

The women of the mining communities organised practical support, stood together, spoke publicly and challenged power. They were not simply supporting characters in somebody else's industrial struggle. They were organisers and leaders, and their work mattered to the survival and identity of communities.

As a young person, I had watched women like Rose and admired them. Now, more than four decades later, I was meeting one of them. The girl who had wrapped jigsaws for miners' children and the woman attending a trade union summer school seemed suddenly to occupy the same room.

I found it profoundly moving. Not because the past had become a museum piece, but because the principles were still alive: collective action, mutual aid, courage, persistence and the refusal to leave people behind.

The summer school did not give me a new set of values. It reconnected me with the ones I had carried all my life. **I had been radicalised once by the circumstances of childhood. I felt radicalised again by the living history of solidarity.**

Three careers, one set of principles

Social work is my third career. Before this, I worked as a specialist teacher and SENCO, and in therapeutic and psychotherapeutically informed practice. I have spent my professional life with people whose differences, disabilities, distress or circumstances are too often misunderstood.

In education I saw how systems could exclude children by expecting them to learn and communicate in one approved way. In therapeutic work I saw how trauma, relationships and social circumstances shape what is possible for a person. In social work I am learning to bring these understandings together with law, rights, professional accountability and structural analysis.

These careers are not unrelated detours. They are different approaches to the same question: **what prevents people from living a life of dignity and belonging, and what can we do together to change it?**

I have changed careers. I have never changed my principles.

Radical social work means looking at the roots

The word 'radical' comes from the Latin *radix*: root. Radical social

work asks us to look beneath the immediate presenting problem. Bailey and Brake's influential collection **Radical Social Work** (1975) placed social work in a wider analysis of class, power and structural inequality.

If someone cannot heat their home, do we only assess their budgeting? If a disabled person cannot enter employment, do we only examine their impairment? If a family struggles with poverty, do we record their difficulties without asking how the wider economy and welfare system shape them?

My £70 heater is a small story with a large lesson. The medical system could undertake complex reconstructive surgery. Yet a practical barrier to returning home remained unresolved. A narrowly individualised approach might describe my condition and my mother's circumstances. A structural approach asks why the systems did not work together.

Radical practice does not mean disregarding safeguarding, evidence or professional boundaries. It means recognising that our assessments take place within unequal distributions of resources and power, and that ethical practice sometimes requires us to challenge those conditions.

Freire: consciousness becomes action

Paulo Freire's **Pedagogy of the Oppressed** (1970) gives me language for something I began doing before I could name it. His account of critical consciousness links recognising oppression with acting to transform the conditions that sustain it.

I did not only fear nuclear war; I joined CND. I did not only worry about my friends during the miners' strike; I collected gifts and raised funds. I did not only feel frustrated in hospital; I questioned the financial logic keeping me there.

None of those actions made me a fully formed political thinker. They made me a child beginning to connect experience with agency. That matters in social work. People using services bring knowledge about their own lives. Our role is not to deposit answers into them but to create the conditions for dialogue, choice and collective problem-solving.

The social model: surgery was not the whole answer

Michael Oliver's work on the social model of disability helps me distinguish the medical treatment I needed from the social barriers I encountered. My bilateral ureteric reimplantation addressed a bodily condition. The absence of adequate heating and the refusal of support affected whether I could participate in family life.

Both dimensions mattered. Recognising structural barriers does not diminish the importance of surgery, rehabilitation or healthcare. It insists that successful treatment alone does not guarantee inclusion.

I see this in work with disabled people whose independence is constrained by inaccessible homes, unsuitable transport, equipment delays or rigid service rules. We must ask not only what a person can do, but what the environment enables or prevents.

The profession must examine itself

Neil Thompson's **PCS model** asks us to understand discrimination at personal, cultural and structural levels. It is an especially useful challenge for a profession committed to anti-oppressive practice.

My journey through social work education and towards my final placement in Birmingham has involved barriers and uncertainty. I have sometimes felt the exhausting familiarity of having to explain access needs, justify adjustments and demonstrate capability while navigating systems not designed around disabled and neurodivergent people.

I do not assume every obstacle is discrimination. Professional education must have standards, and social workers must be accountable. But a profession that teaches inclusion should be willing to examine whether its own arrangements make inclusion possible.

Are we listening to disabled students?
Are adjustments timely and meaningful? Do we see difference as a source of professional insight as well as a matter of access? Do we ask whether organisational culture matches our stated values?

Anti-oppressive practice cannot be something we do only for people using services. It must also shape how we treat students, colleagues and one another.

Surviving social work should not be the ceiling

Neil Thompson and John McGowan's **How to Survive in Social Work** is an important prompt to think about the pressures on practitioners and the need for support, solidarity and professional sustainability.

