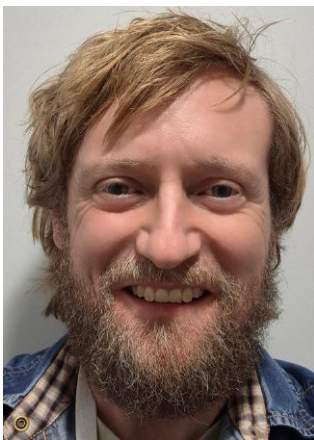


Building the SWU we need



Welcome, members of the Social Workers Union. I am very humbled to have been elected as your General Secretary, and it is a pleasure to write to you now in my first newsletter.

At this point I would like to acknowledge the work, energy and commitment our union has benefitted from these last 10 years from our former General Secretary John McGowan.

One of my first priorities as your new General Secretary will be launching a new Union Contact Development Programme, creating a clear pathway for SWU members who want to play a more active role in our union. Built around support, training, recognition and leadership development, the programme will help us strengthen the SWU presence in workplaces across the four nations.

Most importantly, it will deliver real benefits for members:

- Better trained workplace contacts.
- Greater visibility for SWU in workplaces.
 - More opportunities for members to get involved.

- Stronger campaigns informed by frontline experience.
- A bigger, louder voice for social workers.

The programme will begin with a Welcome and Belonging phase during the first month, ensuring every new Union Contact feels supported from day one. New activists will receive an induction, practical guidance and access to peer support networks, helping them build confidence in their role. Speaking out does not need to be a lonely path.

During months one to three, Union Contacts will have access to high-quality trade union education through the General Federation of Trade Unions. This will help members develop confidence in communication, workplace organising, equality, campaigning and leadership skills that benefit both their union activity and their professional and personal development.

From month three onwards, the focus shifts to involvement and influence. Union Contacts will be able to contribute to campaigns, support recruitment, engage with students, and participate in a growing national network of activists through regular forums and learning events. There is strength in our union.

Along the way, members will have opportunities to gain recognition for their contribution through a structured

progression pathway, moving from UC Advocate through to UC Champion, with achievements recognised through certificates, leadership opportunities and national recognition.

A stronger Union Contact network means SWU becomes more visible, more connected and better able to represent the interests of social workers wherever they work. It also delivers on a key commitment from my election campaign: investing in our members and developing the next generation of confident union leaders.

The months ahead will see a number of initiatives designed to strengthen SWU and increase member engagement. The Union Contact Development Programme will be one of the first.

SWU's future has been and will continue to be built by members who are supported, skilled, connected and empowered to make a difference. I want all SWU members to feel the belonging a trade union can provide, and I understand that activism looks different for all of us. You are valued whether you are a workplace activist, a campaigner, someone who speaks up when needed, or simply a member who wants the support and protection of their union. Whatever your level of activism, you are welcome in SWU, and you will always belong in your union.

Congratulations to Chrissie Beatty on being elected as interim SWU Chair who I know will be fantastic in this role. It has been great working with Chrissie in the Cross-Party Group for Social Work we launched at Westminster, and we are looking forward to attending the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in Brighton on 15th September as well as hosting our online "Talk to SWU" live from congress at 12pm the same day.

Looking further ahead, I will be hosting a panel discussion at The Social Work Show in Manchester on 28th September 2026 where we will explore findings from coastal social work research. I hope you can make it.

It is a pleasure to congratulate our SWU assignment competition winners in this newsletter and in this respect, acknowledge the importance of our student and newly qualified members - you are always welcome.

Finally, I would like to thank the SWU staff team and SWU Executive committee for their support as I begin the role as your general secretary.

Dave

Dave Callow
General Secretary

dave.callow@swu-union.org.uk

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:

Website: <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>

John McGowan, Social Workers Union General Secretary from 2016-2026

“Ten years of championing social workers, strengthening the Union, and standing up for social justice.”

John McGowan
SWU Social Workers Union **General Secretary**
2016 – 2026

On behalf of members, colleagues, partners and friends of the Social Workers Union, we thank John McGowan for ten remarkable years of leadership and dedicated service.

Thank you for your vision. Thank you for your courage. Thank you for always putting social workers first.



A Voice for Social Workers

When John McGowan became General Secretary of the Social Workers Union (SWU) in 2016, the profession was already facing significant pressures and continues to do so. Austerity, rising demand for services, workforce shortages and increasing public scrutiny were placing unprecedented demands on social workers across the United Kingdom.

What followed over the next decade was a period of growth, influence, and visibility for the Union.

Under John's leadership as the first General Secretary as a separate organisation from the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), SWU evolved into a confident national voice for social workers and one that combined professional values with strong trade union principles and ensured that practitioners had both representation and a platform from which to be heard.

Building a Stronger Union

One of John's most significant achievements has been helping to strengthen SWU's identity as the specialist trade union dedicated to social workers.

Working closely with members, staff, the SWU Executive Committee, other unions, and professional partners such as BASW, he helped build an organisation that is widely recognised for its principled advocacy, member support and commitment to the profession.

During his tenure, SWU increased its national profile and became an influential contributor to debates on social work, public services and social justice.



Leading National Campaigns

Over ten years, SWU became a driving force behind campaigns calling for:

- Better professional working conditions
- Safe and manageable workloads
- Improved wellbeing and mental health support
- Fair funding for social work services
- Greater respect and recognition for the profession
- Championing proper Media Representation for social workers
- Reduced bureaucracy so social workers can spend more time with the people they support
- Reflective Supervision
- Part-Time / Flexible Working
- Cross Party Group for Social Work in Parliament
- Smacking Ban Campaign
- Free School Meals for All Campaign
- Make Equality Real Campaign
- Boot Out Austerity Campaign

Among the most influential initiatives was the 'Respect Social Work' and the 'Working Conditions' campaign, both launched in partnership with the British Association of Social Workers. The campaigns brought national attention to the realities of frontline practice and helped place social workers' experiences firmly on the public agenda.



Standing Against Austerity

John consistently argued that social work cannot be separated from the wider social conditions affecting communities. Under his leadership, SWU became known for its willingness to speak out on poverty, inequality and cuts to public services. The memorable 'Boot Out Austerity' campaign with BASW symbolised the Union's belief that social workers have an important role in advocating for a fairer society, not just for themselves but for the people they serve every day. John was central in creating the standalone campaign group 'Austerity Action Group' funded by SWU.

Championing the Wider Trade Union Movement

John's influence has extended well beyond the Social Workers Union. Through his role as National Executive member then Vice President of the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), he has been a passionate advocate for solidarity across the wider trade union movement, ensuring that the voice of social workers has been heard alongside those of workers from many other sectors.

Believing that lasting change is achieved through collaboration, John strengthened SWU's relationship with the GFTU and encouraged active participation in campaigns that reflected the shared values of fairness, equality and social justice. Under his leadership, SWU stood shoulder to shoulder with fellow affiliated unions in campaigns promoting workers' rights, defending public services, tackling workplace inequality, supporting mental health and wellbeing, and speaking out against discrimination and injustice.

John recognised that the challenges facing social workers are often rooted in wider social and economic issues. His commitment to partnership working through the GFTU enabled SWU to contribute to national conversations on employment rights, equality, anti-racism, dignity at work and the future of public services. His leadership helped ensure that social work was recognised not only as a profession, but as an essential part of a broader movement striving for a more just and compassionate society.

As Vice President, John has been a respected and valued voice within the GFTU family; bringing insight, integrity and a deep understanding of the realities facing frontline practitioners. His work has strengthened relationships between SWU and fellow unions, reinforcing the principle that collective action is at the heart of achieving meaningful and lasting change.

He is committed to international solidarity. Through SWU's work with international social work organisations and trade union partners, John has consistently promoted the values of human rights, peace and global social justice, ensuring that SWU's influence has reached far beyond the UK.



Tributes

Dave Callow, former SWU Chair, Austerity Action Group (AAG) Chair, and incoming SWU General Secretary:

“It has been a privilege to have known and worked with John these last 7 years, to get to know him as a social worker, general secretary, socialist and human being. John’s support and encouragement has meant the world to me over this time, something I never have or never will take for granted. He has carefully steered SWU for 10 years where our union, and equally our profession, can be grateful for his dedication to social workers. I wish John chart topping success for his band and to join him for many more laughs and happy times along the way.”

Chrissie Beatty, SWU Vice Chair, SWU Executive Committee UK Representative, and Relationships and Strengths-based Practice Lead:

“I first met John in 2018 when I was still a student social worker. From that first meeting, I was struck by his energy, enthusiasm and passion for both social work and our union - qualities that are truly contagious. It was John who encouraged me to join the Executive Committee and later to become Vice Chair. Having worked closely with him in both roles, I have seen first-hand his unwavering dedication and commitment. John will be greatly missed, but he leaves behind a stronger, thriving union with firm foundations for the future, after ten outstanding years as General Secretary.”

Gerry Madden, SWU Executive Committee Northern Ireland Representative and SWU Honorary Treasurer:

“John and I were present in 2011 at the meeting which created SWU and for the past ten years he has been the elected General Secretary of SWU. This longevity reflects John’s continuing passion and vision for SWU and its importance in both supporting front line Social Workers and promoting the social work agenda. I have been privileged to serve alongside John on the SWU Executive over the past fifteen years and through our close working relationship come to recognise and appreciate his many qualities rooted always in strong social work values. His always energetic leadership, seeking to get things done, his ability to relate easily to people accompanied by a sharp sense of Scottish wit whilst at the same time not being afraid to challenge when he felt it necessary have all combined to bring SWU from its humble beginnings to a now firmly recognised place within the wider trade union family as evidenced by relationships with the GFTU. I will miss very much working alongside John as will all his colleagues at SWU but what a rich legacy he leaves and I will finish by wishing him all the very best in the next chapter of his journey both professionally and personally.”

James Birchall, SWU Executive Committee UK Representative, former SWU Chair, and former Honorary Treasurer of BASW:

“I have known John for many years. We both served on BASW Council and were amongst the founders of SWU in 2011. When I was appointed President in 2012 John was Vice President. In 2016 John became General Secretary and during the next 10 years SWU made great progress under his creative leadership. SWU, as it is today, owes a great debt to the hard work and skill John brought to his role as GS. It has been a great pleasure to work with John over the years and to have seen his dedication, skills, knowledge and wisdom in action. It is difficult for me to imagine SWU without John, but I am sure SWU will continue to progress with Dave as General Secretary.”

Allison Hulmes; SWU Executive Committee Wales Representative; Senior Lecturer in Social Work at Swansea University; Director, co-founder of the Romani & Traveller Social Work Association; and Romani & Traveller Representative at the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW):

“It has been an absolute privilege to work alongside John McGowan during his ten years as General Secretary of the Social Workers Union. John has always been a passionate and tireless advocate for social workers, always standing up for our profession, our values and the people we support. His leadership of SWU has combined determination with warmth, helping to build a strong and vibrant union that truly reflects the voices of its members.

One of my fondest memories is completing the 100-mile ‘Boot Out Austerity’ walk together in 2017. It captures John’s commitment to social justice and his willingness to go the extra mile - quite literally - for causes he believes in and that mean so much to social workers. Alongside his dedication, John has always brought a wonderful sense of fun, humour and humanity to everything he does. Whether sharing stories about punk music, talking about his favourite bands and new album, or getting behind a drum kit, he reminds us that activism and joy can go hand in hand. I will miss you John. Your leadership, friendship and infectious energy will be greatly missed, and I wish you every success and happiness for the future.”

Gawain Little, General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) General Secretary:

“As a longstanding member of the Executive Committee, Chair of the International Solidarity Committee and, since May 2025, Vice President, John made an outstanding contribution to the work of the General Federation of Trades Unions. Throughout his years of service, he demonstrated unwavering commitment, principled leadership and a deep belief in the values of trade unionism. John’s contribution extended well beyond the positions he held. He brought integrity, wisdom and generosity to the Federation, earning the respect and friendship of trade union colleagues across the movement. His thoughtful approach and dedication helped strengthen the GFTU’s work both at home and internationally.

