Guidance on
Supporting
Social Workers

Continuous professional development

Organisational culture

Newly qualified & early career support

Supervision

Well-being

Support with role related violence and aggression

Flexible Working

What supports social workers thrive in their role?

An overview of key messages contained in DoH guidance for social work employers

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Purpose of session	Context
• What supports social workers thrive in their role? • An overview of key messages contained in DoH guidance for social work employers	• SW Workforce Review (2022) • SW Workforce Implementation Board action plan • Developed by Office of Social Services (DoH) as a priority • Evidence based document

Why it is important social workers are supported in their role

Enhances service quality
Supported social workers make better decisions that ensures they deliver safe, effective services.

Prevents burnout and stress
The emotional complexity of the role

-crisis work, trauma, and ethical dilemmas

can impact negatively on mental health without strong organisational support.

Why it is important social workers are supported in their role

Promotes ethical and safe practice
Good supervision, clear values, and a positive culture help social workers practice safely and confidently.

Strengthens teams and community impact
Supportive teams boost resilience, belonging, and engagement, improving retention and service continuity.

Supports professional growth
Development opportunities, supervision, and structured support - especially for early-career staff - builds confidence and competence.

Overview of the guidance – Section 1

Presents 6 key themes drawn from research about what supports social workers in their role.

A positive organisational culture

Promoting well-being

Supporting flexibility and work-life balance
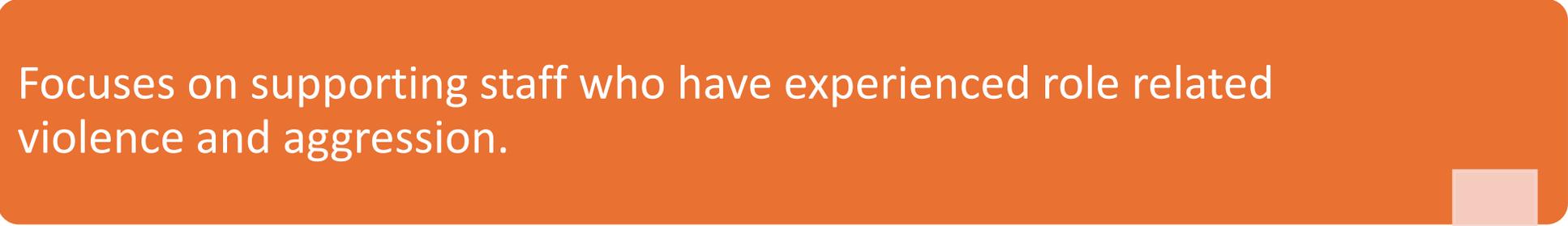
Continuous professional and career development

Support for newly qualified and early career social workers

Effective supervision

Each theme is paired with practical actions and resources for organisations.

Section 2

Focuses on supporting staff who have experienced role related violence and aggression.

Revised and updated version of a piece of work developed by the Department of Health in partnership with the five Health and Social Care Trusts, HSCB, NIPSA, NISCC and BASW NI.

Builds on the Violence and Aggression in the Workplace HSC Framework (2023) and reflects the unique challenges of social work.

Section 3

A TOOL TO FACILITATE AN ORGANIZATION TO REVIEW THE SUGGESTED ACTIONS DETAILED IN SECTIONS ONE AND TWO.

ASSIST EMPLOYERS IDENTIFY GAPS

PLAN TO ADDRESS AREAS THAT MAY REQUIRE ATTENTION WITHIN THEIR ORGANISATION

NOT A MANDATORY TICK-LIST – PROVIDES IDEAS BASED ON EVIDENCE

Susan Ritchie (Professional Officer OSS)

Section 1 Key messages

Carolyn Ewart (Independent Consultant)

Section 2 Key messages

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1.Organisational Culture

Organisational Culture

Impacts on a social worker's sense of feeling supported and their well-being.

Good working environment, a good relationship with their line manager, and being part of a consistent team is key.

Compassionate leadership plays a key role.

If things go wrong social workers need to know they will be supported and treated with fairness.

Importance of team

and

the 'team as a secure base'

Team support - develops resilience, a sense of belonging, work engagement and influences remaining with an organisation.

Informal colleague discussions can support and assist social work practitioners manage the emotional impact of the role.

Strong relationships with peers they can talk to can prevent practitioners from feeling overwhelmed and risking burnout.

