



Department of  
**Health**

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# Social Work Leadership Framework

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*Improving and Safeguarding  
Social Wellbeing in  
Northern Ireland*

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## Foreword

When we ask social workers who they think of as social work leaders, often it is senior managers, academics or those who work in policy and strategic positions that immediately come to mind. It is certainly true that as social work continues to face unprecedented pressures and challenges, it is vital that we have confident and effective social work leaders who can inspire and lead teams in often complex, and multidisciplinary systems. However it is equally true that all social workers have a leadership role and the purpose of this framework is to demonstrate how leadership is an important aspect of effective social work practice at all levels irrespective of role and setting.

This Social Work Leadership Framework was developed as part of the work of the Social Work Strategy as it became clear that there was a need to clarify social work leadership capabilities as distinct from generic leadership capabilities. So the framework describes the distinctive leadership role social workers play and in doing so will enable social work to participate effectively in collective leadership across all organisations that employ social workers including the Health and Social Care sector, Probation, Youth Justice, Education and the Voluntary and Community Sector. It will support social workers to plan and pursue careers in a range of areas including practice, corporate management, academia, regulation or policy and it is our intention that the framework will underpin the design and provision of professional leadership development and accreditation opportunities in order that we enhance the leadership capacity and capability within the social work profession.

The Leadership Framework was developed in consultation with practitioners and the Social Work Leadership Network and I wish to thank all those who contributed to its development. With particular thanks to the co-authors Anne McMurray, Christine Smyth and Eileen McKay for their commitment and determination to produce a framework which will be relevant to all social workers as leaders whether that be within their own area of practice, advocating for the people they work with, leading others or to support their own leadership journey.



**Sean Holland**  
**Chief Social Work Officer**

# 1 Leadership Models

What makes good leaders has been a focus of study and research since the 1900s. A review of scholarly articles on leadership shows a wide variety of different theoretical approaches to explain the complexities of leadership. Effective leadership is accepted as being a key determinant of organisational performance across all sectors and settings.

A review of the literature highlights different ways of conceptualising leadership:

- a) Group processes, i.e. the leader is at the centre of group change and activity and embodies the will of the group (Situational)
- b) Personality perspective, i.e. leadership is the combination of special traits or characteristics (Trait)
- c) Act or behaviour, i.e. what leaders **do** to bring about change in a group (Behavioural)
- d) Emerging, i.e. 'nearby' leadership, adaptive, authentic<sup>1</sup>
- e) Power perspective, i.e. defined by the relationship between leaders and followers and the leader's ability to wield influence
- f) Transformational, i.e. leaders who can motivate followers to achieve more than was expected to be possible
- g) Skills based, i.e. leadership capabilities, skills and knowledge that create effectiveness

However, whatever approach to leadership is taken, four central components can be identified:

- a. Leadership is an activity, i.e. it is available to everyone
- b. Leadership involves influence, i.e. the leader's effect on others determines their success
- c. Leadership occurs in groups, i.e. leaders mobilise others to achieve a purpose
- d. Leadership involves common goals, i.e. leaders direct energy to achieving something together

Leadership and management are two different but interrelated activities<sup>2</sup>. They both involve similar skills e.g., influence, relationships and outcomes orientation. The key difference is that the overriding function of management is to provide order and consistency in organisation through the functions of planning, organising, resourcing and controlling to reduce uncertainty;

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1 Leadership: Theory and Practice, Northouse P. G., SAGE, 2016

2 Leadership: Theory and Practice, Northouse, P. Sage 2016

whereas leadership is about producing change and movement towards the future which is always uncertain. Both are important practices in social work. Leadership activities<sup>3</sup> can be summarised as: Establishing Direction (vision and strategy), Aligning People (communication, commitment and coalitions) and Motivating (inspiring energising, empowering and meeting unmet needs). The Leadership Framework translates these into a construct which is applicable to the variety of professional social work roles.

## 2 Why Do We Need a Social Work Leadership Framework?

The focus on professional leadership in social work is part of the broader agenda of the **Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing: A Strategy for Social Work (SWS)** to strengthen social work as the means of improving people's social wellbeing and has been a key priority since its launch in 2012.

*'Professional leadership is critical to inspire, lead and represent the profession'* (SWS, 2012)

In 2016, professional leadership was confirmed as one of the four priorities to support the SWS Stage 2 plan to 'put improvement at the heart of social work' with the goal of *'develop(ing) social workers at all levels as leaders and ambassadors for the profession, modelling high professional standards and contributing to the development of social work'*.