As Chair of the International Solidarity Committee, he championed support for working people across the world, from Palestine to Cuba and beyond, ensuring that the Federation remained steadfast in its commitment to justice, peace and workers’ rights.

His dedication to international solidarity was a true reflection of his values as a trade unionist. John’s legacy will endure in the work he helped shape and in the many people he inspired through his commitment, friendship and example. He will be sorely missed by all who had the privilege of working alongside him.”

Sarah Woolley, General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) President and Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU) General Secretary:

“John’s retirement is the end of an important chapter for the Social Workers Union and for the wider GFTU family. I’ve had the pleasure of working alongside John on the GFTU Executive for the last ten or so years, and during that time I’ve come to know him as someone who always brought thoughtfulness, experience and a measured response to discussions and decisions that have needed to be made.

John has been a great advocate for social workers and the members he represents, but he's also been a valued colleague who has always understood the importance of supporting the wider trade union movement. Whether around the Executive table or at our many events over the years, he's been someone whose views were respected and whose company was always appreciated.

On a personal level, I'm going to miss the opportunity of seeing John become Joint President next year after being part of the presidential team for the last 18 months as joint vice president. It's difficult to imagine GFTU meetings and events without him there.

We've shared some memorable moments over the years, do ask me about the curry in Poland if you see me around the movement!

While I'm genuinely pleased that he now gets the opportunity to enjoy a well-earned retirement, his presence, friendship and contributions will certainly be missed.

Thank you, John, for everything you have contributed during your time on the Executive Committee. I wish you every happiness for the future and hope retirement brings you all the time, opportunities, music and holidays you deserve."

Paul Day, Pharmacists Union (PDA) Union Director and General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) Executive Committee Member:

"John has been a fantastic colleague at the GFTU, and through him SWU have also been a brilliant sister union to us."

Julia Georgiou, NHBC Staff Association General Secretary and General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) Executive Committee Member:

"Sad to hear the news and a loss to SWU and the wider movement. John was always ready to listen and help a new GS when I first was elevated, unexpectedly, to the role. He gave me some good advice and was always keen to listen and help, especially through the connections at GFTU. I'll miss his stories after hours at GFTU gatherings!"

Paul O'Connor, Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) Chief of Staff (Industrial):

"You've been a fantastic advocate for a massively under-appreciated group of workers John. Well done. All the very best for the future Comrade."

Steve Gillan, Prison Officers Association (POA) General Secretary and General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) Executive Committee Member:

"John wasn't just a very good General Secretary but a thoroughly decent man and when he spoke at GFTU meetings on any subject matter people listened as he was full of common sense and sound advice. He is well respected and the trade union movement is in a far better place with his input."

Professor Jermaine M Ravalier; SWU Ambassador; Pro-Vice Chancellor, Academic at Buckinghamshire New University:

"I've been working with John for coming up to a decade now, and together we have led a lot of projects and initiatives which have influenced the conversation and practice of social work across the country and the world.

We started by running a number of large projects looking at wellbeing and working conditions in social work, and while this began as a UK-wide project it has been extended across the whole of the world. We lobbied MPs in parliament, employers, and other policy makers. Alongside BASW we developed the first wellbeing toolkit, which is now being taken international. We have led nationwide work on reflective supervision, and delivered training across the whole of the country.

John's influence therefore on the social work profession has been significant. I genuinely believe that the profession is in a stronger position because of his commitment to social work, commitment to the profession, and commitment to making a difference to those that social workers work with every day."

Emma Lewell, SWU Ambassador and Member of Parliament (MP) for South Shields:

"I am sorry to see John's term of office coming to an end. Social workers have been at the harsh end of austerity and the cost-of-living crisis. John has always championed those social workers who are in our communities, day in and day out, making a positive difference to people's lives.

He has also been a great advocate for better pay, conditions and work-life balance as well as working to address the wider issues of poverty, disadvantage and erosion of wider support services that increase the amount of people in need of social work help.

I hope you get some rest John; you deserve it. Thank you for everything."

Dr Neil Thompson, SWU Ambassador, Author, Director of Studies at the Neil Thompson Academy, and Visiting Professor at the Open University:

"I have long been aware of the parallels between social work and trade unionism - both involve trying to make a positive difference and a concern with wellbeing and social justice. Over the past ten years, SWU - and the social work profession more broadly - have been fortunate to have someone as capable, committed and conscientious as John to bring the two fields together by leading SWU so effectively. Social workers need strong union backing provided by people with a social work background. John has done an outstanding job in heading up that initiative. We all have a lot to be grateful to him for."

Ian Byrne, MP for Liverpool West Derby and Chair of the Cross-Party Group for Social Work:

"I would like to thank John for his dedication in establishing and building the Cross-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Work.

As Chair of the group since it launched last October, I have been privileged to work alongside John to celebrate the vital role social workers play in supporting some of the most vulnerable people in society. More importantly, John has created a platform to give the profession the political attention it deserves, as we look to drive change in policy to allow our social workers to do their jobs safely and effectively.

I would also like to thank John for lending the union's backing for the Right to Food Commission, as we look to enshrine a national Right to Food in law."

Kellie Doubtfire, Publishing and Events Director of *Social Work Today*:

“John McGowan's retirement marks the conclusion of a significant period of service to the Social Workers Union. During his time as General Secretary, SWU has grown in stature and influence, while championing campaigns that have highlighted the realities of social work practice. John consistently campaigned for better working conditions for social workers, while also supporting the Austerity Action Group and helping to develop the SWU Campaign Fund, enabling members to lead campaigns on issues affecting both the profession and the people they support.

“John has always worked closely with Social Work Today and COMPASS. He recognised the value of bringing the profession together to share learning, exchange ideas and celebrate good practice, and consistently gave his time to engage with professionals through our events and publications.

“Whether helping his team during the event, contributing to conference sessions alongside colleagues, or taking the time to speak with delegates individually, John was always willing to get involved. He made a point of engaging with the many social workers who attended our events, listening to their experiences and discussing the issues that mattered to them. That willingness to engage directly with social work practitioners reflected his approach to supporting the people at the heart of the profession.

“On behalf of everyone at *Social Work Today* and COMPASS, we thank John for his support and collaboration over the years and wish him every success and happiness in his retirement.”

Shahid Naqvi, Editor of *Professional Social Work (PSW) Magazine*:

“One of the great things about John is that I could always rely on him to turn around a good quote on request, often within minutes. As a journalist working to deadlines this has been invaluable and indicative of his keen understanding of the media.

Through his words and actions, John has been a tireless advocate for social work and social workers over the last decade, with his finger on the pulse of the issues.

SWU's work with the Campaign Collective has been particularly impressive and a good example of his collaborative style. The energy John has put into building SWU's presence and profile cannot be over-estimated. It comes from a deep-seated passion for improving social work which I have seen demonstrated time and again.”

Anthony Dhadwal, BASW Senior Press & Communications Officer:

“It doesn't feel like it's been ten years since you strolled into the office and asked if I would fancy talking about media over a game of pool (feels like twenty!) ...in that time, we've done great work in the media, on important issues, and always in a seamless collaboration between BASW and SWU - bringing out the best of us for all to see. I'm glad we clicked in that fashion and even happier to call you a friend.”

Simon Francis, Founder Member of Campaign Collective and Coordinator of the End Fuel Poverty Coalition:

“John has been a tireless champion for social workers and for the values at the heart of the profession. Over the past decade, he has helped transform SWU into a confident, campaigning union that isn't afraid to speak out on the issues that matter most to members.

Working with John has always been a pleasure because he combines passion for the issues with warmth and an unwavering commitment to improving the lives of social workers and the people they support.

The launch of the unique Campaign Fund where union members can get professional support to campaign on issues they are passionate about is an example of his leadership. And the establishment of the Cross Party Group on Social Work will ensure that SWU's voice is heard far beyond the profession and his legacy will continue to shape the union for many years to come."

Samantha Baron, British Association of Social Workers CEO:

"It is important to acknowledge the contribution John has made during his time as General Secretary of the Social Work Union. John has been the recognised face of SWU for over 10 years, leading many joint campaigns with BASW which over the years have been very successful. These campaigns have delivered meaningful change, influencing policy, raising awareness of the challenges facing the profession, and improving the working lives of countless social workers. John's dedication to the trade union movement is without question. On behalf of BASW, we wish him every success and happiness in the next chapter of his journey."

Fran Fuller, former BASW UK Chair (5 years) and first President of SWU:

"John and I go way back and have shared some challenging times along the way. John has been a friend and comrade promoting values and ethics of social workers across the UK and beyond. He has helped members to recognise the importance of a union being honest and brave in his commitment to social work, social workers and the campaigns which he has driven to make significant change, influencing policy and policy makers and making changes to people's lives who work as professional social workers.

John's dedication and sincere beliefs with the trade union movement have strengthened my relationship with a person who advocates and reflects all that I believe as a social worker, a trade unionist and a friend.

All the best John in your next adventure and I hope our paths will cross in the very new future."

Guy Shennan, former BASW Chair, Practitioner & Trainer, Activist, and Author:

"On becoming BASW Chair in 2014, it was clear that getting the relationship right between BASW and SWU was always going to be a tricky job, and John's election as SWU General Secretary helped this process immeasurably. While he represented SWU strongly, his commitment to BASW was always clear too. He marched alongside us to boot out austerity, and then ensured that the action continued, while his commitment to supporting the Palestinians' struggle for justice has remained solid, under great pressure. John is someone who can be counted upon, and his stewardship of SWU over the past 10 years has been first-rate.

Thank you, John."

Hilton Dawson, first General Secretary of SWU, former BASW CEO, and former Member of Parliament (MP) for Lancaster and Wyre:

“It had become part of the lore, the very being of BASW, to a large extent the matter, never to be spoken, that establishing a trade union would be vehemently opposed and thwarted. It was something that we just couldn’t do, so when we found the means as well as the necessity to do it, the elected leadership needed to be brave, as well as independent-minded and committed.

Of course, there’s never a good time to start anything which is going to be challenging, particularly something which stands for the principles of social work and the rights and needs of those who work in it.

We needed a trade union to secure the rights of our members to be represented by the people they wanted to advise and represent them. Those in London, with whom we were negotiating sagely advised that this was not a good time, others seized on a way to build barriers a little higher, as justification for their view of us, as unreasonable. In Scotland, there was a particular view around traditional trade unionism, which portrayed us as lacking solidarity, for letting down our friends.

As a leader of BASW, from Scotland, perhaps you needed to be particularly brave and independent-minded and committed to the cause of the Social Workers Union?

I worked for John McGowan as we made history and created SWU. I have watched from afar as he has made a fundamental career change to work for others as they have taken that noisy, squalling opportunity and turned it, ever growing and developing into a powerful, respected, collegiate voice for the rights and interests of people at work, for great social work and social progress.

Such an achievement, a personal as well as organisational achievement at such a febrile, monstrously difficult time for people, all across the United Kingdom.

How do you follow that? There’s a big question.

One thing to do, for an organisation proudly based in Birmingham.

Send to the Jewellery Quarter, get them to strike John McGowan a very big SWU medal.

Thank you John.”

Bridget Robb, second General Secretary of SWU, former BASW CEO, and Director at Roho Learning:

“John has led the Social Workers Union from strength to strength within the social work community and the trade union movement.

As an active member of the first SWU Executive, John worked with me to explore and develop how the union and BASW could effectively work alongside each other to enhance both organisations. I was delighted when John was elected as the first General Secretary of the union who was not also Chief Executive of BASW.

John's vision and energy have enabled SWU to grow into a fully active trade union enhanced by John's membership of the General Federation of Trade Unions National Executive Committee.

I wish John a very fulfilling retirement from being General Secretary."

Dr Peter Unwin, Principal Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Worcester and former Austerity Action Group (AAG) Chair:

"I first met John during the BASW/SWU 'Boot Out Austerity' march from Birmingham to Liverpool in 2017, one of the very few outwardly political actions taken by social workers in recent times.