Skilled team leaders and senior managers who recognise and understand the value of the team and the value of building and promoting peer connectivity and support is key.

Working environment

Happiness in work or a lack of it, impacts on individual well-being, engagement, job satisfaction, and ultimately service user experience.

Supervisors and senior management play a key role creating and maintaining positive working environments and should demonstrate both strong management capabilities and compassionate leadership behaviour.

An unsatisfactory relationship with their manager is a major contributor to burnout and the decision for a SW to leave a job.

'Stay or go' moments

Not unusual to experience 'stay or go' moments across a career span.

Often occur when professional identity or values are compromised, or where a SW feels they cannot make a difference.

Social work is a relationship and value-based profession and the desire to make a difference is why many social workers enter the profession.

'Stay or go' moments are essential for organisations, line managers and practitioners to recognise and understand.

Professional identity

Strong sense of professional identity and having a sense of pride in their work is important to SWs

- sustains experienced social workers in practice,
- contributes to their sense of purpose and meaning,
- acts as a buffer to the stressors of the role.

If this is compromised, well-being can be impacted and can leave practitioners questioning if they should remain in a role or the profession.

What organisations can do - Organisational Culture

Demonstrating	Respecting and valuing	Promoting	Promoting	Developing
compassionate leadership,	respecting and valuing staff,	happy workplace environments,	a learning culture,	social work teams 'as a secure base'

2. Social Worker well-being.

Wellbeing

ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN RETENTION, WELL-BEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

STRESS, DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY ARE ASSOCIATED WITH BURNOUT

HIGH EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION STRONGLY LINKED TO HIGH SICKNESS LEVELS; JOB EXITS AND INTENTION TO LEAVE

SW role - impact on wellbeing

The emotional nature of the social work role can impact on mental health and well-being. Social work practice means:

- Managing complex and often distressing crisis situations,

- Working with adversity and trauma,

- Difficult decision-making, and

- Managing ethical challenges that require high levels of emotional investment.

Empathetic engagement that involves:

Listening to or seeing:

-experiences of abuse, neglect, maltreatment, domestic violence,

-supporting service users to cope with their trauma,

-or being on the receiving end of violence, abuse or aggression

impacts emotionally on social workers and can result in vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout where they are not supported to deal with the impact of such issues.

Burnout can involve:

1. emotional exhaustion

2. a sense of not being effective

3. disengagement or indifference

Moral distress

The impact on professionals where they are not able to practice in keeping with their professional identity and values.

Psychological response to a morally challenging situation - may know the ethically right course of action but unable to take that action because of organisational or policy constraints.

Over time these experiences can cause demoralisation, depression, anxiety, powerlessness and burnout, especially if unsupported if raising these issues with line managers.

Workloads/ caseloads

Need to feel supported to manage a safe workload and caseload as they face increasing need and complexity in practice.

Those who enter the profession should be viewed as 'developing practitioners' in the early stages of their career and need support to manage.

Personal and Professional Self-care

Personal self-care - 'practices that promote the health and well-being of the self', such as getting enough sleep, listening to music, exercising, engaging in yoga and mindfulness.

Professional self-care - 'the effective and appropriate use of the self in the professional role within the context of sustaining health and well-being'.

SWs benefit from support to:

- use strategies to manage or restrict the emotional investment in or the emotional impact of working with trauma, adversity or crisis,

• develop caseload and workload management techniques such as restricting when tasks are completed,

• build a professional support system,

• place boundaries on professional relationships,

• take leave regularly.

What organisations can do - Wellbeing

Shift towards a culture of prevention and early intervention that supports social workers manage their own wellbeing:

- understand/ recognise the emotional impact of the role and potential risk of vicarious trauma,

- provide clear pathways for expressing and managing the emotional impact of the role

- ensure healthy boundaries are in place between work and home

- encourage positive connection with colleagues

- build and develop social worker knowledge and skills of working with trauma

- ask staff about the types of support that would be helpful to address role-related stress

- overcome any stigma that may exist in relation to having mental health conversations at work

3.Flexibility and work-life balance

Flexible working arrangements can help to sustain motivation and reduce turnover.

If social workers know that flexible working is in place to support a good work-life balance, they are more likely to be motivated and have more job satisfaction.

A commitment to and respect for staff's work-life balance and to protect non-working days as much as possible is essential.