This sits well with the HSC Collective Leadership Strategy which was launched in 2017. It aims to create *'a culture of high quality, continually improving, compassionate care and support'* and which requires recognition that leadership is the responsibility of all, applies to staff at all levels as well as to service users and carers.

### 2.1 Collective Leadership

*"Collective leadership means everyone taking responsibility for the success of the organisation as a whole – not just their own area."* – M. West<sup>4</sup>

Defining a Social Work Leadership Framework supports a collective leadership approach. It enables social workers to clarify their role and purpose, manage their professional boundaries and in so doing, work more effectively in partnership with others. Boundaries create role clarity, confidence and help the profession establish its purpose and role within a larger multi-disciplinary system.

3 A force for change: how leadership differs from management , Kotter, J.P. 21990, New York: Free Press

4 Developing Collective Leadership for Health Care, West M., The King's Fund, 2014

The Social Work Leadership Framework (SWLF) describes the distinctive leadership role social workers play. This will enable them to engage more effectively with other disciplines and sectors beyond the professional context of the health service e.g. education, justice, local government and community.

## 2.2 Rationale

Since 2018, work has been carried out in regard to workforce planning, succession and career pathways and a review of leadership development in social work. This highlighted the need to clarify social work leadership capabilities as distinct from generic leadership capabilities irrespective of professional background.

***The contention is that social work leadership is differentiated by the profession's purpose, its value base, the context in which it is practised, its approaches to practice and how it applies relevant evidence and social science knowledge to practice and policy.***

The SWLF is future proofed so that we are equipping social workers as leaders not just for today but also for the future.

## 2.3 Purpose

The purpose of the Social Work Leadership Framework (SWLF) is to:

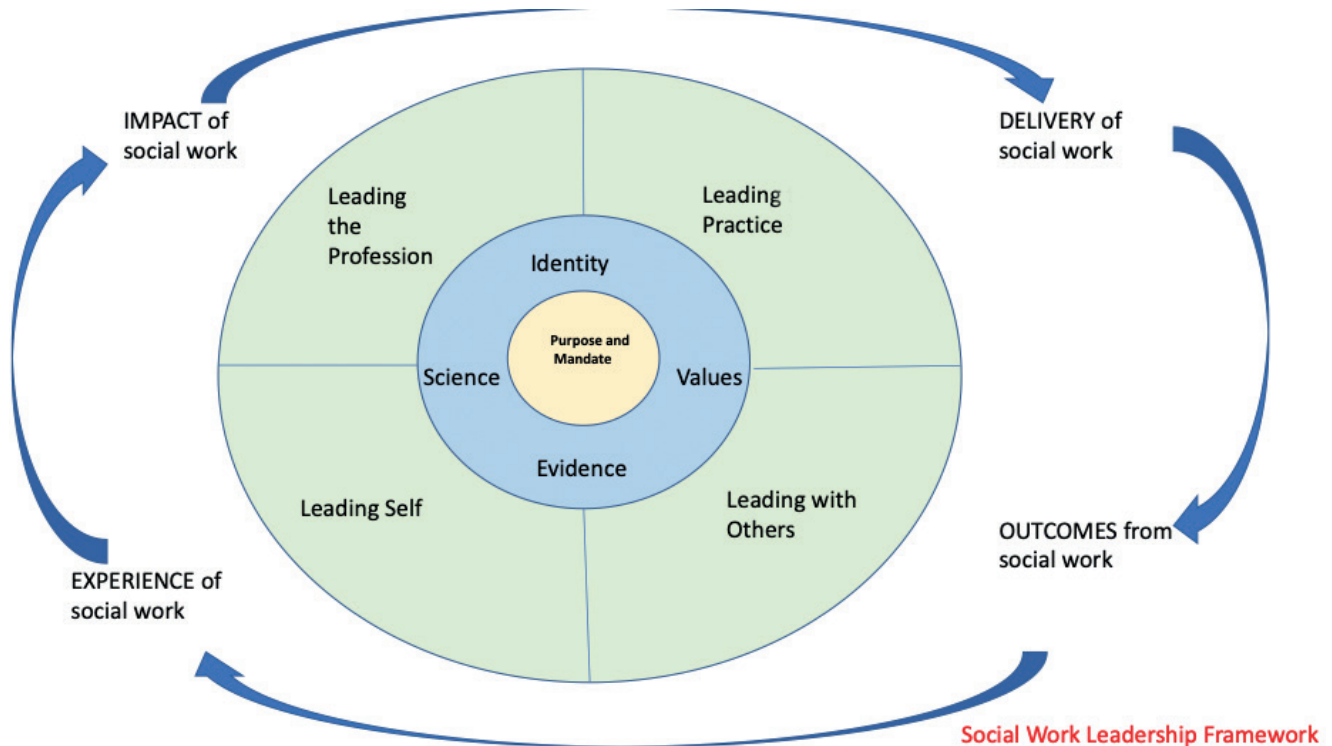
- (a) Demonstrate how leadership is an important aspect of effective social work practice at all levels, as it is in other professions such as nursing and medicine (interrupting the cycle of 'missing leadership' in social work)<sup>5</sup>
- (b) Enable social work to participate effectively in collective leadership across all organisations that employ social workers including the HSC, Probation, Youth Justice, Education and the Voluntary and Community Sector;
- (c) Support social workers to plan and pursue careers in a range of areas including practice, corporate management, academia, regulation or policy;
- (d) Underpin the design and provision of relevant professional leadership development and accreditation opportunities to enhance the leadership capacity and capability in social work.