John's reputation for being a 'man of the people' had reached me well before that time and getting to know him better over the years has only confirmed this reputation. John is a true fighter for social justice and his passion and fire will be much missed by the UK social work profession."

Dr Joe Hanley, Lecturer at The Open University and Author:

"I had the pleasure of working with John both at the Open University and through his role with the Social Workers Union. What I found particularly refreshing about his approach, was that John never shied away from presenting or promoting critical perspectives on the direction of the profession. During his time as General Secretary, the Social Workers Union, through its various forums, was always willing to engage with debates and perspectives that others shied away from. This was invaluable to the maintaining a strong and critical professional voice, and I believe John made an important difference in this."

Edith Till, SWU Executive Committee Student/NQSW Representative and BASW Student Ambassador:

"As a Social Work Student Ambassador, I first met John online. Even then, his encouragement meant so much - he pushed us to join SWU, get involved with GFTU's young members' courses, and believe that our voices mattered. When he asked me to write up an event, it felt like a real vote of confidence, and many opportunities followed from that moment.

I finally met John in person at the Durham Miners' Gala, and he was exactly as he seemed online: kind, supportive, and genuinely invested in helping others grow. He told me about the Student Executive vacancy at SWU and encouraged me to go for it. His belief in my ideas - especially campaigning for better placement conditions for students - gave me the courage to step forward and become more active in the union.

John's passion for union work was infectious. He inspired me, guided me, and made me feel that I belonged in this movement. I will always be grateful for the time, support, and faith he gave me. He will be deeply missed, and he will always remain one of my role models."

MJ Lace, Final Year Social Work Student, SENDco, Ultrapreneur and Activist:

“John McGowan has always struck me as a calm, grounded and quietly influential General Secretary. He understands what is happening beneath the surface and never needs to be the loudest voice in the room. His commitment to social justice reflects the best traditions of radical social work. John has always been open, supportive and accepting, giving me the confidence to strengthen my own activist voice. Reading *How to Survive in Social Work* reinforced my belief that neoliberal policies have damaged our profession. His leadership is thoughtful, authentic and quietly transformative.”

Joanne Marciano, SWU Operations Manager:

“Working with John over the last 10 years has been an absolute privilege. His support, trust and belief in me have shaped my career and given me opportunities I never thought possible. He has always brought positivity, kindness and encouragement, no matter what was happening around him. SWU won't be the same without him, and I will always be grateful for everything he has done for me and so many others. I wish him nothing but happiness and success in the future.”

Dr Shawn Major; SWU Communications, Media, and Engagement Officer:

“A hearty congratulations to John on his well-earned retirement! It has been a privilege to work with John and I thank him for his leadership that is a strong blend of enthusiasm, practicality, candour, and kindness. I will always appreciate how his supportive management style has helped me to flourish at SWU for the past five and a half years. He will be greatly missed, but all the great work he has done this past decade to ensure that social workers have both effective representation and a powerful collective voice is a rock-solid foundation for the union to continue building upon. I wish him all the best for the future.”

A Lasting Legacy

After ten years as General Secretary, John McGowan leaves behind far more than an office. He leaves a stronger Social Workers Union, a louder collective voice for social workers, and a legacy built on integrity, courage and compassion.

Most importantly, he leaves a profession that knows someone was prepared to stand beside it during some of its most challenging years.

On behalf of members, colleagues, partners and friends of the Social Workers Union, we thank John McGowan for ten remarkable years of leadership and dedicated service.

“Thank you for your vision. Thank you for your courage.
Thank you for always putting social workers first.”

Your contribution will continue to be felt for many years to come.

A New Chapter for SWU



It is a tremendous honour to be appointed as Interim Chair of the Social Workers Union at such an important moment in our union's history.

Before looking ahead, I want to pay tribute to someone whose contribution to SWU, and to social work more broadly, cannot be overstated. After ten years as General Secretary, John McGowan is stepping down from the role, bringing to a close a remarkable chapter for our union.

John built SWU from scratch. Through his vision, determination and unwavering commitment to social workers, he transformed a fledgling organisation into the strong, respected and influential union we know today. He has championed social workers at every level, fought tirelessly for social justice, and ensured that our profession has had a voice when it mattered most. On behalf of our members, I want to thank John for everything he has done and wish him every success and happiness in the future. His legacy will continue to shape SWU for many years to come.



Chrissie Beatty and Dave Callow marching with the Together Alliance on 28th March 2026

I would also like to warmly congratulate Dave Callow on becoming SWU's new General Secretary. Dave brings a wealth of experience, passion and commitment to the role, and I know our union is in safe hands with Dave steering the ship. I look forward to working alongside him as we continue to grow and strengthen our collective voice.

This is also an exciting time for member involvement. In November, a number of positions on the SWU Executive Committee will become available. This presents a fantastic opportunity for members to step forward, bring fresh ideas, new energy and diverse perspectives, and help shape the future of our union. We have strong foundations to build on, and I hope many members will consider getting involved.

For those who don't know me, I joined SWU in 2018 as an enthusiastic student social worker. My passion for social work was strong then, and it has only grown since. Since joining the union, I have served as a Union Contact, Executive Committee member, and, for the last year, Vice Chair.

As a practising social worker, I have a particular interest in reflective practice, older people's mental health and end-of-life care. Every day I see the incredible difference social workers make. I know the power of social work to transform lives, support families and strengthen communities. At the same time, I recognise that too many social workers are being asked to do extraordinary work with one hand tied behind their back.

We are working in a climate of underfunding, high caseloads and increasingly complex challenges affecting the people and families we support. Despite these pressures, social workers continue to demonstrate extraordinary professionalism, compassion and resilience. They deserve to be heard, valued and supported.

Advocating for social workers has always been important to me. Earlier this year, I represented SWU at the House of Commons for World Social Work Day and called on decision-makers to stand in solidarity with social workers. Throughout my time with SWU, I have represented the union at the House of Commons, the

House of Lords, on demonstrations and campaigns, including the march against the far right.

Wherever I have been, my message has remained the same: social workers must have a seat at the table when decisions affecting people and communities are being made.



My commitment to social justice began long before I became a social worker. Both of my parents were trade unionists, and they taught me the importance of standing up for what is right. In fact, my first campaign came at the age of nine, when I petitioned my local council to improve access to play areas for local children. Ever since then, I have believed that when something is unfair, we have a responsibility to challenge it.

I am tenacious, and I will always speak out on behalf of our members and those in society whose voices are being silenced. I condemn the language of hate that is affecting so many people in our communities, and I will challenge it wherever I encounter it. I stand for unity, for opportunity, and for a society where everybody has the chance to thrive and nobody is left behind.

As a [perimenopausal](#), [neurodivergent](#) social worker, I understand many of the challenges that members face in the workplace. I want to help raise standards, improve morale and champion the unique skills, values and expertise that social workers bring.

Away from work, I am a mum to four grown-up boys, Nana to two wonderful granddaughters, a wife, a sister, an aunty and a friend. I share my home with four dogs, a cat and some chickens, and I love getting my hands in the soil and growing vegetables.

Those experiences remind me that it is often the gloriously ordinary things in life that matter most. Yet I regularly see social workers sacrificing time with their families, their hobbies, their health and

their wellbeing as they go above and beyond for others. That cannot continue to be the expectation. Social workers deserve a healthy work-life balance. We should not be worked into the ground and left exhausted, unable to provide the support that individuals and families depend upon.

As Interim Chair, I will work hard to lift up the voices of our members, champion our profession and speak truth to power at every opportunity. I believe social workers belong at the heart of conversations and

decisions that affect our communities. I believe in building a strong, inclusive and confident profession. Most of all, I believe in the collective strength of our union and our members.

These are challenging times, but they are also full of opportunity. Together, we can build on the incredible foundations laid by those who came before us, welcome new voices and ideas, and continue to fight for the profession we love.

I am excited about what comes next. Let's build it together.



*Dave Callow and Chrissie Beatty with the SWU banner,
September 2024*

Chrissie Beatty
Interim Chair, Social Workers Union (SWU)

Parliamentary monitoring report - July/August 2026



Campaign Focus - Key Issues and Debates in Parliament

1. Anti-poverty

- [Child Poverty Strategy](#) - the Government updated pages including the terms of reference and panel membership for the [Child Poverty Expert Analytical Panel](#).
- **Free school meals** - In April 2018, the government put in place a temporary rule: If a child became eligible for free school meals under benefits-based criteria, they kept that entitlement, even if the household's income later rose. This was designed to prevent children losing meals during the rollout of Universal Credit (UC). **From September 2026** families must qualify for free school meals under the new rules, or the entitlement ends.
- **Free school meals - From the start of the 2026/27 academic year**, all children in households receiving UC will be eligible for free school meals. Around 3.4 million children currently receive FSM and this will rise to around 4 million.
- **Early Release Prisoners: Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping - HoL debate.** Peers warned that early release and weak coordination between prisons, probation and councils is driving a surge in homelessness and rough sleeping among prison leavers - undermining rehabilitation, increasing deaths, and fuelling reoffending. They called for earlier planning, stronger duties to collaborate, ending Friday releases, and practical reforms to ensure nobody leaves prison to the streets.

- **Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee** - 3rd July - published report on Housing conditions in the Private Rented Sector and recommends the government introduce incentives for landlords, and strengthen the deterrents against breaches, to speed up compliance with the new Decent Homes Standard ahead of the 2035 deadline. Chair, Florence Eshalomi MP said, *“Far too many private renters are living in homes that are sub-standard. Poor conditions in the rented sector are ultimately a symptom of the nation’s wider housing crisis, especially the lack of social and affordable housing. The government needs to come forward with the long-term housing strategy and set out a credible plan to address the drivers of poor housing conditions”*.

2. Workforce - working conditions, recruitment and retention, sharing research

- **Fitness to Practise News report** - 19th July Social Work England has been ordered to produce a ‘comprehensive, end-to-end improvement plan’ for its fitness to practise function within six months, following an independent review that identified “serious and persistent weaknesses” undermining public protection. [Minister sets six-month deadline for overhaul of Social Work England’s fitness to practise system](#)
- **Social Work Today** - 29th June - [Funding cuts threaten future of social work education, union warns | Social Work Today](#)

3. Social care reform - Casey Commission (Independent Commission on Adult Social Care, private sector funding, and Artificial Intelligence (AI))

- **Casey Commission** - 7th July - [Baroness Casey warns social care reform will fail without public consent | The Casey Commission](#) “we must resist the temptation to attempt major reform of adult social care without first having an honest debate with the public about the hard choices involved.”
- **Casey Commission** - On 29th July, Baroness Louise Casey, Chair of the Independent Commission on Adult Social Care, launched The Big Conversation on Care. This will aim to engage with one million people across England. It is open to everyone through a new online platform at caseycommission.co.uk/bigconversation/, starting the conversation by asking people: when we are old or disabled, or have a serious illness, who should support us and how?
- **Casey Commission - The Big Conversation** - will run in two phases. The first phase of the conversation, from July to November, will ask people about the values and principles we should all expect from a care system and who should be eligible for support. The second will focus on how care should be funded and how reform should be delivered. [Press release here.](#)
- **AI** - Suffolk County Council will train every adult social care practitioner on an [AI](#) tool that records and transcribes assessments, following a pilot in which write-up time fell from around three hours to roughly 45 minutes. BASW has warned the resulting savings will come out of social work posts rather than out of waste.

Parliamentary Business that may affect Social Workers

Name	Inquiry /stage	Key dates/Action
Public Accounts Committee	Financial sustainability of adult hospices in England	Govt response Published 1 st June
Public Accounts Committee	Financial sustainability of children's care homes	Letter from the Permanent Secretary published 8 th June
Education Select Committee	Children and Young People's Mental Health	Oral evidence sessions Written evidence online
Education Select Committee	Deliver the Child Poverty Strategy	Oral evidence sessions
Health and Social Care Committee	No relevant inquiries	Letter from the Permanent Secretary published 8 th June
Housing, Communities and Local Government Committees	Inquiry - Housing Conditions In the Social Rented Sector	Published report 4th July 2026 - see above

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A&R Team Digest - Medication in the Workplace

BASW/SWU Advice & Representation (A&R) Officer, Kevin Waldock shares guidance and considerations for staff and employers.