Where organisations listen to staff preferences and try to meet their needs, it can enhance loyalty to the organisation and reduce turnover.

Hybrid working

- Many benefits - helps social workers balance responsibilities in work and outside of work.

- Can also isolate individuals and impact negatively on colleague relationships and connection within teams.

- Social work role benefits from day-to-day team support and contact.

- A healthy balance and encouraging teams into the office and spending time together can contribute to well-being.

- Danger of isolation if virtual working is over-used at all career stages, but especially in early career stage where newly qualified social workers rely heavily on relationships with experienced team members to gain practice knowledge and skills.

What organisations can do
Flexibility/Work Life balance

Be considerate about personal responsibilities and challenges outside of work

Support social workers to manage a good work-life balance

Have discussions about hybrid working arrangements and expectations that ensure social workers do not become isolated

If consistently working outside of contracted hours explore strategies to reduce
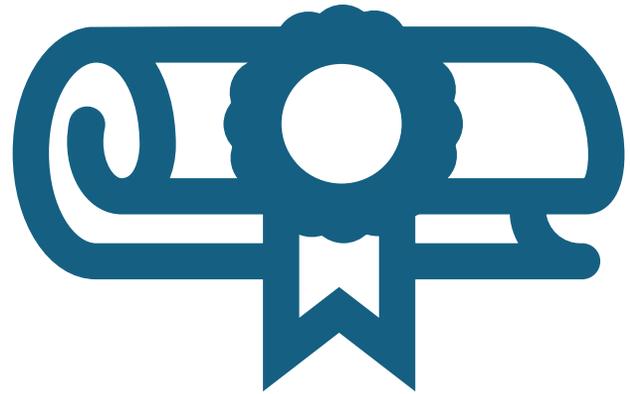
4. Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

CPD

- Increases professional knowledge and practice and to develop confidence in role.

- Enhances career opportunities.

- Provides a pathway - developing specialist knowledge and skills while staying in direct practice, or into more senior levels.

- Professional development that will support career progression is crucial to support and retention.

- Having little or no easement acts as a de-motivating factor for engagement CPD.

- Managers engaging in CPD act as role models to their teams.

- Mid-late career social workers often feel rewarded sharing practice wisdom/supporting those entering the profession.

- Mid-late career social workers may require encouragement and support to apply for and complete assessed learning.

What organisations can do - Continuous Professional Development

Promote a continuous learning and development culture across all service areas.

Organisational career pathways

- Factor CPD into workload management.

- Develop CPD pathways for social workers at all levels that have a clear learning pathway:

❖ for those wishing to remain in social work practitioner posts and develop specialist knowledge

and

❖ for those wishing to move into more senior positions to develop and prepare for those roles

5. Supporting newly qualified and early career social workers.

Early career social workers require significant supervision, direction and support from line managers and colleagues.

First two-three years of employment are crucial for professional socialisation, understanding organisational cultures, and adapting to new methods of working

ECSWs must

learn from peers,

have access to training and support

have manageable caseloads

receive regular good quality supervision.

What organisations can do to support NQ and early career social workers

Practice the responsible recruitment of NQSWs

Provide a range of support in year one reducing across years two and three as confidence and competence increases.

Peer mentoring

Legacy mentoring

Assist them understand key messages about the impact of the role and develop strategies to manage
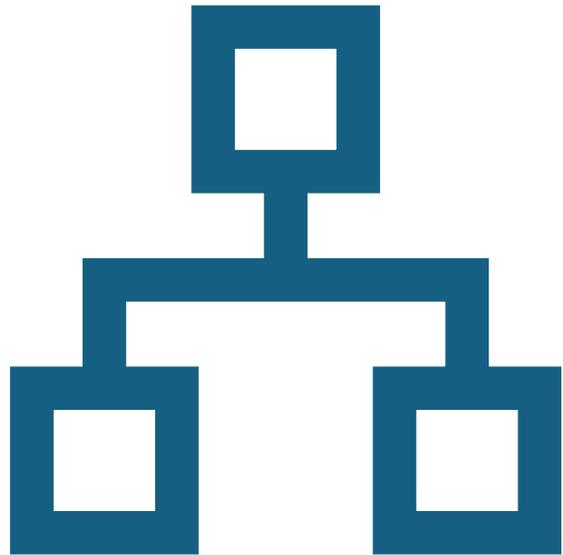
6. Supervision

Supervision is the main means of supporting social workers within organisations.