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5 Leadership in Social Work, Haworth, Millar and Shaub, 2018, University of Birmingham

### 3 Social Work Leadership Framework

The model below is a visual representation of the Social Work Leadership Framework.



This section will describe the different elements of the Social Work Leadership Framework.

#### 3.1 Purpose and Mandate

In the yellow centre of the Social Work Leadership Framework (SWLF) is the core purpose and mandate of social work. The purpose of social work in Northern Ireland is to “improve and safeguard the social wellbeing” of individuals, families and communities and is reflected in legislation<sup>6</sup>, policy<sup>7</sup> and further elucidated in the SWS.

This purpose is derived from the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) definition of social work:

***“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect***

6 Reform Act 2009

7 Delivering Together

*for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels.”<sup>8</sup> (July, 2014)*

To achieve this purpose, social workers need to demonstrate leadership at all levels and across all roles within the profession.

The mandate for social work as a profession **within statutory and some voluntary services** is set out in legislation which imbues statutory powers in social workers and employing organisations. Social workers have legal powers to protect people’s rights and safeguard their wellbeing. Delivering on the purpose of the profession and being accountable for the mandate is the leadership task of every social worker at all levels and settings within the profession.

This does not apply though in all cases. Some social workers in the voluntary and independent sector, in accordance with their professional ethics, have an employed role on behalf of service users and which can lead them to challenge the powers of the State which in some instances are discharged by statutory social workers.

The impact of social work therefore goes beyond the scope of the State. There are registered and community based social workers who value their independence from government in order to be free to act in accordance with their professional ethics and non-State role in challenging and influencing policy.

Leadership in social work is wider than the safe discharge of statutory functions. The impact of social work is also determined by how its values and ethics are modelled in planning and decision making as well as the quality of supervision and support that maintains high standards of professional practice and staff well-being.

Clarity around the purpose and mandate in any setting in which social work is practised, provides a social worker with their professional responsibilities, role confidence and task focus. The outworking of the purpose and mandate will vary across roles and settings. The outer arrows surrounding the Social Work Leadership Framework (SWLF) show how the purpose and mandate are expressed in the following examples:

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8 <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/>



- a. **Impact of social work** is achieved by the development and implementation of policies, strategies and legislation led by the Office of Social Services in the Department of Health, and in consultation with social work leaders
- b. **Experience of social work** by service users and carers who will engage directly with social work practitioners and feel first-hand the type of contribution social work has made to their personal wellbeing and safety
- c. **Outcomes from social work** which are achieved with and through others as social work works through relationships
- d. **Delivery of social work** is determined by the employer organisations **in a range of settings** who create the conditions in which social workers are deployed to achieve their purpose and mandate.

### 3.2 Orientation of Social Work

The blue circle sets out how social work is orientated around four core positions:

#### a. **Professional Identity**

Professional identity is a form of vocational categorisation: **'I am a ...'**. It is the sense of oneness that individuals have with their profession and the degree to which they define themselves as profession members. Professional identity consists of the individual's alignment with the roles, responsibilities, values and ethical standards which are consistent with the practices that are accepted by their profession.