Medication in the workplace can present several challenges for both employers and employees.

There are a range of issues that relate to using medication and the workplace, but the major concerns relate to safety-critical roles, legal compliance, and health-related performance. Whilst not an exhaustive list, some of the common concerns that are encountered include:

Side Effects: Even legal medications can cause impairment e.g. drowsiness, dizziness, or slowed reaction times, and it is quite concerning the amount of time that a substance can remain in the body: a simple over the counter (OTC) antihistamine can cause drowsiness for up to 12 hours.

Opioids and Painkillers: May lead to confusion, sedation, and impaired coordination.

Antidepressants/Anti-anxiety: Potential for fatigue, blurred vision, and difficulty concentrating.

Safety-Critical Risks: For roles involving driving, social or health care, impairment significantly increases the risk of accidents and errors.

Medication errors in the workplace can result in issues that often arise from system failures like:

Workload and Fatigue: Overworked staff are more prone to dosing or calculation errors.

Communication Failures: Inadequate handovers and/or recording of information.

Role of Employers

Employers have a "duty of care" under the [Health and Safety at Work Act](#) to ensure a safe environment. There should be policies in place that clearly define rules for prescription disclosure and drug testing while respecting privacy.

Under the Equality Act 2010, employers may need to make reasonable adjustments for employees taking medication for a disability, such as:

Flexible working hours to help manage fatigue or the timing of doses.

Relocation: Temporarily moving staff from safety-critical duties to lower-risk tasks.

Occupational Health Assessments: Engaging [Occupational Health](#) services help determine if an employee is fit for their specific role while on medication.

It is also essential for employers to maintain medical privacy as required by the General Data Protection Regulation.

Role of Employees

Employees also have a role to play in respect of medication use in the workplace

They should inform their employer if their medication may compromise safety, particularly regarding driving and other critical risk safety tasks.

Workers should also ask their GP or pharmacist about the effects and potential side effects specifically related to their job role.

A well-defined [drug policy](#) helps establish expectations and ensure compliance. Any policy should present a clear distinction between legal and illegal substances and provide guidelines for reporting medication use that may affect performance. It should also clearly outline the organisation's procedures for drug testing and consequences for violations. Employers should consider offering information on support available for employees who may be struggling with substance use or abuse and potential addiction concerns. This could quite easily be incorporated into the induction phase of employment.

Regular [training](#) sessions can raise awareness about the effects of legal and illegal drugs on workplace safety and productivity. Employees should understand how their medication choices might affect their ability to perform job duties effectively and be made aware of possible alternatives. This allows employees to be confident that any declared medication will not jeopardise safety of themselves or others.

Creating a culture where employees feel comfortable discussing their medical needs without fear of stigma or retaliation can help address concerns before they become issues. Employers should encourage employees to inform the HR department or their manager if a prescribed medication affects their job performance and ensure [training](#) is in place to help management offer appropriate support.

Substance Use

Providing employee assistance programmes (EAPs) [EAPs](#) can offer confidential counselling and support for employees dealing with substance use disorders, as well as other issues. Programmes like these can help employees access treatment while maintaining job security.

For organisations with potential high safety risk tasks eg driving or critical assessments, drug testing may be necessary or even compulsory, but testing should be legally compliant and balanced to avoid discrimination.

Did you know, perhaps alarmingly, cannabis can remain detectable in the body for up to 90 days depending on strength and use! It would be unlikely to have any effect after such a long duration, but it could be problematic if randomised testing was used and it was detected - you could be taken down a disciplinary procedure.

Employees with a drug or alcohol problem should be encouraged to ask for help at work if they are sure their problems will be dealt with discreetly and confidentially; employers can facilitate an environment where this can be achieved.

Drug and alcohol dependence are recognised medical problems. Someone who is misusing drugs or alcohol has the same rights to confidentiality and support as they would if they had any other medical or psychological condition.

Employers should encourage staff to get help from their GP or a specialist drug or alcohol agency and refer them to the organisation's occupational health service (if there is one). They could also consider allowing someone time off to get expert help. Often the cost of recruiting and training a new employee may be more than the cost of time off.

Employers need to give serious thought about whether drug and alcohol misuse in the workplace is treated as a disciplinary matter or a health concern. If someone is dismissed because of drug or alcohol misuse without trying to help them, an employment tribunal may find that they have been dismissed unfairly.

Final Considerations

Managing the use of both legal and illegal drugs in the workplace is crucial for maintaining a safe, efficient and ethical environment. As mentioned above, employers should have clear policies that foster a supportive culture and training provided to educate employees on potential risks; this will encourage responsible medication use. By taking proactive steps, organisations can protect both employee wellbeing and overall business performance.

When employers have assessed the risk and have a policy on drug or alcohol misuse (or abuse) in the workplace, employees should know about the policy and the support they can access.

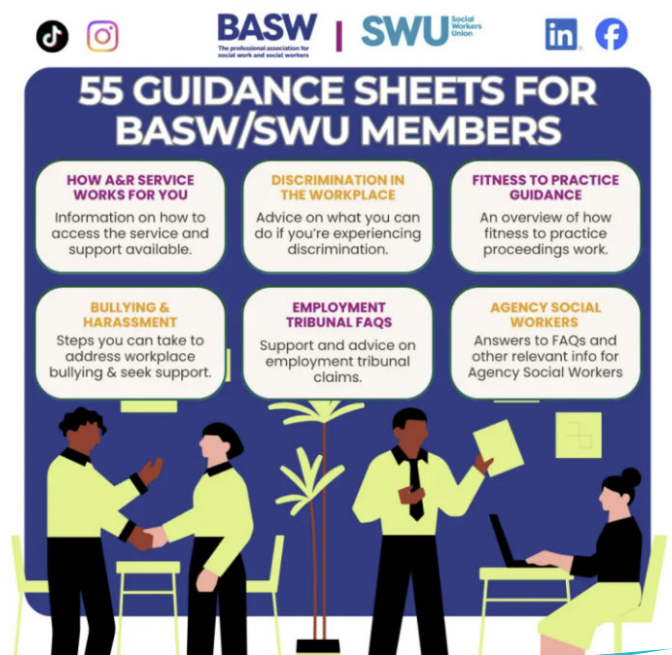
Employers also have a role in briefing managers and supervisors so they are clear about how to recognise the signs of drug or alcohol misuse, and are versed in the organisation's rules on drug and alcohol misuse and what to do if they suspect an employee is misusing drugs or alcohol; also what to do when an employee tells them about a drug or alcohol problem. If the normal work is safety-critical an employee may need to temporarily move to another job.

If employers don't have access to occupational health services, they can still support employees' health and wellbeing. They can make sure there is information at work about where employees can go for advice and help if they're concerned about drug or alcohol misuse, and there is a wealth of information and advice out there where they can signpost employees.

BASW and SWU Members with questions or concerns about anything raised in this article can speak confidentially to a member of our Advice and Representation team [here](#).

Our Advice and Representation service is available to BASW/SWU Members for any issues that arise a month after you joined. We ask that you get in touch as soon as you know there is an issue - the sooner we are aware of it, the better the advice and representation we can offer.

Members who have just joined are not eligible for representation but can access a range of [guide sheets](#) written by our team to assist with providing a response to the regulator and how to approach a hearing. They also include advice for managing common workplace issues that might crop up.



New reports by Dr Neil Thompson highlight leadership and workforce challenges in social work

Two new reports published by SWU argue that stronger leadership and a new way of understanding the pressures facing social work and social care are essential if the profession is to overcome growing challenges.



SWU Ambassador Dr Neil Thompson [commented to Social Work Today](#), "I've been aware for quite some time that we have a number of problems in social work and social care above and beyond the challenges that are inherent in the nature of the work."

Both of the reports are free to download from the SWU website:

- **Managing Change in Social Work and Social Care: A Guide for Leaders:**
[https://swu-union.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/SWU-Neil Thompson - Guide to Managing Change 2026.pdf](https://swu-union.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/SWU-Neil_Thompson_-_Guide_to_Managing_Change_2026.pdf)
- **People, Problems and Potential: A Framework for Understanding and Addressing the Challenges Facing Social Work and Social Care:**
[https://swu-union.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/SWU-Neil Thompson - People Problems Potential 2026.pdf](https://swu-union.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/SWU-Neil_Thompson_-_People_Problems_Potential_2026.pdf)

Read the introduction to these two reports in our "Rising to the Challenges" blog:

<https://swu-union.org.uk/2026/07/rising-to-the-challenges>

Watch Dr Neil Thompson's video introducing his two new reports for social workers:

<https://youtu.be/Ln2aEyliZQk>

Writing a Motion for the SWU Annual General Meeting 2026



One of the greatest strengths of the Social Workers Union is that our direction is determined by our membership. This is why it is important for our members to identify issues that matter and then bring them to the Annual General Meeting (AGM) through Motions.

A powerful example of the impact that Motions can make came from the 2025 SWU AGM, where members raised concerns about the exploitation of social and economic challenges by right wing forces, alongside the growing hostility towards migrant people working within health and social care. The Motion highlighted the impact of divisive immigration debates, the exploitation of migrant care workers on skilled worker visas, and the need for a fairer system that protects workers from abuse and insecurity. The Motion challenged injustice, provided a clear analysis of the issues affecting workers and communities, and called for specific action. This is a concrete example of how members can use the AGM to ensure SWU takes a collective stance on issues that affect social workers, service users, and our society.

We encourage you, our members, to consider submitting a Motion for the upcoming AGM on 27th November 2026.

You do not need to be an experienced policy writer or activist to put forward a Motion for consideration. The most effective Motions often begin with a simple question: *What issue is affecting me, my colleagues, or the people I support, and what should SWU do about it?*

Motions can address workplace issues, professional practice, equality and human rights, social justice concerns, or wider political developments that affect social work and the communities we support.

The impact of a successful Motion can be significant. Decisions made during AGMs through member voting helps shape SWU campaigns, inform partnerships with wider trade union and social justice movements, and ensure that members' concerns are reflected in the union's priorities.

Motions must be signed by 10 members of SWU and then submitted to the SWU Executive Committee by **1st October 2026**.

Amendments to Motions must also be signed by 10 SWU members and submitted by 19th November 2026.

SWU is strongest when members bring their ideas, knowledge, and experience to the table. If there is an issue you care about, now is the time to start the conversation. Your Motion could be the next step in creating real change for social workers and the communities we support, and we look forward to reading them.

We are always willing to assist union members with the drafting of Motions. Please send an email to joanne.marciano@swu-union.org.uk for support and guidance.

Motions should also be submitted by email to: joanne.marciano@swu-union.org.uk

Having the Conversation: Suicide, Social Work, and Hope

SWU Interim Chair Chrissie Beatty has written this for Suicide Awareness Week 2026. This year's theme is "Changing the Narrative on Suicide" with the associated call to action "Start the Conversation."

As social workers, we are often alongside people at the most difficult moments in their lives - times of loss, crisis, isolation, and uncertainty. During Suicide Awareness Week, it is important to recognise that suicide is not a distant issue; it is something that can be present, sometimes quietly, in many areas of our work and our lives away from work.

Suicide Awareness Week takes place from 10th - 16th September, beginning on World Suicide Prevention Day.

In the UK, over 7,000 people die by suicide each year. Behind these statistics are individuals, families, and communities - and many of those people will have had contact with services like ours. For me, this is also deeply personal.

When I was a teenager, my cousin James died by suicide. Just a couple of weeks before, I had seen him - we laughed, we joked, and nothing seemed out of the ordinary.



His death devastated me. I remember feeling an overwhelming sense of guilt, questioning what I had missed. I watched the ripple effect across my family, the way it changed people. Even now, I find myself imagining how desperate he must have felt in those final hours. That stays with me - and it always will.

How Suicide Shows Up in Practice

Suicidal thoughts do not always present in obvious ways. While some people speak openly about wanting to die, others express distress more subtly - "I'm tired of everything" or "people would be better off without me."