A good relationship between a supervisor and a social worker and

Team leader/supervisor skills are key to facilitating high quality supervision .

Those considering going into team leader posts should spend time preparing for the role & building their skills to equip them for the role

Team leaders need support/mentoring to carry out their role

What organisations can do - supervision

Ensure the provision of supervision that is regular, supportive, and effective in line with policy.

Invest in developing 'aspiring' team leaders to prepare them for the role. Assist them understand their role in supporting and retaining social workers.

Core principles underpinning section two of the guidance.

While understanding the factors that influence behaviour, whatever the circumstances, violence or aggression toward social workers is never acceptable.

All social workers have the right to work in a way that is free from violence, abuse, intimidation, and threat.

All social workers reporting a concern about role-related violence or abuse should be provided with an effective and supportive response.

Prevention of violence and aggression should be a core principle of all organisations - a preventative, responsive and supportive organisational culture should be fostered that recognises the impact of rolerelated violence or aggression on social work staff.

What does the evidence tell us?

When exploring the impact of violence, threats, and intimidation against social workers in Northern Ireland, BASW NI19 found:

the majority of social workers had experienced intimidation related to their job.

three quarters reported they had received a threat.

half reported that they had been subject to violence.

Why social workers may experience violence

people use social work services during periods of distress, adversity, crisis, and loss. Therefore, they may be in a heightened emotional state.

• some service users have experienced trauma during their lives. Therefore, some aggressive behaviours may be a manifestation of underlying and deeply rooted psychological distress.

• personal or family distress may at times become heightened or exacerbated when the role of a social worker involves a statutory intervention into the private or family life of a service user which they resent, dispute or challenge.

• an individual's mental capacity or illness may lead to unintended or unintentional incidents of violence and aggression which are outside of their control.

What types of role related violence and aggression are there?

Verbal abuse is the use of inappropriate words or behaviour causing distress including shouting, swearing or insults with racial or sexual intent and intimidation.

Physical violence is the intentional application of force to another person without lawful justification, resulting in physical injury or personal emotional discomfort. It includes slapping, punching, nipping, biting, kicking, spitting, head butting, stamping or sexualised abuse. It may also include more extreme forms of violence using weapons that are not just restricted to sharp implements, chemicals and firearms".

Property damage towards social workers and their families has also been reported across studies, in particular to vehicles and on occasions to homes.

Threats of violence and intimidation Social workers can be subjected to threats of violence and intimidation from individuals, families, and from within communities. They have experienced being stopped and threatened when entering or leaving communities by individuals, or groups, in order to prevent them carrying out their professional duties.

Social media, online digital abuse and harassment

The misuse of social media can have a detrimental effect on the well-being of social workers, causing stress, anxiety, and concern about personal safety, as well as tarnishing their personal and professional reputation.

Many social workers have personal social media accounts across different sites and platforms which may be accessible to others online. NISCC Standards of Conduct and Practice21 (standard 5.9) states that 'social workers must ensure they use social media or social networking sites or other forms of electronic communication in a way that does not contravene professional boundaries'.

Yet the perceived anonymity provided by social media may provide opportunities for the online abuse of social workers related to their professional role.

Social media platforms can be sources of discrimination, defamation, hatred, abuse, cyberbullying and disinformation.

Cyber bullying

targeting a social worker's social media account with abusive comments

- threats or personal insults via email
- posting unsolicited videos or recordings of a social worker on line

- threats made on social media stating they know where a social worker lives, who family members are etc.

- a fake profile set up in a social worker's name aimed at discrediting them

- on-line homophobic and racist slurs

Race, sexual orienatation, gender, identity, religion, sectarianism or disability

- Refusing to engage with a social worker based on race, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, sectarianism or disability

- Use of offensive or derogatory language, which can be spoken or written

- Demeaning or insulting verbal or non-verbal behaviour.

- Hate crime based on race, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, sectarianism or disability can include

- Verbal or written abuse/intimidation and harassment.

- Threatened or actual physical assault.

- Physical assault which can include punching, slapping, hair pulling, biting,   burning hitting, choking or kicking.

- Criminal damage to property.

- Using racist gestures including hand gestures

The impact of violence, intimidation, and threats

Being the victim of hate crime has the potential to leave staff feeling:

Isolated.

Anxious, fearful and unsafe.

Angry, frustrated or powerless.

Stressed.

