

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Social Work England: A regulator worthy of our collective dissent

Journal Item

How to cite:

Hanley, Joe (2022). Social Work England: A regulator worthy of our collective dissent. Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work, 34(3) pp. 48–60.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2022 Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<https://anzswjournal.nz/anzsw/article/view/925>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Social Work England: A regulator that has earned our collective dissent

Joe Hanley, Open University, England

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: In December 2019, Social Work England (SWE) officially took over as the regulator of the approximately 100,000 social workers in England. This article explores the foundations and first two years of SWE, suggesting that, as a regulator, it has earned the collective dissent of social workers.

APPROACH: Initially, a brief history of social work regulation in England is provided, before moving on to explore the founding of SWE and the makeup of the organisation. The regulator's standards and rules, approach to consultation and representative role are also discussed.

DISCUSSION: This culminates in a discussion about the dissent that many social workers in England have already started to demonstrate towards SWE, with a particular focus on the new continuing professional development (CPD) requirements. The potential to translate this largely individual dissent into collective action and mutual support is explored.

Keywords: Social work; regulation; Social Work England; continuing professional development; dissent

In December 2019, Social Work England (SWE) officially took over as the regulator of the approximately 100,000 social workers in England—the third such regulator for social workers in just seven years. There were those who argued when social work regulation was initially introduced in the UK under the Care Standards Act 2000 that it was a move that would gradually erode both professional discretion and social work values (Rogowski, 2020). This article argues that many of the developments around SWE could be seen as these predictions coming to fruition. Following a brief history of social work regulation in England and circumstances that led to the creation of SWE, various aspects and activities of the new regulator are reviewed: the makeup of the organisation; rules and standards; manufacturing

consensus; and the appropriation of social worker voice. The article then focuses on the ways social workers have already started to demonstrate their dissent in relation to SWE, and how this, largely individualised, dissent could be translated into collective action and mutual support.

Brief regulatory history

In 1970 the Central Council for the Education and Training of Social Workers (CCETSW) was established in the UK with a specific remit to promote the quality of social work training and education (Rogowski, 2020). The CCETSW remained in place until the passing of the Care Standards Act 2000, legislation that required, for the first time, all social workers in England to be registered,

AOTEAROA
NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL
WORK 34(3), 48–60.

CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Joe Hanley
joe.hanley@open.ac.uk

and thus obligated them to abide by the standards and rules of the new regulator: the General Social Care Council (GSCC). This was seen by the government of the day as an important step in modernising the social work profession, and three additional nation-specific regulators were also established in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, a regulatory split that remains today (Rogowski, 2020).

Following the intense media and political scrutiny of social workers in England that followed the death of 17-month-old Peter Connelly (Baby P) in 2007, the Social Work Task Force (2009) was appointed by the government to review the profession and recommend reform. While highly critical of the GSCC on areas like quality assurance and clarity of role, that task force did not actually recommend a change of regulator. However, there were several other influential developments at the time. These included the dismissal of GSCC Chief Executive Mike Wardle in 2009 following a report into the handling and backlog of professional misconduct cases (Brindle, 2009), and the introduction of austerity measures following the financial market collapse of 2008 that included the shutting down of several public organisations perceived to be overly expensive (Jones, 2019). As a result, in 2010, the government announced its intention close the GSCC and shift regulatory responsibility for social workers to the Health Professions Council, an existing regulator that covered a range of professions including physiotherapists, occupational therapists and paramedics, and would be renamed the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) (Department of Health, 2010). The central justification provided when this change was announced was that the current arrangement was “anomalous” because the GSCC was the only professional regulator directly answerable to the Secretary of State for Health (p. 21). Therefore, in 2012, the HCPC took over regulatory responsibility for the profession, and would maintain this until the founding of SWE.

This relatively short and linear exploration of social work regulation in England belies a much more complex history. For example, Purcell (2020) presented research that suggested the frequently repeated narrative of high-profile child deaths leading to major reforms oversimplifies, and that these deaths are actually more likely to be utilised to justify pre-planned government initiatives. A more in-depth exploration of this regulatory history can be found in several places (for example, Purcell, 2020; Rogowski, 2020; Worsley et al., 2020a).

Justifying the new regulator

In the 2016 report *Children's Social Care Reform: A Vision for Change*, the Department for Education (2016) announced their intention to create a new regulatory organisation for social workers in England that would come to be SWE. Justifications provided for his new regulator included the need for a social-work-specific regulator to “develop an in-depth understanding of the profession”, a perspective that seemingly ignored that the GSCC, holding such a remit, had only recently been abolished (Department for Education, 2018, p. 9). However, the primary focus of government discourse around the new regulator centred on claims that this change was needed to address poor-quality social workers, and in particular education providers who were seen to be “producing poor quality trainees” (McNicoll, 2016). In order to make these arguments, the government relied on several reports they had commissioned into the profession, most notably, the Narey (2014) report. The author of that report, Martin Narey, was a frequent advisor to the government with a background predominantly in prison services. Narey raised concerns about social work qualifying education, critiquing the quality of placements and the literacy of students (p. 16). However, the report's methodology was based primarily on “a large number of private interviews”, and there was minimal engagement with existing research or

alternative perspectives (p. 3). The Narey report, and the influence it has had on SWE, are discussed in more detail later.