I have often been called resilient. Sometimes that feels like recognition; sometimes it feels like a request to keep enduring what should have been changed. Resilience is valuable, but it cannot substitute for accessible systems, manageable expectations, fair working conditions and genuine support.

When somebody succeeds despite repeated barriers, we should celebrate their achievement and still ask why the barriers were there. When a social worker copes with impossible pressures, we should admire their commitment and still ask whether the workplace is safe and ethical.

I do not want merely to survive this profession. I want to thrive in it, and I want colleagues and the people we support to thrive too.

Why the union matters

Trade unionism joins personal experience to collective responsibility. It recognises that a problem experienced by one worker may reveal a wider pattern that cannot be solved by individual determination alone.

The miners' wives understood this. Rose Hunter and her fellow organisers embodied it. The Social Workers Union's support in attending the GFTU summer school brought that lesson into the present for me.

Social workers deserve safe working conditions, professional respect, the ability to practise ethically and the support to challenge injustice. Those concerns are connected to the quality of the services people receive. Workers' rights and service users' rights should not be set against each other.

Solidarity is not sentiment. It is something we do: showing up, listening, organising, challenging, and refusing to leave the next person to fight alone.

When will the marginalisation end?

At 55, as I complete my final 100-day placement in Birmingham, I still ask a question that has followed me from childhood: **when will the marginalisation end?**

When will a disabled person stop having to prove, repeatedly, that they belong? When will access be treated as an ordinary condition of participation rather than an exceptional favour? When will institutions recognise that knowledge and capability can look, sound and move differently?

I am not entering social work to rescue people. I know how uncomfortable it is when other people take control of your story. I am entering because I believe in autonomy, rights, relationships and the power of people to define their own lives.

My lived experience does not replace evidence or professional judgment. It gives me a reason to use them carefully, to remain curious and to question whose voice is missing.

Radicalised twice- and not finished yet

I think about that little girl in Rotherham. The one who endured major surgery and months of rehabilitation. The one who asked Mac the Knife whether it was cheaper to keep her in hospital than give her mother £70. The one who marched with CND, watched Threads, and wrapped jigsaws for the children of mining families.

I think about the harlequin, bright enough for a town centre to notice, while the child inside hoped not to be recognised by her father. I think about what that child knew of fear, loyalty and the importance of doing something rather than nothing.

And I think about meeting Rose Hunter in 2026. That moment joined my childhood to my present professional life. I t reminded me that the history of social justice is made by ordinary people who decide to stand alongside one another.

I have been a disabled child, a specialist teacher, a therapeutic practitioner and now a trainee social worker. I have learned new languages for injustice, and new methods of responding to it. But the principle has not changed.

I was radicalised at 11. At 55, I was radicalised all over again.

I have changed careers. I have never changed my principles.

And I am not entering social work to become part of the furniture.

I am entering social work to help move the furniture so everybody can get through the door.

If that makes me a radical social worker, good. After more than forty years of asking difficult questions, I have no intention of stopping now.

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About the author

***MJ Lace** is a final-year BSc (Hons) Social Work student at Cardiff Metropolitan University, undertaking her final placement in Birmingham. A disabled, neurodivergent entrepreneur, specialist teacher and SENCO, and psychotherapeutically informed practitioner, she is entering her third career. Her work centres on disability rights, inclusion, human rights, neurodivergence and social justice.*



Austerity Action Group Report

Update report written by Austerity Action Group (AAG) member Andrew MacDonald

Updates relating to poverty and austerity:

Recent poverty figures from the Joseph Rowntree Trust show that the UK has hit a record number of people living in "very deep poverty". Their UK Poverty Report 2026 shows half of all those in poverty - or 6.8 million people - are unable to afford the cost of food, energy bills and clothing.

Here is a mini-briefing about how the proposed pension triple lock for 2030 would work: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvlNqP6THqI

A quarter of Social Workers use their own money to support people: https://basw.co.uk/about-social-work/psw-magazine/articles/quarter-social-workers-use-own-money-support-people-every

Local Authorities have 40% less funding; some have issued Section 114 (bankruptcy) notices: https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/local-authority-section-114-notices

Over a fifth of austerity generation children scarred by poverty, a direct legacy of the welfare benefit cuts imposed by Conservative governments in recent years, research reveals: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2026/apr/13/uk-austerity-children-scarred-poverty-study-conservatives

Fuel poverty:

Fuel poverty disproportionately affects poor people. The End Fuel Poverty Coalition monitors the rising costs of fuel and its implications for us all. The Coalition's letter to the Chancellor for the budget: https://www.endfuelpoverty.org.uk/coalition-sets-out-winter-rescue-plan-for-chancellors-budget

Rachel Reeves sought to break the link between the cost of gas & electriicity: https://www.theguardian.com/business/2026/apr/16/reeves-break-link-between-gas-cost-and-electricity-prices

The Timms Review co-chair update from September 2026: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-timms-review-co-chair-update-september-2026/the-timms-review-co-chair-update-september-2026

The Casey Review

Independent Commission on Adult Social Care: https://caseycommission.co.uk

Immigration, Assessment and Trafficking

Asylum seekers and other immigrant groups suffer from poverty. Age assessment determines the level of support people receive. Some people have no recourse to public funds.