Forced to suppress how they feel.

Overwhelmed or worn down25.
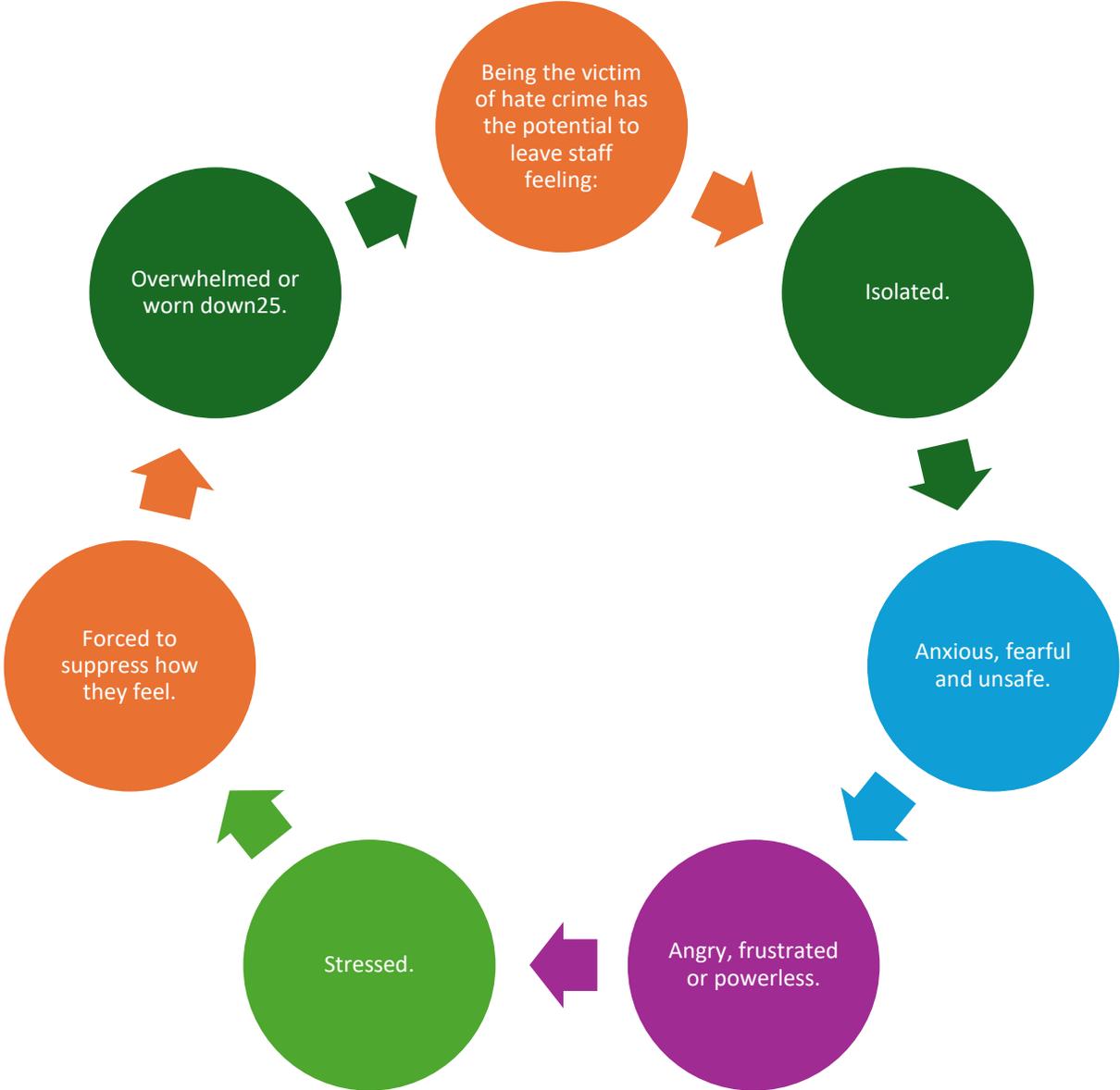
What can organisations do?

Prevention - be aware of the risks of role-related violence or aggression.

procedures to manage the risks

appropriate personal safety information and training

raise relevant policy, such as lone worker policy

supervision arrangements that address managing personal safety and risk issues

support plans for the affected staff, and, when relevant, their colleagues

effective reporting and escalation procedures

monitoring and reviewing systems.

