Industry insight - Social care

In a nutshell

The social care sector covers all occupations whose aim is to help people overcome difficulties related to physical, mental, environmental or lifestyle problems at any stage in their lives. It includes staff in both professional and non-professional roles who support vulnerable people living in the community and in residential care.

Social care is separated into child social care and adult social care services. Adult social care is the fastest growing part of the sector and it is likely to continue to be with the ageing population.

What kind of work can I do?

- **Working with adults** - supporting the elderly (in care homes or to help them to live independently), working with people who have substance abuse issues, the homeless and those who have been the victim of violence - particularly domestic abuse, as well as adults with mental health, learning, and physical disabilities.

- **Working with children, young people and families** - this might be in child protection, adoption or fostering, working with young offenders, working with youngsters and families who are homeless or unemployed, supporting care leavers and those who have learning and physical disabilities.

The range of work settings includes the community, hospitals, health centres, education and advice centres, and people’s homes.

The following profiles are examples of key jobs that exist in the social care sector:

- Advice worker
- Art therapist
- Careers adviser
- Charity fundraiser
- Charity officer
- Community development worker
- Counsellor
- Mental health nurse
- Occupational therapist
- Prison officer
- Social worker
- Youth worker
What’s it like working in this sector?

The social care sector has suffered from a negative image, with high vacancy and staff turnover rates in some areas and high profile child abuse cases bringing it under public scrutiny. Those working in social care do often face pressurised roles and heavy caseloads but managers are aiming to address employees’ support and training needs to improve conditions. The work, although stressful can be highly rewarding and personal satisfaction can be gained from developing and maintaining relationships with those you are trying to help.

- There are more women than men working in the sector and it employs around one in ten of all female workers in the UK (Skills for Care and Development, 2011). The ethnic make-up of the workforce does not reflect the diverse community it serves.
- Salaries depend on the professional and geographical area you work in. As a guide, the British Association of Social Workers state that a newly qualified social worker could start at around £18,000 and work up to around £30,000 with increased experience and responsibility.
- The social care and development sector serves around 2.3 million adults. It employs just over 1.8 million people in the UK, which is around 6% of the total UK workforce. Just under a third work in the public sector while almost half are employed by private or commercial organisations.
- There are a growing number of workers being employed on small projects with short-term funding. These projects are often community based and focused on certain issues such as drug rehabilitation or preventing youth offending.
- There are opportunities to work all over the UK, with particularly high vacancy rates in large cities such as London and Birmingham.
- In Scotland, around 198,000 are employed in the sector, in Wales there are approximately 76,000, who work predominately with the elderly (Wales Online, 2011), and in Northern Ireland there are around 30,000. Many of these roles are within public sector organisations.

Further information

- British Association of Social Workers
- Northern Ireland Social Care Council
- Scottish Social Services Council
- Social Care Association
- Society Guardian

Entry and progression

How do I find a job?
Vacancies can be found online at a variety of places, including the following:

- sector focused websites such as Jobsgopublic (public sector jobs) and NHS Jobs;
- local council websites - see the Directory of Local Councils for contact details;
- specialist job sites such as Jobs in Social Work, AllCareJobs, Great Social Care, Community Care Jobs and Socialwork and care jobs;
- specialist recruitment agencies such as Charity People and RIG Social Care;
- voluntary organisations - explore those within areas that interest you - see Charity Choice and Third sector for contact details and try sending speculative applications;
- Local and national press, e.g. Society Guardian.

Vacancies occur all year round. Staff turnover can be high, creating both advertised and unadvertised positions. It may therefore be useful to send in your CV speculatively. Volunteering, short-term project work and temporary contracts may lead to a permanent career role. Also try careers fairs at your university to find out about opportunities.

Further guidance on getting into social care can be found at Skills for Care, Social Care Online and Skills for Care and Development.

**What skills do I need?**

To be successful in this type of work you will need to demonstrate:

- empathy and the ability to relate to a range of clients and professionals;
- strong communication skills - particularly listening skills;
- an ability to maintain clear, consistently well-written notes;
- an ability to motivate yourself and others;
- an understanding of policy and guidelines and the ability to apply them to situations/individuals involved;
- ability to cope in crisis situations in a clear and logical manner;
- a non-judgemental approach - dealing with facts alone.

For roles requiring qualifications and experience, employers may prefer someone who is interested in theory and best practice and has a good standard of literacy.

Professional posts require specific academic and/or professional qualifications. Social workers can qualify via either an undergraduate degree or a postgraduate qualification. Courses are available full-time, part-time, by distance learning and through the Open University. Part-time study may be combined with paid work. Employers may sponsor staff working in care support roles to undertake approved training courses whilst employing them as trainees.

