



Is your employer up to standard?

Branch guide to using the standards for employers of social workers in England

2020 update

Introduction

The Standards for employers of social workers in England are published by the Local Government Association (LGA) on behalf of 16 social work stakeholder partners – a group including local government and voluntary sector employers, UNISON, social services directors associations and professional bodies.

The Standards set out what employers are expected to do to support their social workers. They specify the working conditions employers should provide to ensure safe and effective social work practice. They cover all employers of registered social workers in all settings.

Service regulators Ofsted and CQC were involved in the development of the Standards, and take them into account in their work.

The Standards were first published in 2012 and were refreshed in 2014 and 2020.

They can be viewed and downloaded at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce-and-hr-support/social-workers/standards-employers-social-workers-england-2020>

The Standards contains links to useful supporting resources.

A summary of what each *Standard* covers is set out below:

- Standard 1** Strong and clear social work framework
- Standard 2** Effective workforce planning systems
- Standard 3** Safe workloads and case allocation
- Standard 4** Wellbeing
- Standard 5** Supervision
- Standard 6** Continuing professional development (CPD)
- Standard 7** Professional registration
- Standard 8** Strategic partnerships

The Standards Health Check

As part of meeting the Standards, Principal Social Workers (PSWs) are committed to completing an annual 'Health Check' to assess practice conditions and working environment for their social workers.

The Health Check also enables social workers to identify priorities for social work. Social worker participation and feedback is anonymous so social workers should feel able to be candid.

The Health Check survey from the LGA includes social workers, occupational therapists and other social care practitioners. The survey is accessible via a single unique link which PSWs can forward across their organisation.

The LGA will provide each organisation with an individual report on how they are meeting the Standards. The Health Check is offered free to councils who are members of the LGA. A small fee is charged to NHS trusts and authorities who are not LGA members.

The annual Health Check goes live each autumn with organisational reports immediately available after it closes. The LGA then compiles regional and national reports, which means local findings can be then be looked at in terms of the regional and national picture.

Scope of the Standards and Health Check

The reality on the ground is that many social work assistants and support workers are carrying out social work functions. UNISON's position is that work on the Standards and the Health Check should include these staff groups.

Organisations can choose to include occupational therapists and other social care practitioners in the Health Check survey. Respondents select their role from a drop down menu which will take them to a tailored set of questions.

Negotiating around the Standards and Health Check

UNISON continues to believe that for the Standards and Health Check to have real teeth they need to be mandatory on all employers and we continue to campaign for this. In the meantime, we apply pressure on employers to sign up through negotiation and organisation.

There is no published list of councils who have adopted the Standards. In 2021 UNISON asked councils via an FOI if they were signed up to the Standards and did the 2020 Health Check. The response indicated that 83% of councils are signed up to the Standards and 75% of respondents did the 2020 Health Check.

However, of those who did the Health Check only 36% published the results to their organisation and a mere 8% agreed a joint action plan to take forward the findings.

Of those who commented on this, typically the local findings and learning were shared with and discussed by senior management. This is not in the spirit of the Standards. They are jointly agreed by the sector as a commitment to the workforce – core expectations of employers to enable social workers to work effectively and safely.

The recent standardisation of the Health Check as an online annual survey gives us fresh impetus to engage with members and employers on the Standards and Health Check findings.

The Standards cover how social workers should be resourced, managed and supported. They provide a whole system approach to managing pressures on social worker caseloads. This makes it important that branches engage with Principial Social Workers to publicise the survey, encourage members to participate and then follow up findings jointly with management.

Arguments to use

- ▶ The Social Work profession have all agreed and support the Standards. The Standards stakeholders are:
 - The Association of Directors of Adult Social Services
 - The Association of Directors of Children's Services
 - British Association of Social Workers
 - The Department of Education
 - The Department of Health and Social Care
 - Health Education England
 - Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee
 - Local Government Association
 - National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
 - Social Care Institute for Excellence
 - Skills for Care
 - Social Work England
 - UNISON
 - What Works Centre
 - The Adult Principal Social Worker Network
 - The Children's Principal Social Worker Network
- ▶ The Health Check is quick simple and free to use. There are no charges for the survey and producing bespoke reports. To opt into the Health Check, PSWs simply need to email the LGA at workforce@local.gov.uk
- ▶ Ofsted and where applicable CQC take account of the Standards and Health Check findings in their work.
- ▶ Being able to demonstrate to social workers that the employer is complying with the Standards helps employers recruit and retain social workers.
- ▶ Carrying out the annual Health Check means issues can be identified and addressed in the right way and lets social workers feel listened to. It signals their employer is proactive in tackling issues that affect them at the front line, enabling social workers maintain their professionalism and practice more effectively. It also supports openness and accountability.