Understand risks associated with work environments.

Specific risk considerations in organisational work settings may include:

whether car parks and entrances to offices are isolated

whether they are well lit for social workers accessing the premises in the evening/at night

the need for personal safety devices such as personal alarms and mobile telephones

whether meeting and interview rooms are observable to other staff or are fitted with alarms

the use of security measures such as CCTV and security locks in the workplace.

Responding to support social workers

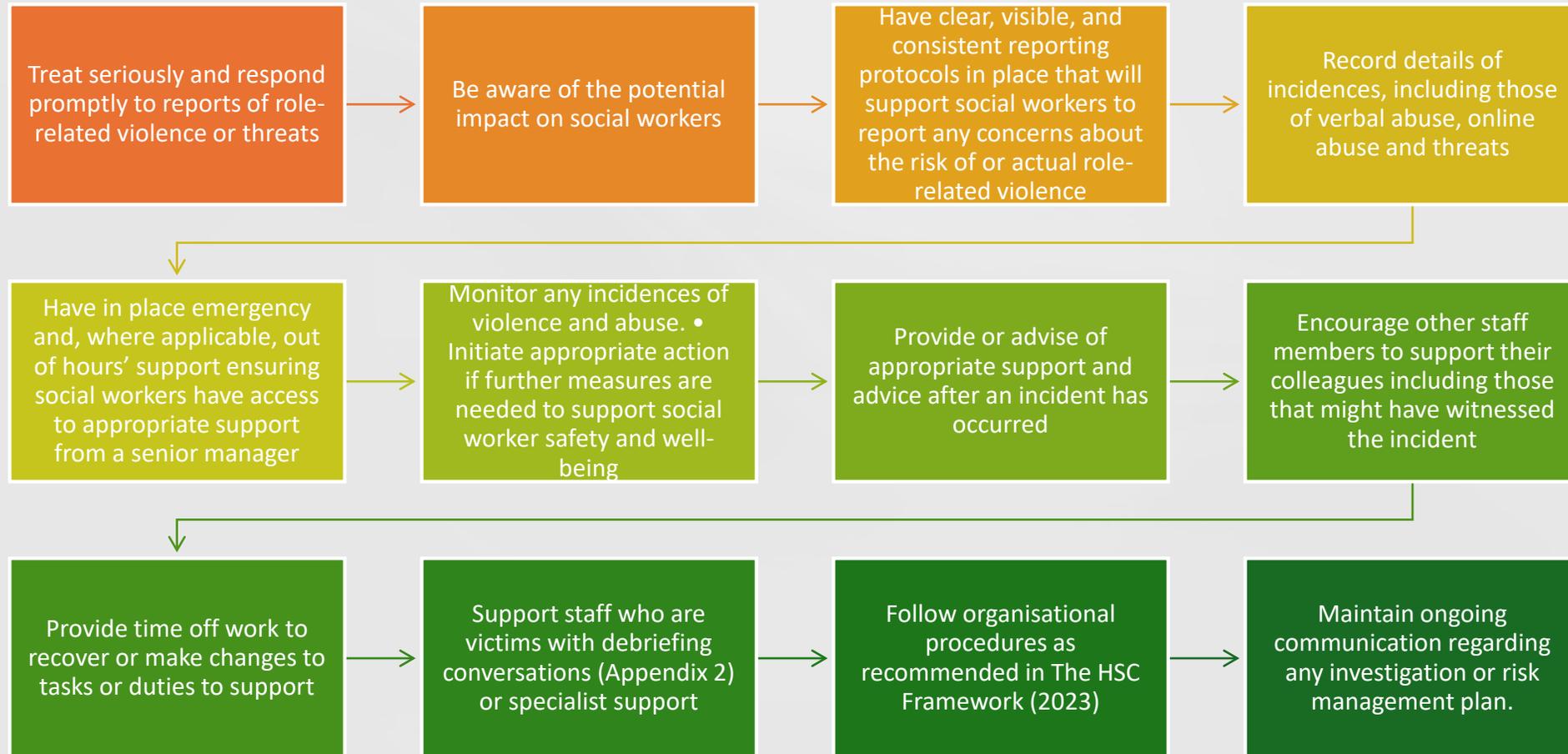|				
Social workers who experience work related violence should never be left to deal with the impact on their own.	Section 5 of the HSC Framework (2023) outlines a clear process following an incident, in relation to both immediate and ongoing support	Employers should understand and recognise the impact of violent incidences on their workforce	All employers should ensure that there is a designated person who will provide support to the affected social worker following a violent or aggressive incident	That designated person may be the line manager or another suitably experienced senior professional who should be able to
understand and recognise the impact violence and aggression can have on an individual	have a range of skills to support, that includes debriefing (Appendix One provides an example of a debriefing model)	provide on-going support and advice in relation to processes such as reporting	have knowledge of resources and psychological services available to support well-being	understands that well-being