In social work, we see this across adult's and children's social care, safeguarding, hospital discharge, and support for carers. Suicide risk is not confined to mental health services - it can emerge wherever people feel overwhelmed, isolated, or without hope.

Having the Conversation

One of the most important things we can do is ask directly about suicide. It can feel uncomfortable, but we know that asking does not increase risk - it can reduce it.

Simple, clear questions matter:

- "Are you thinking about ending your life?"
- "Have you had thoughts about suicide?"
- "Have you made any plans?"
- "What has stopped you from carrying out your plans?"

In my role, I have had many of these conversations. I explore what people are feeling, what has brought them to that point, and what might help them stay safe. What matters is being present - listening without judgement and allowing space for honesty.

Using the Right Language

Language shapes how people experience support. Saying "died by suicide" instead of "committed suicide" helps remove blame and stigma. Talking about someone "experiencing suicidal thoughts" keeps the focus on the person, not the label.

These small changes help create safer spaces - for the people we support and for ourselves.

Recognising Our Limits

One of the hardest realities in this work is this: we cannot control every outcome.

Through my personal experience and my professional role, I have

come to understand that if someone is determined to end their life, they may find a way. That is incredibly difficult to accept. But what we can do - what we must do - is everything within our power: ask the questions, listen, stay present, and act to reduce risk.

Recognising our limitations is not about giving up responsibility - it is about understanding the boundaries of it.

Caring for Ourselves

Working with suicide risk carries an emotional weight. Many social workers hold onto a sense of responsibility long after conversations end. Reflective supervision, supportive colleagues, and space to talk openly are essential.

We are part of a wider system of care - we are not carrying this alone.

A Message of Hope

Suicide prevention is not about having all the answers. It is about being willing to ask, to listen, and to stay alongside someone in their darkest moments.

People do find reasons to keep going. Situations change. Hope can return.

We may never fully know the impact of the conversations we have - but we know they matter. And sometimes, simply being there can make all the difference.

Helplines -

HopeLine 24/7 is free and confidential: <https://www.papyrus-uk.org/help-me/hopeline-24-7>

Call **Samaritans** anytime day or night from any phone for free: <https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan>

A black and white photograph of a man and a woman walking a dog on a grassy hill. The man is wearing a dark vest over a sweater and jeans, and the woman is wearing a light-colored sweater and a dark jacket. They are both smiling and holding hands. A large, fluffy dog is walking on a leash to the right. The background shows a valley with trees and a small town.

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General Federation of Trade Unions Summer School 2026

SWU Executive Committee Member Edith Till reports on the 2-day GFTU Summer School course which taught dozens of workers radical political economy, organising skills, and lessons from our history for today.



Day 1

Class Struggle Unionism

GFTU General Secretary Gawain Little explored different approaches to trade unionism and examined where trade union power comes from. He compared partnership, institutional and class struggle approaches, highlighting the strengths and limitations of each.

He emphasised that lasting trade union power comes from organised workers acting collectively. The session explored solidarity, workplace organisation and collective action, alongside the challenges created by anti-union legislation and restrictions on industrial action.

Union Maps: How Strong Is the Movement Where You Live? / The 1926 General Strike

Author and activist Callum Cant examined how the strength of the trade union movement can be measured, looking beyond membership numbers to participation and wider social support. He encouraged participants to think about how union power can be mapped and understood at a local level.

The session also explored the history of the 1926 General Strike and its roots in earlier working-class struggles. Callum reflected on the relationship between organised labour, employers and the state, and discussed lessons that remain relevant for trade unionists today.

Why Do Billionaires Exist?

GFTU Educational Trust Knowledge Transfer Partnership Associate Hwanhee Bae explored how extreme wealth is created and maintained within modern capitalist economies. She focused on the difference between earning income through work and accumulating wealth through ownership of assets, investments and businesses.

Using examples from major corporations and financial markets, he explained how wealth becomes concentrated among a small number of individuals. The discussion encouraged participants to think critically about economic inequality, ownership and power.

Understanding and Organising Not-for-Profits

Activist, author, and senior lecturer in Political Science at San José State University Dr Robert Ovetz discussed the realities of working in the non-profit sector and the challenges many workers face, including burnout, insecurity, excessive workloads and poor leadership. Participants reflected on how commitment to a social cause can sometimes be used to justify poor treatment.

He stressed that non-profit workers are workers first and foremost. The session highlighted the importance of organisation, workplace inquiry and collective action in improving conditions and building worker confidence.

Iron Ladies Film Showing and Discussion

Chair of the North Staffs Miners' Wives Action Group Rose Hunter shared her experiences of the miners' strike and reflected on the important role played by women, families and communities. She described the challenges faced by mining communities and the solidarity that emerged throughout the dispute.

The discussion highlighted how women organised support networks, raised funds and sustained families during industrial action. Rose encouraged participants to learn from these experiences and apply similar principles of solidarity in their own organising.

End of Session Reflection

Medway Trade Union Council delegate Ed Baldwin reflected on the themes raised by the film and linked them to his own experiences during the Royal Mail dispute. He spoke about dismissal, reinstatement and the personal impact industrial disputes can have on workers and their families.

His reflections reinforced the importance of collective support, resilience and solidarity. He highlighted how trade union values remain essential when workers face challenges in the workplace.

Day 2

Organising Game Workers in a Time of AI

Chair of the King's College London UCU branch Jamie Woodcock and secretary of the IWGB Game Workers branch Jordan Garland explored organising within the video games industry, focusing on job insecurity, outsourcing, layoffs and the impact of artificial intelligence. They explained why increasing numbers of workers are looking towards collective organisation.

The session highlighted practical organising techniques, including workplace mapping, relationship building and identifying shared concerns. They emphasised the importance of developing trust and confidence before launching public campaigns.

Why Won't Our Economy Grow?

Hwanhee Bae examined the reasons behind slow economic growth despite advances in technology and productivity. He explored financialisation, wealth concentration, housing speculation and the influence of global financial markets.

The session encouraged participants to think about economic decisions as political choices rather than purely technical issues. He argued that organised workers have an important role in shaping future economic priorities.

Using a Worker's Inquiry to Build Power

Dr Robert Ovetz introduced the worker's inquiry as a practical organising tool that helps workers understand how their workplaces operate. He encouraged participants to analyse workplace structures, management systems, technologies and supply chains.

By building a deeper understanding of the workplace, workers can identify opportunities for action, develop effective strategies and strengthen collective organisation.

Using the Media

Former industrial correspondent Polly Smythe shared practical guidance on working with the media, handling interviews and communicating trade union messages effectively. Drawing on her experience as a labour journalist, she discussed how media coverage can influence public understanding of workplace campaigns.

She encouraged participants to engage confidently with journalists, develop clear messages and use media strategically to build support for workers and trade union campaigns.

Salting: What Is It? Does It Work?

Jamie Woodcock and Jack Ran explained the organising practice known as salting, where organisers take jobs in non-union workplaces to help workers build organisation from within. They discussed examples from organising campaigns in sectors such as retail and hospitality.

The speakers emphasised that successful salting depends on trust, credibility and relationship building. The session highlighted the importance of patience and long-term organising when developing workplace power.

Interested in learning more?

You can read reports of this action-packed course in the Morning Star written by GFTU President & BFAWU General Secretary Sarah Woolley and GFTU Assistant General Secretary Henry Fowler:

- Introduction: <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/years-summer-school-bringing-heat>
- Day 1: <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/power-labour-movement-history-and-strategies-today-show-us-how-change-world>
- Day 2: <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/organising-skills-building-confidence-and-uniting-our-fights-win>

Did you know that SWU members can access the majority of the GFTUET Education Programme training courses free of charge?

The GFTU Educational Trust continues to provide invaluable support to affiliated unions like SWU through leadership development, organising support, solidarity work, and a wide range of educational programmes. This includes activist training opportunities, collaborative projects with academic institutions, and the highly regarded GFTU Summer School and Young Members' Development Weekend.



Courses are delivered in a variety of formats - both online and in-person. Residential courses include all meals and overnight stays, and are run at the state-of-the-art education centre at Quorn Grange in Loughborough. These residential courses create the space to step away from the pressures of work, reflect, exchange ideas and think collectively about how to strengthen workplace organisation and branch activity. Learning alongside others over several days builds stronger relationships, deeper understanding and greater confidence.

The 2026/2027 Education Programme is especially exciting with almost 90 courses to choose from and we encourage our members to take a look!

You can [click here to view a full list of courses](#), [click here for a PDF version of the full timetable of courses](#), or visit the SWU website: <https://swu-union.org.uk/gftu-training>



DISABLED PEOPLE AGAINST CUTS



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Timms Review complaint: SWU joins DPAC Cymru's call for independent review

A powerful coalition of Welsh disability, carers', and trade union organisations wrote to the Welsh Government asking ministers to lodge their "strongest possible grievance" with the UK Government over the Timms Review into the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) disability benefit.

The letter was coordinated by [Disabled People Against Cuts Cymru \(DPAC Cymru\)](#) and sent on 14th July 2026. Co-signatories include Disabled Peoples

Organisations, unpaid Carers Organisations, and trade union organisations including the Social Workers Union, BFAWU, PCS Wales, TSSA Wales No 1 Branch, Unite Community Wales, the NSSN, and Welsh trades councils.

The UK-wide Timms Review was announced in parliament late last year with promises of “co-production” with disabled people and a pledge of no further cuts until its conclusion. However, Welsh Disabled Peoples’ Organisations are adamant that co-production is not happening - with Welsh disabled people, they claim, treated with particular contempt.

The intervention came in the final week before the Senedd summer recess after local authorities, including Swansea Council, admitted they have made “no provision” for impending disability cuts in their medium-term budgets.

The groups are asking the new Welsh Government to deliver on their promise and commit to providing practical assistance in achieving a “long standing demand” of “a genuine disability review, led independently and democratically by disabled people and our organisations, including our trade unions.”

Disabled People Against Cuts Cymru (DPAC Cymru) led several high-profile protests against the disability cuts last year. A spokesperson for the group said they intend to hold the UK Government to the promises they made to parliament:

“The Timms Review was won by protest, but it is not what was promised. We are asking the Welsh Government to join us in setting out a clear expectation that the UK Government may not table further disability cuts while a genuine and independent review takes place in Wales.

“MPs, whatever their views, must also refuse, on principle, to vote for disability cuts for the duration.

“All we’re demanding from Westminster here is a fair fight. Enough with the broken promises, misdirection, and insults.”

John McGowan, Social Workers Union (SWU) General Secretary at the time the letter was submitted, stated:

“Disability benefits are not luxuries. The PIP disability benefit is a crucial support to help disabled people meet the extra costs of disability and long-term ill health and to support their independence. We urge the Welsh Government to join DPAC Cymru in demanding an independent review on PIP cuts which would impact on 275,000 people in Wales.

“No further cuts must be made until a genuinely co-produced disability review has been achieved, and the focus should be on improving the system rather than further restricting access to it. To do otherwise will cause significant hardship for people with physical and mental health conditions - pushing them out of work and into deep poverty - and put further strain on the social care system already stretched to breaking point by chronic underfunding and a staffing crisis.”

VOICES ADFOCAD operates across Wales to promote and advocate for the rights of Unpaid Carers. A spokesperson said:

“Disabled people in Wales have been clear for years: we will not accept reviews that speak about us while shutting us out. The Timms Review has failed to meet even the most basic standards of co-production, and Welsh disabled people have been treated with disregard throughout the process.

“We are asking Welsh ministers to intervene because our communities deserve a review that is democratic, accountable, and led by disabled people ourselves, not another exercise that reinforces the inequality we are fighting to dismantle.”

Plaid Cymru Anabledd is the disabled members’ section of Plaid Cymru, the party that leads Wales’ new minority government.

A spokesperson for the section said:

“The Welsh Government must use every lever it has to demand a genuine, independent review - led by disabled people, our organisations and our trade unions. Anything less is not co-production, it's a rubber stamp.