Professional identity acts as an 'internal compass' to regulate a practitioner's work. It also influences self-esteem and confidence. A strong professional identity can help mitigate against burnout. Professional regulation plays an important role in identity formation, particularly in the early stages of a social worker's career, but non-regulatory factors such as beliefs, attitudes, values, experiences, peer group, education, work environment, culture and local leadership are more influential on the continued development and sustainability of a social worker's identity throughout their career.

Society's attitude about social work can also impact positively or negatively on social workers' professional identity. A strong professional identity helps social workers be clear and confident about their professional boundaries and to be effective interprofessional practitioners who understand their role and how they contribute to multidisciplinary and/or interagency working.

### *b. Values*

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) Code of Ethics<sup>9</sup> states the values and ethical principles on which the profession is based. Core values in social work include **human rights**<sup>10</sup> (inherent worth and dignity of all people), social justice (anti-discriminatory, diversity, fairness, inclusion), professional integrity (reliable, honest, trustworthy), accountability.

These are not discretionary. The regulator, the Northern Ireland Social Care Council reinforces them through setting standards of conduct and practice to which all registered social workers adhere. Social workers are expected to comply with the values of their employer. In the Health and Social Care sector these include compassion, excellence, openness and respect which are all compatible with social work professional values.

These values underpin social workers' personal behaviour, relationships, practice and policy development. They inform decision making and interactions with service users, carers, colleagues and practitioners.

### *c. Evidence*

Social workers make decisions every day that have huge implications for individuals and their families. They make decisions in difficult, complicated circumstances and have to explain them to families, colleagues and Court. Social workers use evidence to inform their professional judgement and decision making from a range of sources: user and carer feedback, practice wisdom, formal research and learning from best practice.

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9 <https://www.basw.co.uk/about-basw/code-ethics>

10 <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/human-rights/what-are-human-rights>

Social work bases its methodologies on a systematic body of evidence informed knowledge which is derived from research and practice evaluation. It recognises the complexity of the interactions between human beings, with each other and within the family, community and social systems which surround them.

#### d. Science

The social work profession draws on a range of social science disciplines to understand, assess and plan interventions that result in improved social wellbeing and safeguarding. These include theories and knowledge about human development and behaviours, social systems, social administration, as well as disciplines such as statistics, social anthropology, community development, salutogenics<sup>11</sup>, politics and the social determinants of wellbeing.<sup>12</sup>

Social work is differentiated by its systemic, holistic focus. Its priorities and practices are determined by how the wider, cultural, societal, economic and political conditions that impact on individual, family and community wellbeing.

### 3.3 Four Domains of Leadership

The green circle sets out the four domains of social work leadership which are described in this section. It is considered that these can apply to all types of social work roles.

#### 3.3.1 Leading Self

Social work is primarily a relationship based profession. The ‘use of self’ is a core concept in social work practice<sup>13</sup>. Literature on social work practice indicates that social workers themselves are the **“instruments of the profession”**. Use of self implies **“skilful self-disclosure, empathy and authentically bringing oneself into the ... client relationship”** to enhance the wellbeing of the individual, family group or society as a whole at policy level. Individual personality, beliefs, relational skills, self-awareness and self-management are all factors that impact on Leading Self.

11 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEh3JG74C6s&feature=youtu.be>

12 British Association of Social Workers

13 Use of Self in Social work: Rhetoric or Reality, Archana Kaushik, Ph.D, *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, Volume 14, Number 1 (2017)

This domain highlights that the conscious use and development of ‘self’ is the leadership capability to intentionally behave and communicate in ways that facilitate change<sup>14</sup>. In this way, social work is a way of “being” based on personal self-mastery and interpersonal dexterity.

***Leading Self Skills/Capabilities:***

1. Authenticity
2. Emotional intelligence
3. Self-awareness
4. Self-care
5. Self-discipline

**3.3.2 *Leading with Others***

Social work is carried out within a network of human relationships. Social workers engage with a range of ‘others’ to achieve change. ‘Others’ include service users, carers, colleagues, professions, agencies, a range of community groups and social networks.

Social workers work collaboratively with others to achieve better outcomes for those whom they serve. They harness the intelligence and resourcefulness of the people they work with to achieve positive change. Social workers challenge silo mentalities, motivate and engage others towards a shared goal, and use collective co-operation as a change strategy.