The focus on *quality* of social workers also points to another potential motivation for introducing the new regulator: to accelerate a programme of reforms that have been narrowing and restricting social work knowledge and practice in England, particularly over the past decade. Tunstill (2019) points to several interlinked projects and processes that form part of this programme, including the introduction and rapid expansion of the social work fast-track qualifying provider Frontline, an organisation established to recruit and train “high-quality” social workers (MacAlister et al., 2012, p. 3). Concerns with the Frontline organisation and model have been widely documented elsewhere, and include high costs, poor retention, perpetuating inequality, concerning business connections and (somewhat ironically), the poor quality of their training model (Hanley, 2021a; Jones, 2019; Tunstill, 2019). However, despite all of this, the government continue to back Frontline and habitually increases the value and number of their contracts. In one critique Murphy (2016) even goes so far as to suggest that a key catalyst for replacing the HCPC was that they were too challenging of Frontline and its proponents. As evidence, he notes that the head of the HCPC had challenged claims that social work courses were producing poor-quality social workers, highlighting that those making these claims had failed to provide a single piece of evidence. Murphy (2016) also describes how the HCPC obligated Frontline to make extensive changes to their programme in order to meet its approval criteria. In contrast to this, Frontline have reported that SWE ended their first inspection of them a day early “as the regulator had already found sufficient evidence to recommend Frontline approval” (Frontline, 2021, p. 5).

What is Social Work England?

SWE was initially proposed in draft legislation to be an executive agency under

the Department for Education, a very unusual proposal for a profession that had only four years earlier seen the closure of the GSCC justified by the need to move further away from government (Department of Health, 2010). These initial proposals for SWE were supported by some very prominent figures, including the Chief Social Worker (CSW) for children and families in England, Isabelle Trowler, a registered social worker and consultant who had played a key role in designing Frontline’s curriculum, and was appointed by the Department for Education to provide leadership for the profession (Jones, 2019). However, concerns about the lack of independence that approach would have created were raised by many in the sector, including the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), the largest professional association of social workers in the UK (Jones, 2019). Under the weight of these objections, the plans were eventually watered down and, under the Children and Family Act 2017, SWE was created in terms not dissimilar to the GSCC, being an arms-length body. However, among the wide range of maintained powers, the Secretary of State for Education still holds veto/modifying rights over any SWE rules, appoints the Chair and approves the appointment of all chief executives. The founding of SWE also brought with it a £26m government investment, a large sum at a time when social workers were regularly reporting the negative impact of underfunding on services (Ravalier et al., 2021).

To better understand SWE and how it functions as an organisation, it is vital to look at those who make up the organisation, as well as those who do not. For example, while the initial board of SWE included a consultant, a finance director and a member of the House of Lords, it took almost two years and substantial pressure from the profession for SWE to appoint any registered social workers as board members (Smith, 2021). Furthermore, a 2021 internal audit found that only 13% of the SWE workforce were qualified

social workers (Smith, 2021). Considering government claims that SWE was set up in part to develop an in-depth understanding of the profession, this marginalisation of social workers seems counterintuitive (Department for Education, 2018). The Chair of SWE, Kamlesh Kumar Patel, and the Chief Executive Colum Conway, do both hold social work qualifications; however, neither is a registered social worker in England (Conway is registered in Northern Ireland, Patel does not appear on any UK register). Furthermore, in line with SWE's regulations, both individuals were appointed directly by the Secretary of State for Education at a time of increasing concern about government bias in public appointments (Cathcart, 2022; Dunton, 2020). Patel holds a number of prominent political and business roles and, despite being only one of his 22 disclosed interests, SWE alone pay Patel a salary of £70k (SWE, 2021a).

The marginalisation of social workers within their regulator can be further seen by looking at more micro-level activities of SWE. For example, under their Fitness to Practise (FtP) rules, SWE has a legislative responsibility to investigate concerns raised about social workers whose ability to practise may be impaired (SWE, 2019d). When SWE introduced these rules, it was clear that reform in this area was needed. Research had shown that social workers were more likely to find themselves subject to FtP investigations than other professionals, as well as being more likely to be removed from the register as a result and less likely to be able to engage effectively with the process (Kirkham et al., 2019; Worsley et al., 2020b). However, social work perspectives have once again been marginalised in this process, with no requirement for either case investigators or case managers who are overseeing these investigations to have any experience, or even knowledge, of social work (SWE, 2019a).

Furthermore, since SWE took over responsibility the number of FtP referrals received, and the length of time it takes

to reach an outcome, have both increased (Preston, 2021a). SWE have also faced questioning about the legality of their FtP processes. This included a proposed power to impose interim orders without offering a hearing, a proposal that was eventually scrapped following legal scrutiny (Stevenson, 2018). Less than a year after the new rules were implemented SWE also had to suspend its voluntary removal process under pressure from their own regulator, the Professional Standards Authority (PSA) (Samuel, 2020a). The PSA have also raised their concerns about a growing backlog of FtP cases at SWE, and in particular that SWE is failing to identify and prioritise FtP cases that could represent a serious risk to the safety of service users (Preston, 2021a, 2021b). Notably, these difficulties around risk prioritisation and the size of the case backlog are both very similar to those experienced by the GSCC in 2009 that led to a public inquiry, the dismissal of their chief executive, and shortly thereafter, the announcement that the GSCC was to be abolished (Brindle, 2009). However, for SWE the government instead opted to provide them with a £2.3m funding injection to help clear the backlog (Preston, 2021b).

