

Why we responded to SWU members on the issue:



'Social workers in England and Wales should have parity with other emergency workers'

Social workers deserve the protection from assault that many frontline emergency professions already have

Social workers work out of hours as an emergency service, some social workers work alone in this role and often encounter aggression that can lead to violence whilst doing their job. Members have advised us that they have been spat at, verbally abused, threatened with weapons, subject to ongoing harassment, physically injured, and sexually assaulted. The government has classified social workers as "critical workers" during the COVID-19 pandemic but has not given them the protection that other emergency workers have - social workers are also emergency workers in responding to a variety of needs such as Child Protection, Adults at Risk, and Mental Health, the EDT (Emergency Duty Teams) have "Emergency" in their title, it is a Statutory Service.

Many SWU members have been raising this issue with us for several years and, as a member-led organisation, it is vital that we listen to them and act on this. Several members from England have agreed to share their experience to show the seriousness of this issue. A member advised that they were targeted and faced with hardening measures undertaken on their home and workplace after undertaking some emergency work. The risk to their family in this case was so great that they were advised to give their children's and partner's information to the police in case they had to ring 999. Our member still has an alarm to this day for their own safety.

One member said: *'We do this job and our families/loved ones don't always know what we do and who we deal with. I'm sure most workers would feel very differently about the petition if they knew their loved ones were at risk and their home wasn't the safe haven they think it is.'*

Another member, spoke about an emergency home visit with the Police there as support. *'I was violently assaulted during the visit but not the Police Officer. I think the person knew not to assault a Police Officer but I was an easy target'*. Alongside anxiety, depression, and other psychological problems associated with assaults our

members have endured life changing injuries and for some not returning to social work and a secure job.

Social workers in Scotland who enforce child protection orders or carry out mental health assessments already have this type of protection under the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Act 2005. The Royal College of Nurses indicates that it has provided better protection for their members, stating in a briefing paper: *'The NHS Scotland staff survey in 2015 found that the proportion of NHS staff who had experienced a physical attack had decreased by 10 percentage points since 2008.'* In addition, other unions; for example, GMB pushed for their ambulance members to be added to the initial Bill. This was successful due to the emergency nature of their work and has had a positive impact for staff protection and fully welcomed by their membership.

This is exactly why the British Association of Social Workers and the Social Workers Union started the petition to gauge opinion and respond to member requests to challenge the exclusion of social workers and to request that the government add social workers to the group of professions that it is an additional offence to assault while they are on duty. This would be done by amending the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018 using the current Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. So far the petition has over 13,200 signatures and more people are signing it every day. This has been the fastest response we have ever received at SWU with so many positive emails on the subject to us from members.

The inclusion of social workers in the Act by itself and the approach of dealing with perpetrators in a more severe way, in terms of sentencing at court, is not going to completely deter or eradicate this type of behaviour in society. We need to do further work to ensure that our members are safe in the workplace. This is often difficult when social workers do not know what they are facing during an emergency home visit.

However, some do support the current status quo in the application of the law. While this stance supports

prosecuting assaults on social workers on the same basis of others, it takes no account of the role of Social Work and the risk encountered by the profession. Some alternative directions have been suggested including a restorative justice approach. These concepts all sound worthy, but they would take a long time to get any meaningful change to be enacted and, in the meantime, social workers would still be acting as emergency response workers but not receiving the same protection, which is unacceptable. SWU's view is that merely perpetuates the invisibility of social work and social care; as well as the poor response from Government to the sector as a whole.

SWU is committed to improving the wellbeing and working conditions of social workers and our members. We firmly believe that social workers are entitled to parity of esteem with other public sector professionals such as health workers in the NHS and other emergency workers. We are simply asking that social workers in England and Wales

receive the same protection afforded to other frontline emergency workers.

The introduction of the new and specific offences under the Act can only be seen as a positive start in recognising the risks to this profession. SWU does not see any concrete or actionable alternatives suggested outside the nebulous concepts of "increase public trust and confidence in social work". This amendment supports people to understand the risks of social work (like assault).

Please share your views below to help inform our ongoing discussion with the Government.

BASW and SWU will continue to campaign for working conditions that enable social workers to thrive and support their communities safely.

<https://www.basw.co.uk/assaults-social-workers-petition-share-your-views>