For many non-professional jobs, you may not need a particular academic or vocational qualification, but you might be expected to gain an NVQ or other vocational qualification while in employment.
You will need a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check (which replaces the CRB from 1 December 2012) if you are applying for work with children or vulnerable adults.

**Where can I find work experience?**

Many roles require enthusiasm more than direct qualifications and employers are often prepared to train on the job. Voluntary work can help you where experience is required but there is often great competition for opportunities. Ensure your CV is tailored to suit the role and that you are able to demonstrate comprehensive understanding of relevant policies and reviews vital to the work involved.

Ways to get work experience include:

- volunteering - look for organisations in the fields that interest you and try Community Service Volunteers (CSV) and Vinspired for opportunities;
- agencies offering temporary contracts where training will be provided;
- working in residential care homes or day centres.

A DBS check will need to be carried out for any work experience you wish to do with children or vulnerable adults.

**Is postgraduate study useful?**

Postgraduate study will be required for most roles involving research, policy-making or lecturing, and for many senior or management posts. It is also required for social workers who do not have an accredited qualification.

You may choose postgraduate study purely out of dedication and interest and it may improve your employment chances, depending on relevance. Postgraduate courses are often completed within two years.

Many employers offer sponsorship but there are other sources of funding. For social workers, NHS Student Bursaries are handled by the NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA).

**How can my career develop?**

This is a broad sector with many opportunities to transfer skills and experience to other roles and organisations. Keeping up to date on industry issues and policies is vital for career develop as is developing contacts and networking.

To maintain your professional status and further your skills, you will need to participate in continuing professional development (CPD). Once qualified social workers can progress through training to:

- Specialist Social Worker (newly qualified);
- Higher Specialist Social Worker (senior practitioner);
• Advanced Social Worker (team/care manager).

Social workers can choose to progress in five specialist areas:

• children, young people, their families and carers;
• adults;
• mental health;
• practice education;
• management.

**Typical employers**

**Big players**

Local councils/public sector: local authorities have statutory responsibility for providing social care to the communities they serve. Social workers and social care staff have to operate within structured policy and legislative procedures. Local authorities can offer good opportunities to work with a variety of service user groups and offer career progression opportunities. Organisations in the public sector include the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, the Children’s Workforce Development Council, HM Prison Service and NHS.

Voluntary or ‘third’ sector: care staff in this sector have clearly defined roles as advocates on behalf of specific user groups. Examples of large organisations within this sector are Age Concern, Mencap and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). There are a wide variety of voluntary organisations offering salaries, training and conditions of service comparable to those provided by local authority employers. Careers in this sector offer more opportunities to work in the advocacy and counselling aspects of social care.

Small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)

Private sector

The majority of care providers in the private sector are SMEs and they are rapidly expanding, offering residential care, housing, fostering and adoption services. Pay and conditions of service vary tremendously and it is therefore essential to research opportunities carefully. This sector can offer residential social workers the opportunity to progress to home management roles. It is also worth noting that there are many private organisations that offer more specialist services, e.g. for hard-to-place children.
**Agencies**

These have become more numerous in recent years. Some London boroughs and city unitary authorities rely heavily on agency staff. The working hours and types of work available through agencies are very flexible and working this way can offer the challenge of the unknown and variety in work settings. Agency work perhaps suits more experienced workers but there are increasing opportunities for the newly trained.

**Self-employment**

Independent social work and social work consultancy have grown steadily over the past decade. There are two categories: those who work directly with service users, and those who work as expert witnesses, or in service development, advisory, investigatory or reviewing capacities (often known as consultants). Those choosing to be self-employed also need to possess a broad range of business skills, including:

- the ability to generate work and negotiate working agreements;
- exceptional organisational skills;
- the ability to deal with self-employment matters, such as sorting out tax claims;
- networking;
- coping with the insecurity of self-employment.

Most people who take this option have already led successful careers. It is important to join the appropriate professional bodies to ensure insurance coverage and have access to professional support.

**Opportunities abroad**

There is demand for a wide range of care professionals in the broad field of development work in many Third World and East European countries. These opportunities are mainly provided by large organisations with charitable status. You could consider carrying out gap year or voluntary work in these countries to build up experience.

Other possibilities include:

- working as a counsellor on an American summer camp (see [Camp America](https://www.campamerica.com)). You may find similar opportunities at a gap year fair or from sites such as [GapYear.com](https://www.gapyear.com);
- working for the armed services, as a social worker or mental health nurse, for example;
- working for international private care organisations.