Further demonstrating the deficits in SWE's approach to FtP are the revelations that black and ethnic minority social workers are overrepresented in the cases they adjudicate (Samuel, 2020b). This finding is potentially indicative of a more fundamental problem with representation and diversity in the organisation, as a 2020 equality audit of SWE found that only 2.7% of their staff are Black, compared to 12% of children's social workers and 15% of adult social workers (Samuel, 2020c). Furthermore, 67% of SWE's executive leadership team are male, while only 17.5% of social workers are male (SWE, 2021a). There are also arguably some fundamental equality issues present in the standards and rules implemented by SWE, including listing lived experience of receiving social work services alongside having a criminal conviction as a potential reason for rejecting

student candidates (SWE, 2021b). These rules and standards will now be discussed in more depth.

Contentious rules and standards

Prior to taking over regulatory responsibility, SWE introduced a number of rules and standards that would shape its functioning. In line with Tunstall's (2019) analysis, these rules and standards could be seen as yet another aspect of the narrowing and restricting of social work knowledge and practice in England discussed earlier. For example, the Professional Standards (SWE, 2019b) that outline what all social workers in England must know, understand and be able to do, are all prefaced by either "I will" or "I will not", representing an individualised, rather than collectivist, conceptualisation of social work, and one seemingly designed to promote self-governing and predictable subjects (Garrett, 2021a). Some indicative examples include:

- Standard 1.7: "I will recognise and use responsibly, the power and authority I have when working with people, ensuring that my interventions are always necessary, the least intrusive, proportionate, and in people's best interests."
- Standard 3.15: "I will recognise and respond to behaviour that may indicate resistance to change, ambivalent or selective cooperation with services, and recognise when there is a need for immediate action." (SWE, 2019a)

The wording of each of these, and indeed of most of the professional standards, are also arguably relevant only to frontline local authority contexts, excluding those in charities, academia, policy, activism, and community development.

However, perhaps more concerning than what is included in these rules and standards are the omissions. For example, there is a distinct lack of emphasis placed

on structural and societal oppression, and there is not a single mention of poverty in any of the professional standards (SWE, 2019b). In the context of contemporary England, where, even before the Covid-19 pandemic, poverty was rapidly rising (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2020), and research increasingly shows those experiencing deprivation are also more likely to experience social work involvement (Bennett et al., 2021)—this omission should be unacceptable. There is, similarly, no engagement with international issues like climate change and migration, contexts that increasingly impact on social work practice in England (Palattiyil et al., 2019). These developments put SWE at odds with the Global Definition of Social Work as developed by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), with its emphasis on collective responsibility and social justice, a point that will be returned to below (IFSW, 2014).

Manufacturing consensus

Before introducing its rules and standards, SWE undertook a public consultation seeking views and opinions from stakeholders (SWE, 2019c). The consultation ran over 10 weeks in early 2019 and, in addition to online and written submissions, public consultation days were held across England. The consultation process was widely publicised, including through industry news outlets and social media. In this way, SWE was not only obtaining feedback, but was publicly seen to be obtaining this feedback. Providing stakeholders with access to extensive, but heavily controlled, consultation opportunities in this way can act to manufacture a feeling of consent, consensus and legitimacy, while ultimately serving to reproduce existing power relations (van Dijk, 1993). This is, in part, because dominant participants still determine all structures and systems for engagement, and in doing so can restrict the scale and scope of involvement.

There were significant ways that SWE strictly controlled both input and output in the consultation process. The online consultation forms included very specific questions about individual sections of the texts, rather than asking respondents for feedback on the areas that they felt were most important to them. As an example, the consultation questionnaire related to the FtP rules included questions about only 16 of the 51 proposed rules (SWE, 2019d). Further limiting the scope of the consultation, there were word limits on the online feedback forms, and no place to list sources or references. This suggests that there was minimal interest in longer responses that had the opportunity to fully develop and provide clear corroborating evidence.

All consultation respondents were also asked to give their general agreement with each of the proposed rules and standards documents, weighted from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The relatively positive average response to these questions (ranging from 4.4/5 for the Professional Standards to 3.5/5 for the FtP Rules) was a major focus of the consultation feedback presented by SWE, allowing them to claim consensus even while acknowledging that there remained high levels of disagreement with specific sections (SWE, 2019c). SWE would later use the same type of scaling questions in a consultation on changes to their continuing professional development (CPD) model (to be discussed more below) (SWE, 2021c). Respondents to that consultation were significantly less positive about these new changes. A proposal to require social workers to reflect on CPD related to a particular theme received an average agreement of only 2.5/5, and a proposal to require social workers to discuss their CPD with a peer was agreed with by only “a third (32%) of respondents” (no reason is given for presenting this finding as a fraction/percentage rather than out of 5) (p. 6). In each of these cases, SWE declared its intention to implement these changes regardless.