“Disabled people were told we would be worked with. Instead we've been worked around. That promise the labour Westminster government made has to mean something - or it was never made in good faith.”

Sarah Woolley, General Secretary of the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union (BFAWU), said:

“Disabled people have the right to dignity, independence and a decent standard of living. If the Timms Review is to have credibility, it must genuinely be led with disabled people, not simply carried out in their name.

Our members know the reality of low pay, insecure work and rising living costs. Personal Independence Payment helps meet the extra costs of disability, and further cuts would push more people into hardship while placing even greater pressure on public services.

BFAWU stands in solidarity with Disabled People's Organisations and supports the call for an independent review, led by disabled people and their organisations, including trade unions. No further disability cuts should be made until that work has been properly completed.”

Mark Evans is the secretary of Swansea and District Trades Council, which brings together affiliated branches and represents the community arm of the trade union movement in the Swansea area. He said:

“Our Trades Council thinks it is deplorable that a Labour Government has not properly and fully consulted Disabled People in compiling the

Timms review. Many disabled people are members of trade unions that are affiliated to the Labour Party and many will rightly be considering why their union donates to a party that has attacked disability benefits in the past and given the lack of consultation is likely to do so again. If this is the case we will be fully supporting disabled trade union members.”

Responding to the Timms Review interim report released on July 9th, a DPAC Cymru spokesperson added:

“The Timms Review is badly dressed in the language of disability activism, but uses none of the methods. About the only thing the interim report gets right is that PIP is not fit for purpose.

“Disabled people, more than anyone, want a better system. The Timms Review will not deliver that because it is not designed to. The review is weaponising our concerns in order to justify cuts in a ‘caring’ way. Meanwhile, the ‘nasty’ arm of the UK Government is demonising us. Caught in that pincer movement, disabled people are a political football.

This has nothing to do with balancing the books. When the last attempt at welfare reform introduced a more punitive benefit system, it too ended up costing more than it saved. The Timms Review is about divide and rule, pure and simple. It is a cynical distraction from falling living standards and a failing economy. Defeating disability cuts is a fight for everyone.”

The letter to the Welsh Government, the full list of signatories, and a briefing, is available here:

- [Non-Easy Read version](#)
- [Easy Read version](#)



The Welsh government has now raised “significant concerns” about the level of coproduction provided by the ongoing review of PIP and has called for an independent, disabled-led review to guide the design of any PIP replacement.

In her reply to the letter on 7th August, Welsh government’s Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Minister for Social Justice and Equality **Sioned Williams MS** “expressed the Welsh Government’s disappointment with the review to date” and that she “highlighted significant concerns that opportunities for meaningful engagement have been limited, and the resulting level of co-production has fallen well short of what disabled people in Wales have a right to expect.”

Read the full article here: <https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/welsh-government-raises-significant-concerns-with-uk-minister-over-pip-review-coproduction>

Welsh disability campaigners reject invitation to be “glorified door-staff” in controversial DWP review.

On 21st August, the Timms Review Steering Group

wrote to DPAC Cymru with an invitation to “co-host” one of the upcoming [“shaping recommendations” workshops](#) looking at changes to the PIP disability benefit.

On 24th August DPAC Cymru issued a statement on why they won’t be “co-hosting” a Timms Review workshop. One of their reasons for declining was that the DWP specified that DPAC Cymru would not be “deciding or designing workshop content” or “facilitating discussions during workshops” as these were “out of scope”, and that DPAC Cymru would also “not be part of the workshop participants in an organisational capacity” and would “not be expected to provide feedback on recommendations.” This would mean that DPAC Cymru would have even less input as co-hosts than as attendees.

Instead, DPAC Cymru’s role on the day would be to “welcome participants to the venue and help them settle in”, “set the scene” at the start, and “thank participants at the end”, for which they would be paid £37.50 per hour.

DPAC Cymru responded: “What the Timms Review have described as an invitation to ‘co-host’ a workshop, is instead a request for glorified door-staff.

“We are not boycotting the review. We [responded](#) to the Call for Evidence. Our members want to attend the workshops and have our say on the record. We also intend to simultaneously protest outside the workshops, [as we did in high-profile protests last year](#) during the sham *Pathways to Work* consultation.

“But we will not be there to smile and take people’s coats.”

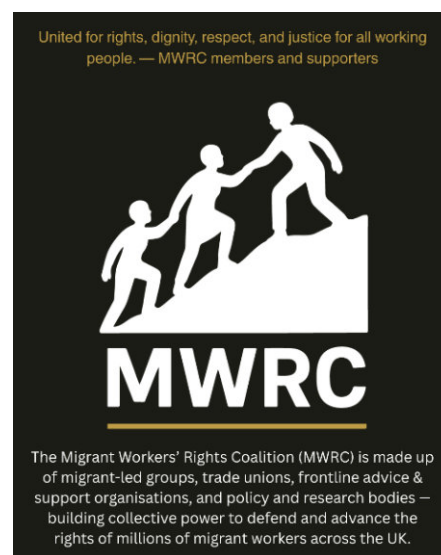
Read the full statement here: <https://dpac.uk.net/2026/08/statement-why-we-wont-be-co-hosting-timms-review-workshop>

SWU signs MWRC's joint letter to Prime Minister Andy Burnham on Migrant Workers' Rights

Fifty organisations from across the UK - including trade unions, migrant-led organisations, frontline advice and support organisations, community groups, and research bodies - have written to the Prime Minister calling for a new direction on migrant workers' rights.

The Migrant Workers' Rights Coalition (MWRC) and supporting organisations set out urgent demands for an end to immigration policies that create insecurity, exploitation, and exclusion. Sent to Prime Minister Andy Burnham on 22nd July, the migrant workers' rights letter calls for:

- Cancel the proposed "earned settlement" model and guarantee settlement after no more than five years.
- Introduce an accessible programme of regularisation.
- End tied and restrictive visas.
- Make employment rights real for every worker.
- End the hostile environment.
- Put migrant workers and affected communities at the centre of policymaking.



The letter also requests a meeting with the Prime Minister and relevant ministers to begin meaningful engagement with migrant workers and affected communities. The full letter can be read on the Regularise website: <https://regularise.org/blog/migrant-workers-rights-letter-andy-burnham>

Workers' rights and immigration policy cannot be treated separately. When immigration rules make people's status precarious and prolong that insecurity, it becomes harder for them to leave exploitation, report abuse, enforce their rights, organise collectively, and build secure lives.

These demands set out a clear direction: away from precarity, exclusion, and punishment and towards security, dignity, and equal rights.

MWRC's Manchester mobilisation for migrant workers' rights

Save the date! The Manchester solidarity march and community gathering has now been confirmed for Saturday 10th October 2026. More information will be posted on social media.

With Andy Burnham now in Downing Street, organising visibly and collectively in Manchester has particular political significance. The mobilisation will be an opportunity to bring our demands onto his political home ground in Manchester - the city he has presented as central to his vision of a "Number 10 North" - and demonstrate the strength of support for migrant workers' rights across the city, region and beyond.



SWU is proud to feature the winners of the SWU Assignment: World Social Work Day 2026 Essay Competition

Four social work students / apprentices have each won a prize of £500 for their outstanding essays.

Congratulations to **Keleigh Smalley-Willows** of the University of Lincoln, **Mercy Akinfolurin** of the University of Hertfordshire, **Judith Nkwopara** of Cardiff University, and **Laura Barr** of Queen's University Belfast who wrote the winning essays!

The SWU Assignment: World Social Work Day 2026 question was:

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

This annual competition is open to all Social Work Students undertaking an Undergraduate or Post Graduate Social Work Degree in the UK, Social Work Apprentices, and students undertaking specialist pathway routes. Each winning entrant will receive £500.

John McGowan, who was SWU General Secretary at the time of the winners' announcement, highlighted the importance of recognising and celebrating the voices of the next generation of social workers:

"Thank you to all the social work students and apprentices who participated in the competition this year and shared their reflections, insights, and hopes for the future. Your contributions have demonstrated not only your commitment to the profession but also your passion for making a positive difference in the lives of individuals, families, and communities. We are grateful for your participation and look forward to seeing the impact you will make throughout your careers."

The 2026 SWU Assignment was marked by a Panel including:

- **Ann Marie Hayes** - a registered Social Worker who is also qualified as a systemic psychotherapist and sits on the SWU Executive Committee
- **Narinder Sidhu** - an experienced Social Worker with a strong clinical background spanning forensic mental health, CAMHS, brain injury rehabilitation, higher education, and adult social care
- **Allison Hulmes** - a Welsh Romani social work academic, activist and co-founder of the Romani & Traveller Social Work Association and sits on the SWU Executive Committee

[Click here to download the four winning essays as a PDF.](#)

You can also [click here to meet the markers for the 2026 SWU Assignment](#) and read the winning essays from previous years at the bottom of the [SWU Assignment webpage](#).

Thank you to our panel of markers

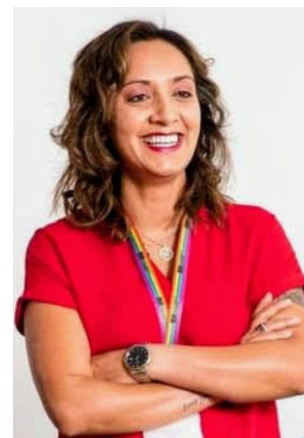
Ann Marie Hayes said:

"As a marker for this year's SWU Assignment essays, I was heartened by the depth and courage students brought to a genuinely difficult question addressing how the social work profession can push back against far-right narratives of division and co-build solidarity and hope across communities. The strongest essays resisted easy answers by grounding theory in real communities and lived experience. They demonstrated a willingness to sit with real tension, and were able to hold empathy for genuine grievance alongside a firm refusal to excuse discrimination, all whilst naming power as something social workers must reckon with in their own practice, not just in the systems around them. I would like to thank each writer for engaging so thoughtfully with a question at the very heart of what this profession is for; there is real hope in a cohort of future social workers already thinking this clearly about solidarity, hope, and justice before they've even qualified. The work continues."



Narinder Sidhu said:

"The winning essays stood out because they answered the question with real insight, intelligence and compassion. They clearly understood the role social workers can play in challenging far-right narratives of division, while also showing strong practice knowledge about building trust, inclusion, solidarity and hope within communities. They were all a delight to read, and it was inspiring to step into the thinking of students who are engaging so thoughtfully with the future of social work."



Allison Hulmes said:

"I was genuinely impressed by the outstanding quality of this year's essays. Students responded to the question with insight, compassion, and courage, demonstrating strong academic skills and a deep commitment to the values of social work. What stood out was their ability to engage critically with difficult issues while offering hopeful, practical ideas for building solidarity across communities. Choosing a winner was no easy task given the exceptionally high standard throughout. My sincere thanks to everyone who took part. Your thoughtful contributions made this a rewarding and inspiring experience and gave me great confidence in the future of the profession."



Winning quotes from the four winners



Mercy Akinfolurin of the University of Hertfordshire said:

"I'm genuinely thrilled and honoured that my essay has been selected as one of the winning entries. The topic matters deeply to me because social workers have a vital role in challenging division, protecting dignity, and helping communities see one another as partners rather than threats. My essay argues that hope is not passive, it is built through everyday practice, honest conversations, solidarity, and collective action. I'm grateful that this message will reach a wider audience and hope it encourages meaningful reflection and positive change."



Laura Barr of Queen's University Belfast said:

"I am thrilled to be one of the winners of this year's essay competition. This year's topic resonated deeply with me, having worked with a number of minority families during the recent race related riots across NI, and witnessing first-hand the impact and disruption of this on their lives. These experiences have strengthened my belief in the importance of social work as a profession in helping protect and support such individuals."



Judith Nkwopara of Cardiff University said:

"Winning this competition is deeply meaningful to me. When I submitted my essay, I was still an asylum seeker whose social work placement had been suspended because of my immigration status. The topic was not simply academic, it reflected my lived experience of exclusion and strengthened my belief in the importance of solidarity, hope and anti-oppressive practice. I hope this recognition encourages social workers to continue challenging division and building more inclusive communities."