Social workers know that successful outcomes depend on the extent to which the individuals who are most impacted by the change, are involved in the planning and execution of that change from the beginning. Social workers leverage diversity in problem solving as the wider the range of perspectives, the greater the likelihood of finding solutions. Building relationships with others based on trust, honesty and reliability is core to a social work leadership approach.

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14 Sheafor, B. W., & Horejsi, C. R. (2003). *Techniques and guidelines for social work practice* (6th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon

***Leading with Others Skills/Capabilities:***

1. Co-production of services through commissioning, co-design, delivery and evaluation
2. Communication and information sharing
3. Constructive challenge and critical thinking
4. Connecting and network development
5. Participation and partnership working with service users, carers and other organisations

**3.3.3 *Leading Practice***

Social workers are employed by a variety of organisations working with a wide range of service users, and in a variety of settings and sectors. Social work practice is in a state of continuous development as a result of new knowledge and evidence; changes in societal patterns, politics and economics; or driven by the findings of inspections and inquiries.

While Leading Practice is a challenging task in a complex, dynamic environment, nevertheless the profession is compelled to lead excellent practice, design systems to support excellent practice and develop excellent practitioners<sup>15</sup>. This is achieved through fostering innovation, learning and evaluation, and supported by robust professional governance systems and processes.

***Leading Practice Skills/Capabilities:***

1. Innovation, improvement and piloting
2. Measurement and evaluation
3. Learning, development and change management
4. Reflective practice and supervision
5. Governance and accountability systems

**3.3.4 *Leading the Profession***

The status of a profession is determined by the extent to which its members consistently demonstrate skills, knowledge and practices that instil trust and credibility within those who experience it. Leading the Profession is the contribution each social worker makes to the reputation and influence of social work as a

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<sup>15</sup> Department for Education (DfE) (2015) Knowledge and Skills Statements for Practice Leaders and Practice Supervisors. London, DfE.

discipline. It also implies making a contribution to the future evolution of the profession to meet current and future challenges. This contribution is required at practitioner, management and policy/strategy levels in social work as well as from its academic, regulatory and inspection branches.

Given the increasing multi-disciplinary nature of social work practice, social workers have an influencing role in shaping service planning and interventions which are aligned to their core purpose and values. Given the changes in societal trends and emerging issues which impact on wellbeing and safeguarding, the profession of social work has a strategic role in shaping public policy, influencing the allocation of resources and providing guidance to address ethical dilemmas.

### ***Leading the Profession Skills/Capabilities:***

1. Strategic analysis
2. Setting vision and direction (policy, strategy)
3. Inspiring shared purpose
4. Advocacy, challenge and influence
5. Upholding standards, ethics and rights

## 4 Application

The Social Work Leadership Framework (SWLF) is designed to have practical application for developing social work as a profession. It gives language to social work leadership and is relevant for the breadth of career pathways within social work. It highlights the importance of leadership as an activity for all social workers.

It is recommended that the Social Work Leadership Framework (SWLF) is field-tested through practice and application rather than being ‘perfected’ as a ‘green’ discussion paper. Examples of how it could be field tested are

- Align with social work leadership programmes.
- Map on to PIP requirements
- Development of curricula and programmes to provide knowledge, skills and resources to equip leaders at all levels
- Linked to supervision policy
- Appraisal conversations
- Job descriptions and interviews
- Career planning
- Introduced to student social workers and newly qualified staff.

Clearly the Social Work Leadership Framework (SWLF) has a direct relevance to all leadership development activity in social work. It supports the HSC Collective Leadership Strategy and the Continuous Learning and Development Improvement Strategy. It can complement any existing leadership development arrangements within organisations. It can be integrated within an organisation’s learning and development strategy. It may also be used inform training needs analysis to identify gaps or priorities for leadership development.

Currently there are a range of leadership development processes provided in-house (by employers as well as regional programmes (Stronger Together), academic post graduate courses and post qualifying awards provided by the NISCC. It is our ambition that social workers at all levels will be leaders that promote and support the profession to meet its core purpose to “improve and safeguard the social wellbeing” of individuals, families and communities.

“The single biggest way to impact an organization is to focus on leadership development. There is almost no limit to the potential of an organization that recruits good people, raises them up as leaders and continually develops them.”

John C Maxwell<sup>16</sup>

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16 The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork, John C Maxwell, 2003



# *Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing in Northern Ireland*