The Refugee Council is an informed and reliable source of information: https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

Criticism of the Home Office's national age assessment board (NAAB): https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2026/feb/18/home-office-age-assessment-child-refugees-ngos

Fall in asylum seekers. UK net migration has dropped to the lowest level, outside of the Covid pandemic, since 2012: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c70989jrdweo

The UK government will stop issuing study visas to people from Afghanistan, Cameroon, Myanmar and Sudan from March 2025, Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood has said, as well as stopping skilled work visas to Afghans: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cx2jy74895eo

Cross-government guidance for local authorities and councils in England on rights and entitlements to service and support for migrants subject to a no recourse to public funds (NRPF) condition: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/no-recourse-to-public-funds-guidance-for-local-authorities/cross-government-guidance-for-local-authorities-and-councils-in-england-on-rights-and-entitlements-to-service-and-support-for-migrants-subject-to-a-no

Assessing and supporting adults who have no recourse to public funds (England): https://guidance.nrpfnetwork.org.uk/reader/practice-guidance-adults/assessing-and-supporting-adults-who-have-no-recourse-to-public-funds-england-all-content

The Daily Telegraph shows the public sector dependency on immigration: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2026/03/28/immigration-falling-public-sector-crisis

International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)

The IFSW sometimes reports on poverty and austerity elsewhere in the world and commonly refers to it as social protection. For context, here is the IFSW Global Definition of Social work: https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work

The Role of Social Work in Social Protection: https://www.ifsw.org/the-role-of-social-work-in-social-protection-systems-the-universal-right-to-social-protection

Cuts to the aid budget: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/uk-budget-economy-foreign-aid-africa-b3073304.html

New strategy for Roma and Traveller inclusion across Europe: https://www.ifsw.org/marking-a-new-roma-and-traveller-inclusion-strategy-for-europe-from-the-council-of-europe

Sustainable Development Goals – Investment in people and communities: https://www.ifsw.org/ifsw-un-representatives-attend-the-uns-2026-asia-pacific-sdg-forum

Social workers for a free Palestine: https://ukpalmhn.com/social-workers-for-a-free-palestine

SWU Social Workers Union

Why join SWU and why you might need us

Only **£35** a year with your present BASW membership (**£10** a year for students)

Every year, the Social Workers Union skilled TU Officers help Social Workers with a range of different situations, from the small and easily resolved, to more significant and prolonged conduct issues. Disciplinary and grievance procedures, including representation at internal hearings - this is only guaranteed if you are a SWU member.

Remember - investigations into professional social work practice and allegations of misconduct - where this is done by your employer, representation is only guaranteed* if you are a member of SWU.

SWU sits on the National Executive of the General Federation of Trade Unions. Have a look at the access you get as a member of GFTU training and development. SWU is one of the fastest growing unions in the UK - be part of the progress.

Being part of a strong growing trade union is a vital and recognised way of successfully being part of the Trade Union movement. Help us campaign for better working conditions, pay and professional recognition. If you want to join SWU or learn more about becoming actively involved as a Union Contact get in touch: unioncontacts@swu-union.org.uk or email SWU Admin: joanne.marciano@swu-union.org.uk



Belong to a Social Work union that:

- is lobbying MPs and Peers to improve working conditions for social workers.
- partners with organisations to support good working conditions and with opportunities to be active as a SWU Union Contact.
- campaigns to change legislation bills.
- collaborates with external unions and continue to be active through membership of General Federation of Trade Unions and ongoing union campaigns.
- funds the Austerity Action Group and opportunities to get involved.

As a SWU member you get:

- Full guaranteed employment representation*
- Free advice and support from A&R and Union Contacts
- Free financial health check from Lighthouse Group
- 10% off Morrish Solicitors
- General Federation of Trade Unions free training courses
- Discounted training from Avenue Professional Group (Dr Neil Thompson)
- Opportunity to be active as part of the trade union movement
- Monthly Newsletter

**Terms and conditions apply regarding new members and levels of representation*

Please check your membership to continue or opt in to being a SWU Member through BASW membership

Find SWU on the following:

https://swu-union.org.uk

https://www.facebook.com/socialworkersunionuk

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https://www.instagram.com/socialworkersunion

https://twitter.com/SWU_UK

https://www.youtube.com/@socialworkersunion

swu-admin@swu-union.org.uk

https://bsky.app/profile/swu-uk.bsky.social