The limited information that SWE does provide about settling disagreements raised in their consultations suggests that they rely heavily on the advice and views of individuals and organisations with existing leadership authority in social work. For example, one of the most contested changes brought in by SWE was the new requirement for a mandatory “statutory” placement for all social work students or, by SWE’s definition, a placement that involves “high volume, high-risk work”, and must involve prescribed legal interventions based on specified legislation (SWE, 2020, p. 3). While the consultation response from SWE recognised that there were various opinions expressed in relation to this change, the decision to retain the new requirement was described in the consultation response as being made based on non-specific “feedback from the Chief Social Workers” (SWE, 2019c, p. 58). This is one of four times that the opinions of the CSWs are referenced in this way, and in each instance, the SWE accepted their suggestions.

This primacy of statutory placements for social work students in England has been shown to have gradually been perpetuated through discourse in government policy and reports and could therefore also be seen as forming part of the aforementioned programme of reforms narrowing and restricting social work knowledge and practice (Bald & Howells, 2019; Hanley, 2021a). The Narey (2014) report, for example, recommended that any university that is unable to provide at least one statutory placement per student should not receive regulatory endorsement. However, in contrast there is a large and growing body of research that suggests that statutory placements are not superior to other placements, and there is arguably more evidence for the value of non-statutory placement opportunities for social work students (Bald & Howells, 2019; MacDermott & Campbell, 2015; McLaughlin et al., 2015; Perry & Hughes, 2021; Scholar et al., 2012). Unfortunately, this body of research has yet to receive any public consideration from SWE.

Appropriation of social work voice

Despite limited social work representation within the organisation, SWE frequently presents itself as a voice for the profession. This is most clearly seen when representatives of SWE claim outright to be “representing social work (Turner, 2019). SWE are, however, quick to relinquish that representative role when facing challenges— particularly from social workers—and instead highlight their role in “public protection” (SWE, 2021a, p. 4). In maintaining this dichotomy, SWE rely on the complex and confusing state of social work leadership in England made up of an ever-increasing number of professional and educational institutes, regulators, senior civil servants and opaque networks, allowing these organisations and individuals to claim leadership responsibility when it suits them, while also skirting blame by abdicating this leadership role when facing scrutiny (Scourfield, 2020).

Through this selective approach to representation, SWE could also be seen to be marginalising organisations that have traditionally represented the profession. This includes organisations like BASW which, for over 50 years, has acted as a professional association representing social workers in the UK and, as noted earlier, were critical of the original plans for SWE. This marginalisation also impacts on emerging organisations like the Social Work Action Network (SWAN), a network of social workers founded in 2004 based on a mutual concern about dominant trends in the profession. SWE acting as a representative for social workers allows the government to exclude these organisations from key events and decision making, while still claiming to be listening to the voice of social workers through engagement with the regulator. This was particularly apparent at the 2021 launch event for the national Children’s Social Care Review, where SWE was the only social work organisation invited (Berridge, 2021). Notably, that review was chaired by Josh MacAlister, founder and long-time CEO of Frontline. The government

did set up The College of Social Work in 2012, a national college with the specific remit of providing a professional voice for social workers. However, in 2015, a year before SWE was announced, a decision was made to close that college (Jones, 2019). The closure of the national college in favour of an arms-length regulatory body, alongside the marginalisation of organisations like SWAN and BASW, raises questions about the government’s genuine interest in listening to the voice of the profession.

Another way that SWE appropriates the voice of social work is through media production. SWE has started a podcast, “This is Social Work,” a title that implies their role in dictating the parameters of the profession, and they produce a regular newsletter that, among other things, claims to present “voices from the sector.” Two senior representatives of SWE were also members of the initial editorial board of *My Social Work News*, a newly launched magazine in 2020 that explicitly professes to represent the “voice of the social worker” (*My Social Work News*, 2021). Perhaps the most revealing way that SWE has appropriated the voice of the profession has been through the co-option of World Social Work Day, a global event started in 2007 by the IFSW to promote international solidarity and cooperation (IFSW, 2020). Since taking over as regulator, SWE has appointed itself a lead role in dictating how this day is celebrated in England, a role that no previous regulator held. In doing so, SWE has expanded the day to introduce a week-long national Social Work Week, relegating World Social Work Day to a single day within that week (SWE, 2022). Social Work Week has its own theme, which for 2022 was “Social Work and Me”, a highly individualistic theme compared to the 2022 World Social Work Day theme of “Co-building a New Eco-Social World: Leaving No One Behind”. As part of their self-appointed role, SWE requires all events for Social Work Week to be submitted to them for approval and has set strict criteria for the events they will endorse. Once again,

the influence of the Narey (2014) report can be seen in these developments, where the IFSW definition of social work was described as “thoroughly inadequate” for highlighting social justice and liberation of people rather than child protection (Narey, 2014, p. 13). In contrast, Garrett (2021a) suggests that the IFSW definition of social work should be a vital source for guiding dissenting social work, which may explain why SWE have made attempts to marginalise it in the face of growing dissent.