Advice to branches

1. Engage with your authority's principal social workers – there should be one for adults' services and one for children's. They should be playing an active role in assessing the organisation's compliance with the Standards and conducting the annual Health Check.
2. Push your employer to publicise the Health Check and promote social worker participation. Ask for the issue to go on your joint consultative agenda, and seek agreement on
 - joint communications about the Health Check
 - dedicated time for social workers to complete the survey
 - how to take forward the Health Check findings jointly – the Standards have been agreed jointly and this is not a management exercise
3. Make sure social work members are aware of the Standards their employer has signed up to and encourage them to take part in the Health Check. Make sure members know their participation and feedback is anonymous so social workers should feel able to be candid.
 - Circulate copies of UNISON's member guide 'Is your employer up to standard? Your guide to the Standards for Employers of Social Workers in England'
 - Organise workplace meetings for members to discuss the Standards and how well they think their employer is meeting them
 - Take the opportunity to recruit workplace contacts or stewards who can keep in touch throughout the process

Achieving compliance – four hotspots

1. It's the workload, stupid

It is not difficult to predict that Standard 3 – Safe workloads and case allocation will be the biggest compliance problem in many teams/services. While many employers have workload management systems they are often ineffective, involve too much paperwork, or fall down because there is just too much work. The Standards contain resources on workload management.

2. Supervision slipping by the wayside

Another area where a large proportion of employers are likely to fall short of the Standards is Standard 5 – Supervision. We know from member feedback that many social workers are not getting anywhere near monthly supervision, and that what they do get is becoming more and more target orientated with reflective supervision being squeezed out.

Getting an active and monitored supervision policy is a good place to start. It should reflect what the Standard says on quantity ie social workers get a minimum of 1½ hours a month with more for newly qualified staff.

The policy should specify the areas that supervision should cover and it should contain a clear route outside the line management chain for social workers to raise concerns about the adequacy of supervision.

3. Safety and resources

Social workers are highly exposed to violence and threats. With staffing cuts lone-working is on the increase. Hot-desking and remote working adds to isolation and loss of support from colleagues.

Many employers are likely to struggle to show that they are providing all their social workers with all the specific requirements in Standard 4 – wellbeing. These cover health and safety, stress and emotional support, practical tools and support from other colleagues such as administrative staff and legal advisors.

There are UNISON resources to help with safety and lone working see:

- *Violence – it's not part of the job* (stock no 1346)
- *Working alone* (stock no 1750)

Ensuring adequate administrative support will require employers to look very carefully at decisions they are making on administrative staffing levels and how that support is organised. This is a good opportunity to argue for specialist admin provision for social workers, and against the trend to put it in remote corporate teams.

Generic corporate employee welfare services are often insufficient and don't have the expertise to assist social workers who are suffering stress and trauma from dealing with difficult cases. Employers need to consider when social workers may need extra specialist support, and how to provide it.

Ongoing problems with IT systems often have a huge impact on practitioners – there is a pressing need to cut out unnecessary duplication and form filling on case recording systems. Many local authorities have radically pruned theirs and employers should seek ways of sharing learning between organisations and their IT providers.

4. Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

The Health Check national reports continue to flag up Standard 6 – CPD as the Standard social workers feel employers have the biggest compliance issue with. In UNISON surveys members have also expressed considerable concern about the lack of time, opportunity, resources and financial support available to them to carry out and record their CPD.

UNISON's Skills Academy gives members access to over 600 free online courses. All the courses are CPD certified, allowing members to show proof of their learning to their employers. See our learning resources for social workers here: <https://learning.unison.org.uk/social-care/cpd-social-workers/>



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