BASW

The professional association for social work and social workers

Sustainability and Social Work: Perspectives from the 2023 BASW Annual Survey

Introduction

To explore social workers' views and experience of environmental issues at work and in their own lives, the 2023 BASW Annual Survey asked a number of questions relating to the impact of the climate crisis and environmental degradation on their work. We also asked questions about the personal and professional use of green spaces and green initiatives and the policies of employers. The survey also gave space for respondents to expand upon what the idea of 'sustainability in social work' meant to them in a broader sense. This supplementary report to our main Annual Survey report 2023 considers both the quantitative and qualitative responses received.

The impact of widescale environmental degradation and climate change is becoming an increasingly important topic for social work at home and internationally, particularly in respect of consequences for the most at risk, least well-resourced and marginalised members of societies everywhere. Beginning to capture the views of UK social workers allows us to contribute to the ongoing debate and build knowledge about how social work can take account of predicted changes to the climate and environment, act against environmental injustice and evolve our practices to meet contemporary challenges.

It is clear from the responses received to questions about sustainability as a concept beyond environmental issues that a major concern for UK social workers is the sustainability of the social work workforce in the UK and the future of the profession itself.

There is a conceptual and practical connection between sustainability as it applies to how we protect and promote the natural world, how social workers support sustainable, thriving lives for communities, families and individuals, and how we look after and value social workers for the long term – as staff, as professionals and as people. This is the basis of eco-social work, a concept being explored by social workers across the world, particularly through the work of the International Federation of Social Workers and its partner global organisations (see https://newecosocialworld.com/the-peoples-charter-for-an-eco-social-world).

Working with colleagues across the UK and internationally, this survey and the themes in our UK conference 2024 are the start of a journey for BASW. We will develop better understanding of how social work can be part of the movement tackling environmental injustice and how this connects with changes in our real-world practices and perspectives And through this, we will continue to improve how we support social workers and our profession.

Dr Ruth Allen
CEO, BASW

At a glance – headlines from the survey

▶ Over **80%** of respondents agreed social workers have a responsibility to understand the impact of environmental and climate change on people we work with

▶ **74%** agreed BASW should take a stance and actions on this

▶ **65%** agreed people using services are negatively affected by environmental and climate change, although over a quarter disagreed with this

▶ **84%** agreed insulation and energy efficiency initiatives would benefit people we work with

▶ Only a **quarter** agreed people they work with have access to local green initiatives and less than one third used green initiatives within their own social work practices

▶ However, nearly **two thirds** of respondents engage in green initiatives themselves

▶ **65%** agreed they encourage people to access green space and over three quarters said green spaces have a positive impact.

▶ Over **88%** of social workers said access to green spaces was important to them personally

▶ Less than a third believed their employer encouraged environmentally sustainable ways of working although **46%** of respondents thought their employers had environmental policies

▶ Of the environmental and climate risks listed, only one (fire) was chosen by less than **30%** of respondents. The top three were Access or affordability of nutritious food; extreme cold; flooding

▶ Just over **half** of social workers were interested in environment related CPD.

This report begins by considering the quantitative findings from the 2023 BASW Annual Survey before moving on to reflect on the major themes that emerged from the qualitative comments. More information on how the survey was conducted can be found in Appendix A.

Findings from the 2023 BASW Annual Survey

The quantitative questions explored a number of different themes relating to sustainability. These included impact on people with whom social workers work, use of green initiatives, use of local green spaces, and workplace initiatives.

▶ **Figure 1: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Social workers have a responsibility to understand the impact of the climate crisis and/or environmental degradation on the people we work with.**

	Number of respondents	Percentage	
Strongly agree	299	24.61%	994 = 81.81%
Agree	695	57.2%	
Disagree	161	13.25%	187 = 15.39%
Strongly disagree	26	2.14%	
Not applicable	29	2.39%	
No response	5	0.41%	

More than four-fifths of respondents (81.81%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that social workers have a responsibility to understand the impact of the climate crisis and/or environmental degradation on the people with whom they work. Figure 17 looks in closer detail at what some of the issues arising are considered to be.