Dissent

There is increasing evidence that many social workers in England recognise the concerns with SWE that have been outlined here. For example, in a study that was commissioned by SWE, social work educators and practitioners described the regulator as bureaucratic, distant, representing more of the same, controlled by “elite” technical experts, and lacking social work representation (Pentaris et al., 2021, p. 72). Social workers have also started to demonstrate their dissent in the ways that are available to them. This can be seen particularly in how social workers have engaged (or not) with new mandatory CPD requirements introduced by SWE. One of the six SWE professional standards is to “maintain my continuing professional development”, and significantly it is the only standard where social workers have to provide evidence in order to maintain their registration (SWE, 2019b, p. 9). The model SWE has devised to enforce this requires all social workers to electronically upload evidence of CPD activities annually; however, only 2.5% of these CPD records are actually audited by SWE (SWE, 2019e). This approach, requiring all professionals to upload evidence regardless of whether it will be audited, is a major departure from comparable regulators, both nationally and internationally. For example, the HCPC audits 2.5% of the professionals they regulate annually, but only those who are chosen for audit are asked to provide this evidence (HCPC, 2018). Social work regulators in other jurisdictions who

adopt a similar model also contact only those chosen for audit to provide CPD evidence, including in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Social Care Council, n.d.), Scotland (Scottish Social Services Council, 2016), Wales (Social Care Wales, 2019), Ireland (CORU, 2019), South Africa (South African Council of Social Service Professions, 2019) and Aotearoa New Zealand (Social Workers Registration Board, nd).

In introducing these new CPD requirements, SWE seemingly overlooked or discounted the impact they would have on workloads, particularly given the crisis of high workloads and poor working conditions that social workers were experiencing at the time (and continue to experience today) (Ravalier et al., 2021). These issues were already known to be negatively impacting CPD, and two local government association (LGA) health checks, undertaken the year before SWE became regulator, found that only 31% of adult social workers and 14% of children’s social workers were able to attend all or most of their planned CPD activities (LGA, 2019a, 2019b). Research also demonstrates that mandated and prescriptive CPD requirements like those introduced by SWE tend to shape organisational cultures around CPD towards performativity, at the expense of reflection and personal development (Beddoe & Duke, 2013; Brady, 2014). Unsurprisingly then, there is already evidence that the SWE model is creating a “box-ticking” culture around CPD (YouGov, 2021, p. 6). Therefore, as with their rules and standards, SWE’s model of CPD, rather than improving the professional development of social workers, could more accurately be described as shaping social workers into compliant and homogenised self-governing subjects (Garrett, 2021a).

If SWE did want to improve CPD for social workers, there is no lack of challenges that they could have addressed instead—in particular, high workloads and poor working conditions. Another major issue that SWE could have addressed is the marketised system that, influenced by austerity and

restricted local authority budgets, relies on providers competing for contracts and a heavy emphasis on lowering costs (Rogowski, 2020). SWE could also have looked at resurrecting the Post-Qualifying Social Work (PQSW) framework, a nationally recognised and university accredited pathway to professional development that was once popular amongst social workers, seeing 33,217 enrolments from 2003–2006 (Moriarty & Manthorpe, 2014). However, following the closure of the GSCC, and the linked impact of austerity measures, local authorities became increasingly reluctant to support their professionals to attend these courses, opting instead for cheaper options available in the growing marketplace of social work CPD (Rogowski, 2020). However, Moriarty and Manthorpe (2014) undertook a scoping review of CPD in England and found that, while this more flexible model of CPD was likely to be favoured by employers for financial reasons, there was limited evidence to support CPD models for social work outside of the PQSW framework.

SWE (2021d) suggests that it is “good practice” for social workers to upload CPD evidence to their electronic system quarterly (p. 9). However, SWE have struggled to get social workers to do even the bare minimum required to maintain registration which, for the first two years, was a single piece of CPD evidence. The lack of engagement with the process has been regularly reported on in the industry media. For example, just over a month before the first deadline, only 44.3% of social workers had met the minimum requirement (Carter, 2020). Rather than looking at this low level of engagement as an opportunity to reflect on the potential deficits of their approach, SWE instead launched a national campaign to encourage compliance. While this campaign would later win a government award (SWE, 2021a), social workers have described the tone of the campaign as lacking understanding and even “threatening” (YouGov, 2021, p. 55). Most social workers did eventually upload their CPD evidence in time to ensure they were not deregistered, and as Garrett (2021b)

highlights, the threat of losing livelihoods usually leads to this type of “grudging compliance” (p. 9).

Research commissioned by SWE found that the reasons for this slow engagement were manifold and included the impact of high workloads and the Covid-19 pandemic (YouGov, 2021). However, that research also found that those who disagreed with SWE’s approach to CPD were less likely to have uploaded their CPD promptly, suggesting a link between this slow uptake and dissenting opinions. Refusing to promptly engage with these CPD mandates may seem a modest form of dissent, but Carey and Foster (2011) previously undertook research that showed that social workers may be more inclined towards this type of pragmatic, individualistic and small-scale resistance when disillusioned with policy mandates and reform, or what the researchers dubbed “deviant social work” (p. 576). Incidentally, we are not talking about small numbers of social workers choosing to do the bare minimum at the last minute, but tens of thousands, and indeed, the specific figures afforded by SWE’s approach to CPD may provide us with concrete data about the extent of deviant social work for the first time—data that could help transform these individual actions into a collective movement of resistance.

Social workers have also expressed their dissent towards SWE elsewhere. For example, in the comment sections of the news articles covering the difficulties SWE have had with its CPD model, social workers regularly voiced their dissent, ranging from their disapproval of SWE’s CPD model to declaring their intention to leave the profession as a result of the new regulator. While online comments are obviously a poor metric for gauging the general mood of a population, the volume of comments was such that SWE felt the need to respond in their own article, titled “How Social Work England responds to criticisms of CPD recording”, an article that elicited another slew of negative comments about the regulator (Blackmore & Hallam,

2020). Furthermore, SWE's own research shows that less than half of social workers found the CPD recording process beneficial (YouGov, 2021).