There are opportunities for employment as a social worker in the EU: the [International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)](https://www.ifsw.org) can be used as a starting point. Sweden and Denmark employ the largest number of social workers in Europe.
Opportunities also exist in the Third world and East Europe in aid and development work. This includes positions working in the community, occupational therapy and personal care. Many of these posts require a professional qualification and relevant experience. To find out about opportunities in this area see organisations such as Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), the International Committee of the Red Cross, Save The Children, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) and World Vision UK. In these settings, you are required to live and work very much as part of the community and are often required to pass on your specialist skills by training local people.

**Will my qualifications be recognised?**

UK social work qualifications are accepted in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the European Community, usually as long as you also have three years of work experience. Careers advice qualifications are often recognised on a full or partial basis. A key requirement is knowledge of the language used in the country you wish to work in. UK professional qualifications and experience will increase your chances of being able to practise overseas, especially in the case of aid and development work opportunities.

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**Future trends**

**Impact of ageing population**

An increasing ageing population means there will be more social care work relating to the elderly. Skills for Care and Development states that by 2066 at least half a million people will be aged 100 or over - this is a big increase from the current 10 million people in the UK who can expect to see their 100th birthday. People are also living with increasingly complex needs, such as dementia, sensory and physical impairments, which in turn require more specialised care.

The care sector will have to be prepared to face these challenges and must invest now in the skills that will be required for the future. Age UK also covers the issues facing the elderly and related care needs.

**Technology**

Technology is often aimed at improving the accessibility of the service and the independence of the service-user. You might expect to use mobile phones, laptops or hand-held tablets while out in the field and assistive technology is used to support independent living for clients. You may be expected to use, explain or recommend such equipment, for example to monitor disabled or infirm people by means of a sensor linked remotely to a carer, to indicate if they fall out of bed, or an electronic medication reminder, etc. Funding cuts in some local authorities may restrict the amount of technology they can afford to implement.
Funding

Social care work is often affected by the economic climate as it can rely heavily on government funding. Youth workers often on short-term contracts have been the first in many areas to see their projects cut. There has also been a decline in the number of care homes and some larger care home consortiums have gone into receivership. Jobs in this area may continue to be unstable while the economy continues to recover.

Jargon buster

- **AASW** - Advance Award in Social Work
- **AMHP** - approved mental health professional (replaces approved social worker (ASW))
- **CAFCASS** - Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service
- **CO** - care order
- **CPR** - Child Protection Register
- **DV** - domestic violence
- **EMI** - elderly and mentally infirm
- **EYPS** - Early Years Professional Status
- **ICO** - interim care order
- **ICPC** - initial child protection case conference
- **IQF** - Integrated Qualifications Framework
- **LAC** - looked-after child (replaces child in care)
- **LD** - learning disability
- **NQSW** - newly qualified social worker
- **NSF** - national service framework
- **PQ** - post-qualifying (education/training for social workers)
- **PQSW** - Post Qualifying Social Work (an award offered through various courses)
- **SGO** - special guardianship order

Case studies

Personal development adviser: Annabel

Annabel is a personal development adviser (PDA); formerly a careers guidance personal adviser to young people. Her first degree was in sociology and she has a Diploma in Career Guidance.

I have had a wide range of jobs but I am very much a ‘people person’ and I always wanted a job role that would make a difference to people’s lives. I started as a careers adviser but my work has developed to cover a range of issues that face young people.
The topics that clients come to see me about for advice can range from housing and homelessness, benefits, budgeting and sexual health to careers and job hunting. Where appropriate I make referrals or signpost to other relevant agencies. Over time I have developed contacts with organisations and professionals including housing providers, social workers and training providers.

My job is set in a range of educational and community settings and it has given me experience with a spectrum of people and needs. Working with emotional and vulnerable young people who sometimes have behavioural difficulties can be intense and challenging. Much of the work is crisis management but there is also an element of helping young people to plan ahead. There is a balance with the role though as I also work with motivated young people who just require help with career options.

You have to be adept at keeping concise and consistent records for this work and know how to use databases effectively. All communication has to be documented in accordance with data protection and organisational guidelines.

I chose my degree because I enjoyed the subject. I did not pick it with a clear idea of what I wanted to do afterwards. It took me a couple of graduate jobs – doing things I discovered I wasn’t happy in. Only after seeking out careers advice for myself, did I think that it might be a job I could do and enjoy. The diploma was interesting and challenging with placements in local schools. From the moment I started I felt it was right for me. The nature of the work changed so we moved from being careers advisers to a more rounded and complete service for young people.