▶ **Figure 2: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: BASW should take a strong stance and actions on the impacts of climate crisis and/or environmental degradation on social workers and the people we work with.**

	Number of respondents	Percentage	
Strongly agree	291	23.95%	895 = 73.66%
Agree	604	49.71%	
Disagree	234	19.26%	277 = 22.8%
Strongly disagree	43	3.54%	
Not applicable	38	3.13%	
No response	5	0.41%	

Almost three-quarters (73.66%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that BASW should take a stronger, more active position on issues relating to the climate and the environment. However, over one-fifth (22.8%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that this was a role for BASW.

▶ Figure 3: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: People I work with are negatively affected by the climate crisis and/or environmental degradation.

	Number of respondents	Percentage	
Strongly agree	197	16.21%	792 = 65.19%
Agree	595	48.97%	
Disagree	287	23.62%	321 = 26.42%
Strongly disagree	34	2.8%	
Not applicable	97	7.98%	
No response	5	0.41%	

Almost two-thirds of total respondents (65.19%) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, suggesting social workers see connections between changes to the climate and the environment and the experiences of people with whom they work. Just over one-quarter (26.42%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

▶ Figure 4: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Government-funded initiatives for better insulation and energy efficient homes would improve the quality of life for people I work with.

	Number of respondents	Percentage	
Strongly agree	419	34.49%	1026 = 84.4%
Agree	607	49.96%	
Disagree	95	7.82%	126 = 10.37%
Strongly disagree	31	2.55%	
Not applicable	58	4.77%	
No response	5	0.41%	

Well over four-fifths of total respondents (84.4%) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, possibly reflecting concerns about cold and/or damp homes and people being unable to afford to keep their homes warm. The finding also suggests recognition that improving the quality of housing will require government intervention for many. One-tenth of respondents (10.37%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Engagement with green initiatives

The 2023 Annual Survey asked how social workers engaged with green initiatives in their work and personal lives and the impact that green initiatives might have on the people with whom they worked. Some examples of green initiatives were given, including community kitchens and gardens, food redistribution, schemes to fund warmer homes, and repair and recycle workshops.

▶ **Figure 5: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I engage with local green initiatives in a personal capacity.**

	Number of respondents	Percentage	
Strongly agree	144	11.85%	759 = 62.47%
Agree	615	50.62%	
Disagree	288	23.7%	369 = 30.37%
Strongly disagree	81	6.67	
Not applicable	82	6.75%	
No response	5	0.41%	

Just over three-fifths of respondents (62.47%) agreed or strongly agreed that they engaged with local green initiatives on a personal level, as distinct from any engagement related to their social work practice. Three-tenths of respondents (30.37%) reported that they disagreed or strongly disagreed.

▶ **Figure 6: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I engage with local green initiatives as a part of my social work practice.**

	Number of respondents	Percentage	
Strongly agree	54	4.4%	394 = 32.43%
Agree	340	27.98%	
Disagree	545	44.86%	670 = 55.14%
Strongly disagree	125	10.29%	
Not applicable	146	12.02%	
No response	5	0.41%	

Slightly under one-third of respondents (32.43%) agreed or strongly agreed that they engaged with local green initiatives as part of their social work practice. More than half of total respondents (55.14%) reported that they disagreed or strongly disagreed.

▶ Figure 7: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: People I work with have regular access to green initiatives.

	Number of respondents	Percentage	
Strongly agree	30	2.47%	305 = 25.1%
Agree	275	22.63%	
Disagree	586	48.23%	743 = 61.15%
Strongly disagree	157	12.92%	
Not applicable	162	13.3%	
No response	5	0.41%	

One-quarter of respondents (25.1%) agreed or strongly agreed that the people with whom they work have regular access to green initiatives. Three-fifths of respondents (61.15%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that this was the case.

▶ Figure 8: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Access to green initiatives has a positive impact on the lives of the people I work with.

	Number of respondents	Percentage	
Strongly agree	94	7.74%	519 = 42.72%
Agree	425	34.98%	
Disagree	323	26.58%	408 = 33.58%
Strongly disagree	85	7%	
Not applicable	283	23.29%	
No response	5	0.41%	

Despite relatively limited access to green initiatives, respondents were somewhat more positive about the positive impact of green initiatives, with over two-fifths of respondents (42.72%) agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement. A third of respondents (33.58%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. Some of these views may reflect the very wide range of issues being faced by the people with whom social workers work.