Conclusion

There are additional, ongoing developments that look likely to expand the regulatory powers of SWE soon. These include a Department for Education (2022) consultation on a revised regulatory framework that would, amongst other things, allow SWE to review and overturn any FtP they deem necessary to achieve "fairer outcomes" (p. 14). The Children's Social Care Review has recently made recommendations to expand the regulatory powers of SWE, including extending their role into other professions (MacAlister, 2022). Of particular note to the discussions around dissent and CPD, SWE has announced that they will shortly be moving from a random CPD audit approach to a "more intelligent approach" based on "targeted sampling" of specific groups (SWE, 2021c). Each of these developments is likely to increase the reach of the regulator over the profession. However, we have also seen that many social workers are willing to engage in action (or inaction) contrary to the edicts of SWE. As SWE expands its role and remit, this dissent could be further explored, engaged with and encouraged towards more collective action and mutual support as a foundational step towards resisting the concerning developments outlined here. International networking and support, through organisations like IFSW or SWAN, could also be explored to build solidarity and realign social work in England as a global profession built around social justice and collective responsibility (IFSW, 2014). As highlighted by Garrett (2021a), in order to influence change, social work dissent needs to be a collective, rather than individualistic, endeavour.

Submitted: 25 January 2022

Accepted: 3 August 2022

Published: 23 September 2022

References

- Bald, C., & Howells, A. (2019). How do we professionalise social work without losing our soul? A reflection on the role and purpose of practice placements within social work education. *The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning*, 15(3), 75–87. <https://doi.org/10.1921/jpts.v15i3.1162>
- Beddoe, L., & Duke, J. (2013). Continuing professional development of registered social workers in New Zealand. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, 25(3), 35–49. <https://anzswjournal.nz/anzsw/article/view/72>
- Bennett, D., Schluter, D., Melis, G., Bywaters, P., Barr, B., Wickham, S. & Taylor-Robinson, D. (2021). Child poverty and children entering care: A natural experiment using longitudinal area-level data in England, 2015–2020. *The Lancet*, Online First. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3972210>
- Berridge, E. (2021, January 20). Children's Social Care Independent Review: Question for Department for Education, UIN HL12395. *UK Parliament*. <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-01-20/HL12395/>
- Blackmore, S., & Hallam, P. (2020, July 22). How Social Work England responds to criticisms of CPD recording. *Community Care*. <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2020/07/22/social-work-england-respond-criticisms-cpd-recording/>
- Brady, E. (2014). Child protection social workers' engagement in continuing professional development: An exploratory study. *Social Work Education*, 33(6), 819–834. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2013.869316>
- Brindle, D. (2009, November 4). Social care regulator "ignored misconduct complaints to save money". *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2009/nov/04/social-care-regulator-ignored-complaints>
- Carey, M., & Foster, V. (2011). Introducing "deviant" social work: Contextualising the limits of radical social work whilst understanding (fragmented) resistance within the social work labour process. *British Journal of Social Work*, 41(3), 576–593. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcq148>
- Carter, C. (2020, October 29). Over half of social workers yet to meet CPD requirements one month out from registration deadline. *Community Care*. <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2020/10/29/half-social-workers-uploaded-cpd-one-month-registration-deadline/>
- Cathcart, B. (2022, March 14). Darkness Falls: Ministers are making themselves unaccountable because they can. *Byline Times*. <https://bylinetimes.com/2022/03/14/darkness-falls-ministers-are-making-themselves-unaccountable-because-they-can/>
- CORU. (2019). *Guidance on continuing professional development*. Social Workers Registration Board. <https://www.coru.ie/files-education/cpd/swrb-guidance-on-continuing-professional-development.pdf>
- Department for Education. (2016). *Children's social care reform: A vision for change*. Department for Education. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-reform-a-vision-for-change>
- Department for Education. (2018). *Social Work England: Consultation on secondary legislative framework*. Department for Education. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/713240/SWE_Secondary_Legislative_Framework_Consultation_Response.pdf