My work has given me the chance to develop a spectrum of skills, and my experience with a diverse range of young people in education, community and home settings means I feel professionally satisfied. It is hard to sometimes strike the right balance between supporting young people and empowering them so they can move forward. My work can be difficult and it can be draining but ultimately I do feel I have achieved something at the end of each day. For me it is about providing practical help and support and finding solutions for problems.

Senior practitioner: Dominic Tierney

Dominic is a senior practitioner with Coventry Social Services. He gained a degree in social work from the University of Leeds and completed an MSc Advanced Social Work Practice at the University of Birmingham.

After graduation I worked as part of a duty and assessment child protection safeguarding team. It was a daily duty to investigate, assess and consult with other colleagues regarding suspected child abuse cases, taking appropriate follow up action and undertaking specific and specialist assessments. My work was varied: preparing care orders, court reports, attending courts, attending/supervising community paediatric medical examinations on children and liaising with medical professionals and police. I also gained experience of fostering and adoption social work processes. I helped clients deal
with debts and offered support with housing, homelessness and drug matters. The main aim of my work was preventative measures, providing guidance and support. It was vital to maintain clear case records.

I then worked in a specialist child and adolescent mental health service as a senior social worker. I was part of a multi-disciplinary team working alongside other social and healthcare professionals including community nurses, clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, family therapists and psychotherapists. We delivered a needs-led mental health social work service to children with severe and profound learning disabilities and their families. I had to comply with legislative requirements, national guidance and policies.

I then took on my current role of a senior practitioner, providing expert specialist services to children and families, and providing professional supervision to other members of the children’s social care staff. I have supervisory and casework responsibilities and carry out specialist court related assessments and court reporting. This can involve attending court on a regular basis, offering support to solicitors and legal officers of the local authority on the provision of child and family law proceedings, including specialist assessments, care plans and contact orders.

Both my initial degree and MSc were vital for my career. Initially my social work degree provided graduation registration with the General Social Care Council as a qualified social worker - a now protected title that only certain individuals working within social work and social care can use. To progress in my career I took a Post Qualifying MSc programme in Advanced Social Work Practice. This helped me move into social work service management.

The most rewarding aspect of my job is working with the most vulnerable and emotionally damaged children (and their families) to get them a better quality of life. I get great satisfaction from helping to keep families together and working with like minded colleagues who are equally committed to addressing often distressing issues. I get great levels of support as well. What can be challenging are the long and unsocial hours. It is also difficult when you are in the family proceedings court looking to remove children from the homes/families on a permanent basis. Also the amount of time spent doing paperwork can put pressure on time spent with families.

My advice would be to get as much work experience as possible especially in frontline roles. Research the industry - there are many areas of practice, know about current trends, government policies and practices. If you are committed to helping vulnerable individuals change their life circumstances, go for it. It’s a very rewarding career.

Senior programme manager: Masood Yasin

Masood is a senior programme manager for a community organisation based in Birmingham. He graduated from Birmingham City University with a BA in Sociology in 2008.
I went to university as a mature student and didn’t have a clear idea of what I wanted to do. I got involved with a local project on a voluntary basis, which got bigger and began to take up more of my time. This is what led to my current job. I do feel the concepts of my course were useful but to be honest, it was more the skills I developed - report writing, time management, etc. that were most useful for my job.

I manage a series of projects that tackle the issues faced by the local community. I write bids to secure funding and that often means getting into partnerships with other projects in other countries. One recent part of my job has been developing links with Turkish groups. I act as a mentor to young men who are at risk of drifting into crime. Often they have had cautions for joyriding. I manage a small team and run events to embed the project into the heart of the community. I report to a board of trustees so I have to justify what actions have been taken. The role has grown and I would like to continue to expand it further. If I moved on from this post I would want to do something similar.

My previous job was working as a manager and I enjoyed it but I now feel like I am making a real contribution to my community. Seeing people turn their life around is a real joy. That could be getting someone into work or getting them to eat more healthily. The project is involved with NHS campaigns and as it is a predominately Asian community there are certain health issues that are prevalent and we try to tackle these.

I work for a community interest company so it is driven by the community and their needs - I have to respond to their requirements and there are times when people want more than is possible - I need to manage their expectations without stifling them. I also need to be focused and know what and where the boundaries are. You get what you put into it. I have a real passion for the community and the response I get means there is a lot of job satisfaction. I enjoy the variety of the work.

If you want to get into a job like mine I would say that work experience is important when there is so much competition for jobs. Know what you want to do and be prepared to keep learning. Writing bids is just one of the ways my job has developed and I think it’s something that in this sector we will see more and more of. As a job it isn’t fantastically well paid but it is extremely rewarding.

Written by Siobhan Qadir, University of Warwick, October 2011

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