The response required from employers to support staff

Treat seriously and respond promptly to reports of role-related violence or threats → Be aware of the potential impact on social workers → Have clear, visible, and consistent reporting protocols in place that will support social workers to report any concerns about the risk of or actual role-related violence → Record details of incidences, including those of verbal abuse, online abuse and threats

Have in place emergency and, where applicable, out of hours' support ensuring social workers have access to appropriate support from a senior manager → Monitor any incidences of violence and abuse. • Initiate appropriate action if further measures are needed to support social worker safety and well-being → Provide or advise of appropriate support and advice after an incident has occurred → Encourage other staff members to support their colleagues including those that might have witnessed the incident

Provide time off work to recover or make changes to tasks or duties to support → Support staff who are victims with debriefing conversations (Appendix 2) or specialist support → Follow organisational procedures as recommended in The HSC Framework (2023) → Maintain ongoing communication regarding any investigation or risk management plan.

Employers' response to service users who display aggressive or threatening behaviour

- Employers play a role in challenging or addressing the actions of those who carry out threats or violence towards social workers

- Employers are expected to create a safe workspace where staff feel supported and protected against aggressive or threatening behaviour from service users. Have policies and procedures in place to address and challenge violence towards staff

- Depending on the severity of the incident, a range of measures can be taken by employers to challenge or address the actions of those who carry out aggressive or threatening behaviour.

- These include a:

- Verbal warning

- Written warning

- Acceptable behaviour agreement

- Change of location for receiving services

- Words of advice or verbal reprimands (given by Police)

- Reviewing the risk of further professional involvement with the service user

- Putting in place safeguards for other staff where involvement is required to continue.

Support to report

HSCT employers can	Support social workers to report	Work with the police and any other agencies, if an investigation is needed	Offer any assistance needed to help in enquiries and investigations
Support social workers with time out of work to assist with any investigations	Offer to provide them with support when attending meetings or appointments, or as follow-up support	Seek support from equality/human resource colleagues within the organization	Where a member of staff may not wish to make a formal complaint, an organisation can choose to flag an incident to the PSNI by way of a record

Support following threats on social media

Employers have a duty of care that includes the responsibility to prevent and address harassment and to protect social workers from role related violence and assault. This responsibility extends to all forms of digital communication

Employers should have a social media policy, as well as operational guidelines on the management of online harassment or threats and provide awareness raising to how best to respond to online abuse

Where role related digital or cyber-abuse and harassment occurs, it is important it is not ignored by employers, as the misuse of social media can have a detrimental effect on the well-being of those targeted, as well as tarnishing their public and personal reputation

Advice or assistance can be sought from the PSNI Cyber Crime unit

Employers should provide social workers with advice and assistance to report online abuse to social media platform providers, including requesting and advocating for the removal of abusive material online.

Awareness raising and training

Difficult conversations can be practiced in both individual and group supervision to assist social workers prepare for situations that cause them concern

Supervision, team meetings and professional forums all provide opportunities for professional leaders to engage with social workers about role related violence and aggression

The HSC Framework (2023) provides guidance on dealing with an incident to manage and minimise risk to staff (4.1) – this could be an item on the agenda of a team meeting or professional forum

The HSC Framework (2023) requires all staff to receive induction and other training relevant to role in relation to managing violence and aggression, prevention and de-escalation (P14). Appendix 5 of the Framework also provides a training needs guide for employers

Social workers should be supported to avail of any organisational training available to them that will assist them prevent and manage violence and aggression, including the use of de-escalation skills.

Post Incident - reflective learning reviews

A learning review should → identify factors that led to the incident occurring → identify any learning or improvements that can be put in place in the service to reduce future risk or prevent similar incidences from re-occurring

consider if the support provided to staff involved was adequate and if it could be improved → communicate results to staff and have a professional discussion in relation to the learning → make any improvements identified.