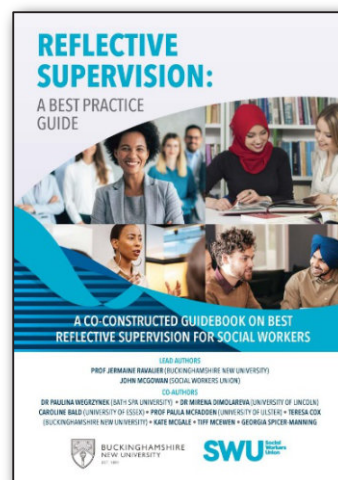
Keleigh Smalley-Willows of the University of Lincoln said:
 “To be in the top four feels incredibly affirming, as a social work apprentice and a neurodivergent practitioner. My assignment explored how social workers can challenge far-right narratives and build solidarity and hope across communities. These issues shape everyday practice; they’re part of the conversations we navigate daily. I wanted to show that social work is strongest when we speak up, act ethically, and embrace diverse ways of thinking, connecting and understanding the world. Social workers cannot be neutral in the face of injustice. Again, can I say thank you to SWU and the panel for the opportunity and result.”

Social work students and apprentices, be sure to check back next year for the announcement of the 2027 SWU Assignment question on World Social Work Day - 18th March!

Download your free copy of the Reflective Supervision: A Best Practice Guide:

<https://swu-union.org.uk/resources-training/swu-bnu-reflective-supervision-best-practice-guide-2024>

This free guide has been developed by the Social Workers Union and Buckinghamshire New University for social workers, by social workers. It demonstrates the steps which should (and can) be taken within a reflective supervision session and contains best practice guidance for social workers receiving reflective supervision, and those facilitating the supervision session.



You can also find more free resources and information on the SWU website here:

<https://swu-union.org.uk/resources-training/swu-leaflets-and-information>

Adultification: Why the Words We Write About Children Matter

Written by SWU Executive Committee Member Rebecca Austin

As social workers, we hold ethical values and principles that span every part of a child and family's life, their experience of home, community, education, health, and the wider systems around them. Part of our role is to explore harm across all of these areas, and to consider the short- and long-term impact of the systems our children and families move through.

Recently, my own practice has brought me back to a child's experience within education: their sense of belonging, their identity, and their safety within the school environment. This reflection sharpened when I heard Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch's



speech setting out plans to scrap the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) altogether, arguing the duty has become a “minefield” that exposes public decisions to legal challenge. The PSED currently requires schools and other public bodies to actively consider how their decisions affect people with protected characteristics, including race, and to foster good relations between different groups. Hearing this made me think about where we might end up if these duties are unpicked, in a system that already struggles to build inclusive, belonging environments for its Black pupils.

Where political will to protect these duties is absent, or actively being unpicked, it raises a harder question for us as a profession: where do we place ourselves as change-makers? We are not simply observers of the systems our young people move through, we are participants in them, with real capacity to influence practice in the schools, courts, and institutions we work alongside. If the wider political environment isn't driving this work, the responsibility to do so doesn't disappear, it shifts more heavily onto us.

Records, Race, and Adultification Bias

As social workers, we have the privilege of viewing a child's education and other records when we make requests to schools. But are we reading those records closely enough, with adultification bias in mind? Reflecting on my own training, I couldn't identify a single point in my education where adultification was named or explored, despite how central it has become to recent conversations in the profession.

Adultification bias is the process by which children, particularly Black children, are perceived as older, more responsible, and less innocent than they are, seen through a lens of deviancy rather than vulnerability. Dr Jahnine Davis, a UK's leading researcher on the subject and a member of the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, describes it as a persistent, ongoing form of dehumanisation rooted in racism, one that begins

before birth and continues across a child's life course. Language plays a central role: words like “streetwise,” “aggressive,” or “hard to engage” can strip a Black child of the vulnerability that would otherwise trigger a safeguarding response, and instead position them as complicit in the harm they've experienced.

This isn't an abstract concern. A 2022 report by the Commission on Young Lives, chaired by former Children's Commissioner Anne Longfield, found Black children were excluded from school at roughly three times the rate of White children, and named adultification bias as a key driver, Black children being viewed as older, less innocent, and therefore more responsible for their own behaviour, which is then used to justify harsher discipline. The 2020 Centre for Mental Health and Ubele Initiative report on the adultification of Black girls similarly found that Black girls in the UK are frequently perceived as loud or aggressive when they are actually anxious or distressed, with the genuine signs of harm overlooked as a result. More recently, the Black Equity Organisation's 2024 report on the state of Black education in Britain found that 47% of surveyed Black pupils felt their school curriculum failed to reflect their cultural heritage, alongside stark under-representation of Black staff at every level of the school workforce. The Youth Justice Board has echoed this pattern in its own resources, noting that racialised children, particularly Black children, are less likely to be seen as vulnerable and more likely to be met with suspicion within the justice system.

This matters for us directly, because the records we read and rely on are rarely neutral. Dr Karen Treisman, a specialist clinical psychologist nationally recognised for her work on trauma-informed practice, has written extensively on how the language used in case records “stories” a child, shaping how they come to be seen and treated by every professional who reads that record afterwards. Careless, vague, or one-sided recording doesn't just describe a child inaccurately; it actively shapes future decisions about them.

This is echoed in safeguarding case reviews, including the Child Q review, where the absence of a safeguarding-first approach meant Child Q was treated as a suspect rather than a child in need of protection, with the review finding a high probability that adultification bias and racism influenced the decision to strip-search her.

This matters because young people are still forming their sense of who they are, and the lens through which we see them shapes the lens through which they come to see themselves. Meeting a child with care and compassion isn't separate from our safeguarding role, it's central to it, and what we write about a child tells them, eventually, what we think and feel about them.

Where the language used tends toward adultification, this doesn't just misrepresent an individual child, it reinforces wider stereotypes, and the effect can be sharper still in rural communities where representation is limited and a young person may have few other Black adults or peers around them to counter that narrative. What we write also doesn't exist in isolation from harmful popular narratives about Black people more broadly, and can intensify a sense of “othering” among those who haven't personally experienced racism or don't have close relationships with people who have.

This isn't a peripheral concern. The University of Leicester's Rural Racism Project (2023-2025), the most detailed UK study of its kind, found that minority ethnic people in rural England commonly experience racial stereotyping and exclusionary treatment, and that rural identity is often quietly equated with whiteness, positioning minoritised people as outsiders. The research also found that rural racism is frequently dismissed as irrelevant or limited to overt incidents, with more subtle, everyday forms overlooked. For a Black child in a rural school with little visible representation, this context matters, it shapes how isolated an experience of racism can feel, and how much weight our records and language carry in either reinforcing or challenging that isolation.

So are we, as professionals whose legal frameworks and ethical codes place a child's wellbeing as paramount, thinking hard enough about the impact of records that misrepresent them and about the ripple effect when a young person is subsequently viewed through that same misleading lens by every other professional they come into contact with?

The Impact Beyond the Child

Research increasingly recognises that racism experienced by a child doesn't stay contained to that child, it moves through the whole family. A 2024 briefing from Centre for Mental Health and King's College London's Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience, based on research with parents and teenagers from UK racialised communities, found cascading effects across families following experiences of racism, affecting parenting, the parent-child relationship, and the mental health of the family as a whole. Parents described constantly working to limit their children's exposure to racism while also having to answer their children's questions about it. A related King's College London study similarly found that parents' and children's experiences of racism are closely entangled, running through the parent-child relationship, identity, and environment, rather than sitting as separate, isolated events. This fits a wider “linked lives” framework in family research, where discrimination experienced by one family member doesn't stay isolated but spills over to affect others, and some research suggests that seeing your own child discriminated against can be more distressing for a parent than experiencing discrimination yourself.

There's also a growing UK evidence base on the longer-term mental health cost. A longitudinal study using the Next Steps cohort found that exposure to racism at age 17 increased the risk of psychological distress at age 25, evidence that the effects of racism experienced in adolescence aren't short-lived, but can shape mental health well into adulthood. A related UK study, drawing on young people's own accounts, found that

experiences of racism led to feelings of loneliness and isolation, and that young people felt the burden of having to change how they presented themselves just to be perceived more favourably and protect themselves from judgement. Together, these studies point towards the need for systemic, structural school-level responses rather than incident-by-incident handling, responses that address how staff are trained and how the curriculum addresses race, not just how individual episodes are resolved.

I raise this because it matters for how we frame concerns to a school: the impact of how a situation is handled rarely stops at the child. Where we know a family and see that a child's sense of belonging isn't being fostered, or that they're experiencing racism, part of our role is asking what support might reduce these stressors for the child and the family around them and being alert to additional barriers some families face, such as engaging with a school where English is an additional language.

A Right to Rectification

One tool we and the young people we work with have is often overlooked: the right under UK GDPR to request rectification of inaccurate personal data. Where a child's record misrepresents them, through biased language, omission, or a one-sided account of an incident, a formal rectification request can be a direct, practical route to challenging that record, rather than simply noting our concerns and moving on.

Repair, Not Just Record

Rectifying a record is a necessary step, but it doesn't on its own repair the harm a young person has experienced, or prevent it becoming something they carry into adulthood. This is where restorative justice frameworks have real value for our practice. Rather than treating an incident as resolved once it's been recorded and amended, a restorative approach asks who has been harmed, what that harm has meant for them, and what would need to happen for that harm to be genuinely

addressed, not just noted. For a young person who has felt unheard or misrepresented, being part of a process that actively repairs that harm, rather than simply closing the file, can be the difference between an experience that resolves and one that lingers unresolved into their adult life.

Protective Factors: Community, Faith, and Belonging

It's important to hold this alongside what protects children, not just what harms them. Faith and cultural communities consistently emerge in the research as a source of resilience.

A 2024 study of Black and South Asian Muslim children in East London found that religiosity is an important protective factor and coping strategy for children navigating discrimination (Murray et al., 2024). The same study flagged a clear gap: we still know very little about how children in UK faith communities experience resilience in their own words. Wider research points the same way. Faith-based practices, intergenerational storytelling, and collective solidarity, the sense of belonging to a group that has each other's back: shared identity, mutual support, community that shows up for you, have all been linked to identity safety and cultural pride among Black children facing structural adversity. Identity safety means feeling secure in who you are, rather than having to constantly defend or explain your identity. Cultural pride means feeling positively about your heritage and background, rather than internalising negative messages about it.

A related but different dynamic concerns children of mixed heritage. These children may not fit neatly within a single racial or cultural category, and that in-between position, belonging fully to neither group, can bring its own difficulties. A DfES-commissioned study of mixed heritage pupils in Birmingham schools found this group, now the fastest-growing minority ethnic population in English schools, faced distinctive and often invisible barriers to belonging and achievement (Tikly et al., 2004).

More recent evidence offers a more hopeful picture. Analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study found no evidence of poorer socioemotional wellbeing among mixed race/ethnicity children at age 5-6, compared with their peers (Nazroo et al., 2018). Where difficulties do arise, they appear to be better explained by socio-economic circumstance and system-level miscategorisation than by identity itself. In other words, it isn't being mixed heritage that causes harm. It's misrecognition, being misread or mishandled by systems, schools and records included, that aren't built to recognise a child who doesn't fit neatly into one box. Misrecognition can mean a child being assumed to belong wholly to one group when they identify with both, having one part of their heritage overlooked or treated as less important, or simply not being asked how they see themselves at all.

I raise this because it matters for how we frame concerns to a school. The ask isn't only "stop doing harm." It's also "actively resource belonging." The risk rarely lies in a child's faith or mixed heritage identity itself. It lies in institutional systems built around discrete, legible categories, ones that struggle to accommodate children who don't sit neatly within them. That's the same structural blind spot that underlies adultification bias more broadly.

Engaging Schools: A Different Starting Point

It's also worth naming an asymmetry that shapes how we approach these conversations with schools. The National Education Union has been explicit that anti-racism is not currently covered in teacher training in England, and that there is no formal guidance for Initial Teacher Education and Training (ITE/T) providers on the subject (NEU, n.d.).