- Department for Education. (2022). *Social Work England: Changes to the regulator framework*. Department for Education. <https://consult.education.gov.uk/social-work-regulation-and-initial-education-team/social-work-england-changes-to-the-regulatory-frame/>
- Department of Health. (2010). *Liberating the NHS: Report of the arm's length bodies review*. Department of Health. <https://lx.iriss.org.uk/content/liberating-nhs-report-arms-length-bodies-review>
- Dunton, J. (2020, November 5). Watchdog sounds alarm over rising political bias in public appointments. *Civil Service World*. <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/news/article/watchdog-sounds-alarm-over-rising-political-bias-in-public-appointments>
- Frontline. (2021). *Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20*. Frontline. <https://thefrontline.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Frontline-annual-report-and-accounts-2019-20.pdf>
- Garrett, P. M. (2021a). *Dissenting social work: Critical theory, resistance and pandemic*. Routledge.
- Garrett, P. M. (2021b). "A world to win": In defence of (dissenting) social work – a response to Chris Maylea. *British Journal of Social Work*, 51(4), 1131–1149. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab009>
- Hanley, J. (2021a). The "quality" of social work students in England: A genealogy of discourse 2002-2018. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 9(2), 253–268. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204986019X15567132118821>
- International Federation of Social Workers. (2014, July 10). *Global definition of social work*. IFSW. <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/>
- International Federation of Social Workers. (2020, March 26). *History of World Social Work Day*. IFSW. <https://www.ifsw.org/history-world-social-work-day/>
- Jones, R. (2019). *In whose interest? The privatisation of child protection and social work*. Policy Press.
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation. (2020). *UK Poverty 2019/20: The Leading Independent Report*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report-uk-poverty-2019-20>
- Kirkham, R., Leigh, J., McLaughlin, K., & Worsley, A. (2019). The procedural fairness limitations of fitness to practise hearings: A case study into social work. *Legal Studies*, 39(2), 339–357. <https://doi.org/10.1017/lst.2018.42>
- Local Government Association. (2019a). *Adult Social Work Health Check Survey 2018 – Report of Findings*. Local Government Association. <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/adult-social-work-health-check-survey-2018-report-findings>
- Local Government Association (2019b). *Children's Social Work Health Check Survey 2018 – Report of Findings*. LGA. <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/childrens-social-work-health-check-survey-2018-report-findings-november-2018>
- MacAlister, J., Crehan, L., & Olsen, A. (2012). *Frontline: Improving the children's social work profession*. IPPR. https://www.ippr.org/files/images/media/files/publication/2013/03/frontline-childrens-social-work_Oct2012_9705.pdf?noredirect=1
- MacAlister, J. (2022). *Final Report*. The independent review of children's social care. <https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-Final-report.pdf>
- MacDermott, D., & Campbell, A. (2015). An examination of student and provider perceptions of voluntary sector social work placements in Northern Ireland. *Social Work Education*, 35(1), 31–49. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02615479.2015.1100289>
- McLaughlin, H., Scholar, H., McCaughan, S., & Coleman, A. (2015). Are non-traditional placements second-best learning opportunities for social work qualifying students? *British Journal of Social Work*, 45(5), 1469–1488. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcu021>
- McNicoll, A. (2016, November 4). Social Work England – a quick guide to the regulator set to replace HCPC. *Community Care*. <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2016/11/04/social-work-england-quick-guide-regulator-set-replace-hcpc/>
- Moriarty, J., & Manthorpe, J. (2014). Post-qualifying education for social workers: A continuing problem or a new opportunity? *Social Work Education*, 33(3), 397–411. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2013.806468>
- Murphy, T. (2016). The Frontline Programme: Conservative ideology and the creation of a social work officer class. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 4(2), 279–287. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204986016X14651166264354>
- My Social Work News (2021, n.d.). *About*. My Social Work News. <https://www.mysocialworknews.com/about>
- Narey, M. (2014). *Making the education of social workers consistently effective*. Department for Education. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/sir-martin-narey-overhauling-childrens-social-work-training#:~:text=Sir%20Martin%20Narey%20publishes%20his,of%20social%20workers%20consistently%20effective'.&text=Greater%20rigour%20in%20social%20work,today%20by%20Sir%20Martin%20Narey.>
- Northern Ireland Social Care Council. (n.d.) *Learning and development*. NISSC. <https://niscc.info/learning-development/>
- Palattiyil, G., Sidhva, D., Pawar, M., Sjahahan, P., Cox, J., & Anand, J. (2019). Reclaiming international social work in the context of the global agenda for social work and social development: Some critical reflections. *International Social Work*, 62(3), 1043–1054. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872818774107>
- Pentaris, P., Raja, M., Hanna, S., & Oresanya, A. (2021). *Social work education and training in England 2020-21*. Social Work England. https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/4098/social-work-education-and-training-in-england-in-2020-21-report_accessible.pdf
- Perry, E., & Hughes, S. (2021). Statutory placement experience of final year students on a BSc (Hons) social work program in England. *Social Work Education*, 40(8), 1051–1063. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1775190>
- Preston, R. (2021a, October 5). Social Work England missed standards on fitness to practise referrals, registration speed and diversity data in first year. *Community Care*. <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2021/10/05/social-work-england-failed-to-adequately-assess-fitness-to-practise-risks-in-first-year-finds-watchdog/>
- Preston, R. (2021b, December 6). DfE gives regulator £2.3m to help clear fitness to practise backlog. *Community Care*. <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2021/12/06/dfe-gives-regulator-2-3m-to-help-clear-fitness-to-practise-backlog/>

