

Social worker

Social workers work with individuals and families to help live more successfully.

This page has information on the role of a social worker, including entry requirements and skills needed.

Working life

As a social worker, you will work with people to find solutions to their problems. This may be helping to protect vulnerable people from harm or abuse or supporting people to live independently.



You will engage with clients, their families and others around them. You'll work with different client groups including:

- the elderly
- children with disabilities

- teenagers with mental health problems
- young offenders
- adults with learning disabilities, mental health problems or physical disabilities
- people with alcohol, drug or other substance misuse problems
- refugees and asylum seekers
- families at risk of breaking down
- children who need to live apart from their families
- foster carers and adopters
- children who are at risk of abuse or neglect
- carers

You may specialise in a particular client group. Their work can involve:

- visiting clients wherever they are (which could be at home or in, for example, a care home, hospital, hostel or prison)
- assessing clients' needs
- organising support
- making referrals to other services and agencies
- keeping detailed records
- attending meetings

An important part of the work is building a professional relationship with the client so that you and the social worker and client can work together to make changes.

Who will I work with?

As well as working with clients and their families and other carers, social workers work with other agencies including the police, local authority departments, schools and the probation service.

Where will I work?

You may be based in a hospital or healthcare centre or in an office elsewhere, sometimes with a team of other social workers. Wherever you're based, you will spend a lot of time visiting clients.

You may be helping to protect vulnerable people from harm or abuse or supporting people to live independently.

Entry requirements

To practise as a social worker, you must be registered with the Health and Care Professions Council ([HCPC](#) ^[1]). To register with the [HCPC](#) ^[1], you first need to successfully complete an approved degree in social work. Courses take three or four years full time.

Courses differ but all include:

- law as it applies to social work
- ethics and values
- assessments and interventions
- mental health, disability and other issues
- practical work with clients and placements in social work settings

Some degrees combine social work with mental health or learning disability nursing.

To get onto a social work degree course you usually need two or three A levels, along with five GCSEs ([grades A-C](#) ^[2]), including English and maths.

Or you could have alternative qualifications, including:

- BTEC, HND or HNC
- relevant NVQ
- health- or social care-based access course
- equivalent Scottish or Irish qualifications

To get onto a Masters course you normally need an honours degree.

However, each institution sets its own entry requirements, so it's important to check carefully.

You can use our [course finder](#) ^[3] to find out where you can study social work combined with nursing.

If you already have a degree in another subject, there are several routes for you to become a social worker:

- take a postgraduate qualification (Diploma or Masters) in social work. Courses take two years full time or up to six years part time.
- train through [Step up to Social Work](#) ^[4] which takes 14 months and combines work and study
- apply for the [Frontline](#) ^[5] 2-year programme combining study with supervised practical work in child protection
- apply for the 2-year [Think Ahead](#) ^[6] fast-track scheme to become a mental health social worker. The scheme blends academic learning with extensive on-the-job experience.

Wherever you apply to study, you will need to show that you have an understanding of social work and experience of working with clients. This can be from paid or voluntary work. Or it could be from your own life experience, for example, as a carer for a friend or relative.

Once you've successfully completed a programme approved by the [HCPC](#) ^[1], you are then eligible to apply for registration with the [HCPC](#) ^[1] to work in England. Once registered as a practitioner, you'll be required to retain your name on the register by keeping your knowledge and skills up to date and paying an annual retention fee.

Skills and personal characteristics needed

Social workers need to:

- be able to work under pressure
- deal with very challenging behaviour
- organise their own workload
- be understanding of other people's lifestyles
- work with people from all walks of life
- be happy visiting people where they live

You'll also need

- organisation skills
- empathy (able to see things from other points of view)
- relationship-building skills
- resilience
- problem-solving skills
- motivational skills

Training and development

As a qualified social worker joining the NHS, you have training to introduce you to the service. You will be expected to attend further training courses to keep your skills and knowledge up to date.

You could take further qualifications related to social work in, for example, counselling or mediation.

Once qualified, many social workers join the [British Association of Social Workers](#) ^[7] (BASW). Social workers have to keep their skills and knowledge up to date with annual CPD (continuing professional development). BASW runs courses, conferences and seminars where social workers can exchange ideas and update their skills.

- Pay and conditions Expand / Collapse
Social workers working in the NHS are paid on the [Agenda for Change \(AfC\)](#) ^[8] pay system. You would typically start on [AfC](#) ^[9] band 6. With further training and experience, you could apply for more senior positions (such as primary mental health worker) at bands 7, and above.

Most social workers in the NHS work standard hours, which are likely to be around 37.5 a week. They may work some evenings or weekends.

Terms and conditions will usually be different for social workers working outside of the NHS.

- Where the role can lead Expand / Collapse

You may decide to specialise in a particular client group or issue such as the elderly, young people, substance misuse, mental health or domestic violence. You could train as a [high intensity therapist](#) [10], as part of the [Improving Access to Psychological Therapies \(IAPT\)](#) [11] service.

With experience, you could become a senior social worker, supervising the work of other social workers, or a primary mental health worker working in child and adolescent mental health services. You may be able to progress into a management position, responsible for a department or an area.

- **Job market and vacancies** Expand / Collapse
In February 2017, there were 90,369 social workers registered with the [Health and Care Professions Council](#) [12].

Most NHS trusts advertise their vacancies on [NHS Jobs](#) [13] and some advertise on their own websites. You can find a list of NHS organisations on [NHS Choices](#) [14].

The [British Association of Social Workers](#) [7] advertises jobs on its website.

If you're applying for a role either directly in the NHS or in an organisation that provides NHS services, you'll be asked to show how you think the NHS values apply in your everyday work.

[Find out more about NHS values](#) [15].

- **Further information** Expand / Collapse
 - [Health and Care Professions Council](#) [16]
 - [British Association of Social Workers](#) [17]

Other roles that may interest you

- [High intensity therapist](#) [10]
- [Occupational therapist](#) [18]
- [Clinical psychologist](#) [19]
- [Emergency care assistant](#) [20]

Source URL: <https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/Explore-roles/clinical-support-staff/social-worker>

Links

[1] <https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/glossary#HCPC>

[2] https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/glossary#Grades_A-C

[3] <https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/i-am/looking-course>

[4] <http://www.gov.uk/step-up-to-social-work-information-for-applicants>

[5] <http://www.thefrontline.org.uk/>

[6] <https://thinkahead.org/>

[7] <http://www.basw.co.uk/>

[8] <https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/about/careers-nhs/nhs-pay-and-benefits/agenda-change-pay-rates>

[9] <https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/glossary#AfC>

[10] <https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/explore-roles/psychological-therapies/high-intensity-therapist>

- [11] <http://www.iapt.nhs.uk>
- [12] <http://www.hcpc-uk.org>
- [13] <http://www.jobs.nhs.uk/>
- [14] <http://www.nhs.uk/aboutnhs/howthenhsworks/authoritiesandtrusts/Pages/Authoritiesandtrusts.aspx>
- [15] <https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/about/working-health/nhs-constitution>
- [16] <http://www.hcpc-uk.org.uk>
- [17] <http://www.basw.co.uk>
- [18] <https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/explore-roles/allied-health-professionals/occupational-therapist>
- [19] <https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/explore-roles/psychological-therapies/clinical-psychologist>
- [20] <https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/explore-roles/ambulance-service-team/emergency-care-assistant>