Research commissioned by the NEU found that where anti-racism content exists in teacher training at all, it tends to be delivered as a one-off session

rather than embedded across the curriculum, an approach shown to be ineffective in building the confidence teachers need to respond well to racism in the classroom (Smith and Lander, 2022). A separate Runnymede Trust study of teachers in English secondary schools reached a similar conclusion: low racial literacy among the workforce is a structural gap, not simply a matter of individual failing, and it leaves many teachers unsure how to respond when race and racism come up in their classrooms (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020).

It is worth being honest, too, that my own social work training didn't specifically name or explore adultification bias, despite how central it has become to recent safeguarding practice. But social work training starts from a different foundation. Anti-discriminatory practice and social justice sit at the centre of our professional standards and ethical codes, not as an add-on. That gives us a stronger starting point for recognising and naming these issues when we encounter them in a child's record or a family's experience.

This matters for how we approach schools. If a teacher hasn't received training that equips them to recognise adultification bias in their own language or practice, that's a structural gap in their profession's training pipeline, not necessarily a mark of individual prejudice. Naming this doesn't excuse harm, and it doesn't reduce our responsibility to challenge it robustly where it occurs.

But it does change the tone of the conversation. We're not approaching a school as adversaries calling out bad actors. We're naming a systemic gap that our own profession, by comparison, has had more grounding to work from. Framing concerns this way, as an invitation to build shared understanding rather than only a complaint, can make schools more likely to engage constructively, while we still hold firm on the outcomes a child and family need.

Building Belonging: Organisations That Can Help

Alongside challenging poor practice, part of our role is actively building a child and family's sense of belonging and identity, something that shouldn't rest solely on us or on the school. A few organisations offer practical, ready-to-use support in this space:

The Black Curriculum (theblackcurriculum.com) is a social enterprise working to embed Black British history into the national curriculum year-round, rather than confining it to isolated moments. They deliver youth curriculum programmes for ages 8-25, educator and school training on embedding Black history into planning, and a resources portal of classroom-ready lesson plans for KS2 and KS3. For families and schools, this offers a concrete way to help a child see their history and identity reflected in what they're taught, rather than left out of it.

Black Men Teach (blackmenteach.co.uk) is a network raising the profile of teaching among Black men and building a community for Black male educators, in response to the stark under-representation in the profession, only around 3.5% of teachers in the UK are Black men, and just 1% of headteachers are Black. For a Black boy in particular, seeing more Black male role models in a school workforce can be a meaningful, practical part of building belonging and challenging the kind of stereotyping that feeds into adultification.

My Cultur-ED (mycultur-ed.com) is a cultural diversity consultancy that works directly with schools on their statutory duties under the Equality Act 2010. Their offer includes staff training on responding to racist incidents, pupil workshops on racial and cultural literacy, support for developing an anti-racism ("Sticks and Stones") policy, parent/carers workshops, and a confidential incident-support service for school leaders. Where a school's response to a racist incident has been inadequate, this is a resource we can point schools

toward as part of a constructive, remedial ask not just a criticism.

Signposting families to these kinds of organisations, or recommending them to schools as part of an improvement plan, is one practical way we can support belonging directly, rather than leaving it entirely to a system that isn't always getting it right.

Connecting With Alienation

Part of what we're describing throughout this piece, misrecognition, exclusion, being seen through a distorted lens, has a name in itself: alienation. Understanding it as a concept can help ground much of what we ask professionals to notice in practice. Dr Neil Thompson's work through the Neil Thompson Academy offers a useful starting point, exploring how alienation shows up not just in obviously "toxic" environments but in the everyday experience of not being fully seen or valued, and pointing to solidarity, genuine connection and being met as a full person, as part of the antidote.

Understanding alienation in the abstract is only part of the task, though. To support young people experiencing it because of race, we also need to understand where the narratives producing that alienation come from in the first place. Roger McKenzie's Roots of Racism course, run through the GFTU Educational Trust, offers grounding here, tracing the historical roots of the narratives that continue to shape how Black children and adults are seen today. As the course's framing suggests, we can't change what we don't see, and seeing the roots of racism is often what allows us to start recognising its present-day expressions, including in our own records and language, through a different lens.

Building a Genuine Safeguarding Culture

Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility, and the culture that fosters it cannot rest on individual goodwill alone. A genuine safeguarding culture is one where a child's experience of harm

is recorded with the same rigour as their reaction to it, where adults are accountable for reflecting honestly on their own role in an incident, and where a child who has been hurt doesn't have to fight to have that harm recognised.

On a final note, I would like to consider how social workers are part of the solution. Where young people are operating within cultures where this doesn't yet exist, the question for us is not whether it's someone else's job to fix, it's how we, as professionals bound by ethical codes that tell us to uphold these principles, actively support them.

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Upcoming Events

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

Tuesday, 15th September from 12 - 1pm

This Talk to SWU webinar session is an opportunity to meet new General Secretary Dave Callow and SWU Interim Chair Chrissie Beatty. Additional guests will include SWU Treasurer and Northern Ireland Representative Gerry Madden and Campaign Collective founding member Simon Francis. Members will be able to learn and ask questions about:

- How SWU and BASW work together through our Co-operation Agreement
- How SWU supports its Union Contacts
- What 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

SWU members book your free place here:

<https://basw.co.uk/events/talk-swu-what-we-do-swu-and-how-get-more-involved>



CAREERS ²⁰²⁶ THAT CARE

24 SEPT • M Shed, Bristol
10AM - 4PM

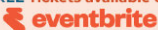
BUILDING BRIGHTER FUTURES FOR EVERY CHILD
A careers event for children's services.
Whether you're looking to start a career, change careers, grow your professional network or develop your skills, this event is for you.

EXPECT

- Leading employers from across the South West
- Expert speakers
- Practical workshops with industry experts
- Networking opportunities and careers information

SPEAKERS

Luke Rodgers BEM CEO (The Care Leaders) Creating better futures for care experienced people	Leanne Morgan Principal Social Worker (Torbay Council) Building hope through social work
Professor Felicity Thomas Professor of Culture and Health (Exeter University) Finding your path without leaving the South West	Dr Vikki Jervis Regional SEND Coordinator (SWRIIA) What inclusion really looks like

 **FREE** Tickets available on 

Careers That Care 2026

Careers That Care South West is a free one-day flagship regional event hosted by Fostering South West and the South West Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliance.

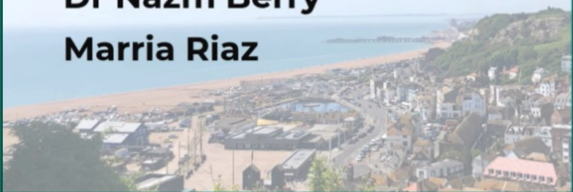
Located at Bristol's M-Shed on 24th September, it hopes to celebrate the impact of our work, reconnect with purpose, and inspire the future of children's services across the South West.

Book your free ticket here:

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/careers-that-care-2026-swriia-tickets-1992825395403>

SWU will see you at The Social Work Show Manchester

Monday, 28th September from 9:30am - 4:30pm at Manchester Deansgate Hotel

A live panel featuring Dave Callow Prof Jermaine Ravalier Dr Joe Hanley Dr Paulina Wegrzynek Dr Nazm Berry Marria Riaz 	How do we keep our social workers? Recruitment and retention of social workers in England's coastal regions Join this session sharing findings from an NIHR-funded programme about vacancy rates in coastal areas.
The Social Work show Manchester, 28 September	Register now for this free in-person conference. 

Join us for the UK's largest social work and social care event bringing together professionals, expert speakers, and leading organisations from across the sector. This event is free and you are welcome to arrive at any time throughout the day, which will involve:

- Networking with colleagues and a brilliant range of exhibitors
- Over 40 insightful seminars and interactive workshops
- Employers sharing their current job vacancies
- A full day of free CPD

This year's conference will explore some of the profession's most important topics including panel discussions covering:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Artificial intelligence (AI) and the future of social work
Hosted by Social Work Today• Leadership in the Helping Professions: Embracing emotional complexity
Hosted by Claudia Megele & Tanya Moore, Authors and Researchers | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recruitment and Retention: New research on the challenges facing social workers in England's coastal regions
Hosted by SWU General Secretary Dave Callow with panellists: Prof. Jermaine Ravalier, Dr Joe Hanley, Dr Paulina Wegrzynek, Dr Nazm Berry, Marria Riaz |
|--|---|

Whether you work in children and families services, adult social care or mental health, this is an unmissable event. The programme will have seminars for visitors at all levels of their career.

Register for your **free ticket** here: <https://www.compassjobsfair.com/Events/The-Social-Work-Show/Book-Tickets>

National March for Palestine

Saturday, 10th October at 12pm beginning at Victoria Embankment, London



Message from the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC): “After 3 years Israel continues to commit genocide against the Palestinian people in Gaza. Join our march on 10th October to stand with Palestine and demand our government take action to end its complicity in Israel's crimes.”

Details for this march and all upcoming PSC events can be found on their website:

<https://palestinecampaign.org/events>

Together Alliance: Organise Summits

People up and down the country are gearing up for Organise Together - two summits to plan next steps:

“We know the challenges we face are bigger than ever before. The voices of division and hate are growing louder.

But we also know that when we come together, we are stronger than hate. We can build the unity we need to stop the far right.

That’s why we’re hosting two summits, North and South, to organise together.”

Manchester Summit on 17th October information and tickets: https://actionnetwork.org/ticketed_events/organise-together-manchester-summit

London Summit on 24th October information and tickets: https://actionnetwork.org/ticketed_events/organise-together-london-summit



Community Anti-racism Conference

Thursday, 22nd October from 11am - 4pm in Horsham, West Sussex



This free conference hosted by [VOT Community Conferences CIC](#) is for everyone - professionals, community members, leaders, students, volunteers, and anyone who believes that we all have a role to play in building fairer, safer, and more inclusive communities. The event will explore anti-racist practice through engaging workshops, lived experiences, practical case studies,

honest conversations, and practical tools that can make a real difference in our workplaces, organisations, and everyday lives.

In line with the UK Black History Month 2026 theme: “Honouring our communities” – this year is about making space for people, intentionally building relationships, strengthening our communities, and inspiring positive change.

Book your **free** ticket here: <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/3rd-annual-community-anti-racism-conference-tickets-1993594758589>

BASW UK Social Work Conference: Practice & Careers 2026

Tuesday, 27th October from 9:30am - 4pm in Birmingham

This year's BASW UK Conference is packed full of engaging, informative, and topical content designed to enrich social work practice, careers, and learning with workshops and talks led by the voices of the profession and lived experience.

Attendees will enjoy:

- 6 hours of CPD and learning through diverse keynote sessions and workshops
- Networking opportunities with fellow delegates
- Lunch and refreshments included
- A range of professional exhibitors
- A programme packed with topical content suited for all career stages, specialisms, and experience

Visit the BASW website to view the programme and register your place:

<https://basw.co.uk/about-basw/social-work-conferences-uk/social-work-live>



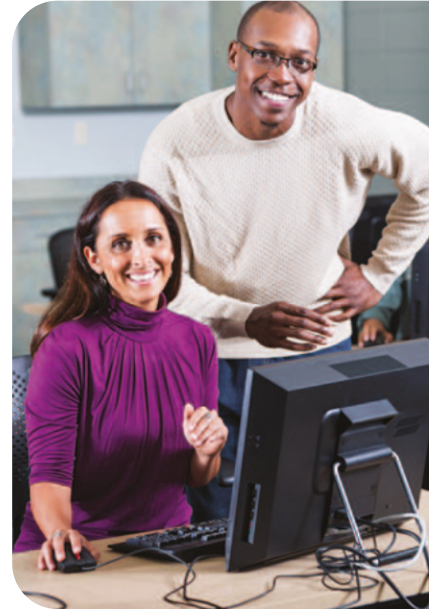
Only **£35** a year with your present BASW membership (**£10** a year for students)

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>



<https://www.linkedin.com/company/social-workers-union>



<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>