- Purcell, C. (2020). *The politics of children's services reform: Re-examining two decades of policy change*. Policy Press.
- Ravalier, J., Wainwright, E., Claburn, O., Loon, M., & Smyth, N. (2021). Working conditions and wellbeing in UK social workers. *Journal of Social Work, 21*(5), 1105–1123. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017320949361>
- Rogowski, S. (2020). *Social work: The rise and fall of a profession?* Policy Press.
- Samuel, M. (2020a, October 2). Social Work England suspends voluntary removal process following legal concerns. Community Care. <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2020/10/02/social-work-england-suspends-voluntary-removal-process-following-legal-concerns/>
- Samuel, M. (2020b, July 31). Black and ethnic minority social workers disproportionately subject to fitness to practise investigations. Community Care. <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2020/07/31/black-ethnic-minority-social-workers-disproportionately-subject-fitness-practise-investigations/>
- Samuel, M. (2020c, July 21). Social Work England pledges action as survey reveals low proportion of Black and ethnic minority staff. Community Care. <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2020/07/21/social-work-england-pledges-action-survey-reveals-low-proportion-black-ethnic-minority-staff/>
- Scholar, H., McCaughan, S., McLaughlin, H., & Coleman, A. (2012). Why is this not social work? The contribution of non-traditional placements in preparing social work students for practice. *Social Work Education, 31*(7), 932–950. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2011.608123>
- Scottish Social Services Council. (2016). *Post registration training and learning (PRTL) requirements: Guidance notes for social workers*. SSSC. <http://sssc.uk.com/post-registration-training-and-learning-requirements-for-social-workers?task=document.viewdoc&id=1127>
- Scourfield, P. (2020). Too many cooks or cannot follow the recipe? A critical consideration of conceptualising the professional leadership of social work in England as a collective endeavour. *Critical and Radical Social Work, 8*(1), 41–57. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204986020X15783171440693>
- Smith, T. (2021, October 18). Regulator adds two social workers to board. Community Care. <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2021/10/18/regulator-adds-two-social-workers-to-board/>
- Social Care Wales. (2019). *How to: Meeting your post-registration training and learning requirements*. Social Care Wales. https://socialcare.wales/cms_assets/file-uploads/PRTL-Requirements_ENG.pdf
- Social Work England. (2019a). *Investigators, case examiners, adjudicators and inspectors rules*. Social Work England. <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/1563/investigators-case-examiners-adjudicators-and-inspectors-rules-2019.pdf>
- Social Work England. (2019b). *Professional standards*. Social Work England. <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/professional-standards/>
- Social Work England. (2019c). *Reshaping standards, enabling change: consultation response*. Social Work England. <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/publications/reshaping-standards-enabling-change-consultation-response/>
- Social Work England. (2019d). *Consultation on fitness to practise rules*. Social Work England. <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/consultations/consultation-on-fitness-to-practise-guidance-and-policy/>
- Social Work England. (2020). *Guidance on practice placements*. Social Work England. [https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/practice-placements-guidance/#:~:text=Students%20must%20spend%20at%20least,\(where%20these%20are%20provided\).](https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/practice-placements-guidance/#:~:text=Students%20must%20spend%20at%20least,(where%20these%20are%20provided).)
- Social Work England. (2021a). *Social Work England annual report and accounts 2020-2021*. Social Work England. <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/publications/annual-report-and-accounts-2020-to-2021/>
- Social Work England. (2021b). *Qualifying education and training standards guidance*. Social Work England. <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/education-and-training-standards/>
- Social Work England. (2021c). *Continuing Professional Development (CPD) consultation response*. Social Work England. <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/publications/cpd-consultation-response-2021/>
- Social Work England. (2021d). *Continuing professional development guidance for social workers*. Social Work England. <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/cpd/cpd-guidance/>
- Social Work England. (2022). *Social Work Week: How to get involved*. Social Work England. <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/social-work-week/how-to-get-involved/>
- Social Work Task Force. (2009). *Building a safe confident future: The final report of the Social Work Task Force. SWTF*. <https://lx.iriss.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Building%20a%20safe.pdf>
- Social Workers Registration Board. (n.d.). Continuing professional development, Wellington. SWRB. <https://swrb.govt.nz/practice/continuing-professional-development/#:~:text=you%20have%20completed%20a%20minimum,practice%20and%20the%20core%20competencies>
- South African Council for Social Service Professions. (2019). *Policy on continuing professional development (CPD) for social workers and social auxiliary workers*. SACSSP. [http://www.sacssp.co.za/2020/CPD%20Policy%20for%20social%20work%202020%20\(PBSW\)%20Final%20for%20publication.pdf](http://www.sacssp.co.za/2020/CPD%20Policy%20for%20social%20work%202020%20(PBSW)%20Final%20for%20publication.pdf)
- Stevenson, L. (2018, February 22). *New fitness to practise process could threaten social workers' human rights, professional body warns*. Community Care. <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2018/02/22/new-fitness-practise-process-threaten-social-workers-human-rights-professional-body-warns/>
- Tunstall, J. (2019). Pruned, policed and privatised: The knowledge base for children and families social work in England and Wales in 2019. *Social Work and Social Sciences Review, 18*(1), 57–76. <https://doi.org/10.1921/swsr.v20i2.1285>
- Turner, A. (2019, August 1). Final Social Work England standards remove duty to report impact of resources on safe practice. Community Care. <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2019/08/01/final-social-work-england-standards-remove-duty-report-impact-resources-safe-practice/>

- van Dijk, T. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse and Society*, 4(2), 249–283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926593004002006>
- Worsley, A., Beddoe, L., McLoughlin, K., & Teater, B. (2020a). Regulation, registration and social work: An international comparison. *British Journal of Social Work*, 50(2), 308–325. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcz152>
- Worsley, A., Shorrocks, S., & McLaughlin, K. (2020b). Protecting the public? An analysis of professional regulation – comparing outcomes in fitness to practice proceedings for social workers, nurses and doctors. *British Journal of Social Work*, 50(6), 1871–1889. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaa079>
- YouGov. (2021). *Social work and continuing professional development*. Social Work England. <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/3975/cpd-research-report.pdf>