Engagement with green spaces

In addition to green initiatives, questions were also asked about engagement with green spaces, both professionally and personally, as well as the impact the use of green space might have upon the people with whom respondents worked. Some examples of green spaces were given, including gardens, parks, nature reserves, recreational grounds and other accessible opportunities to be in nature.

▶ **Figure 9: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: People I work with have regular access to green spaces.**

	Number of respondents	Percentage	
Strongly agree	88	7.24%	620 = 51.03%
Agree	532	43.79%	
Disagree	398	32.76%	472 = 38.85%
Strongly disagree	74	6.09%	
Not applicable	118	9.71%	
No response	5	0.41%	

Just over half of respondents (51.03%) agreed or strongly agreed that the people with whom they work have regular access to local green spaces. Almost two-fifths (38.85%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. To some extent this may reflect problems of accessibility to, or lack of availability of, local green spaces.

▶ **Figure 10: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I encourage the use of local green spaces as part of my social work practice.**

	Number of respondents	Percentage	
Strongly agree	140	11.52%	788 = 64.86%
Agree	648	53.3%	
Disagree	245	20.16%	276 = 22.72%
Strongly disagree	31	2.55%	
Not applicable	146	12.02%	
No response	5	0.41%	

Almost two-thirds of respondents (64.86%) agreed or strongly agreed that they encourage the use of local green spaces as part of their practice. More than one-fifth (22.72%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

▶ **Figure 11: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Access to green spaces has a positive impact on the wellbeing of people I work with**

	Number of respondents	Percentage	
Strongly agree	237	19.51%	931 = 76.63%
Agree	694	57.12%	
Disagree	115	9.47%	132 = 10.86%
Strongly disagree	17	1.4%	
Not applicable	147	12.1%	
No response	5	0.41%	

Whether or not use of local green spaces was encouraged as part of practice, more than three-quarters of respondents (76.63%) agreed or strongly agreed that having access to green spaces had a positive impact on the wellbeing of the people with whom they worked. One-tenth (10.86%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

▶ **Figure 12: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I use local green spaces in a personal capacity.**

	Number of respondents	Percentage	
Strongly agree	454	37.37%	1042 = 85.76%
Agree	588	48.4%	
Disagree	87	7.16%	116 = 9.55%
Strongly disagree	29	2.39%	
Not applicable	52	4.28%	
No response	5	0.41%	

A large majority of respondents (85.76%) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement about personal use of green spaces. Slightly less than one-tenth (9.55%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

▶ **Figure 13: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Accessing local green spaces has a positive impact on my wellbeing.**

	Number of respondents	Percentage	
Strongly agree	498	40.99%	1070 = 88.07%
Agree	572	47.08%	
Disagree	23	1.89	81 = 6.67%
Strongly disagree	58	4.77%	
Not applicable	59	4.86%	
No response	5	0.41%	

A large majority of respondents (88.07%) agreed or strongly agreed that they found accessing local green spaces beneficial for their wellbeing when they had the opportunity to access them.

Ways of working

The survey also asked two questions that were aimed at those respondents who reported being employees. These related to the stance of employers regarding sustainability policies and support for sustainable ways of working.

▶ **Figure 14: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: My employer supports me to adopt environmentally sustainable ways of working.**

	Number of respondents	Percentage	
Strongly agree	31	2.55%	396 = 32.59%
Agree	365	30.04%	
Disagree	480	39.51%	650 = 53.5%
Strongly disagree	170	13.99%	
Not applicable	164	13.5%	
No response	5	0.41%	

Slightly less than one-third of respondents (32.59%) agreed or strongly agreed that their employer supported them to adopt environmentally sustainable ways of working. However, more than half disagreed or strongly disagreed (53.5%) that they were supported in this way. Not all respondents are employees so there were a number of respondents for whom this question was not applicable.

▶ **Figure 15: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I know that my employer has a policy on environmental sustainability.**

	Number of respondents	Percentage	
Strongly agree	68	5.6%	553 = 45.51%
Agree	485	39.92%	
Disagree	385	31.69%	498 = 40.99%
Strongly disagree	113	9.3%	
Not applicable	159	13.09%	
No response	5	0.41%	

45.51% of respondents knew that their employer had a policy on environmental sustainability, whilst two-fifths (40.99%) disagreed. This suggests that either some employers do not have policies, or they have not been promoted effectively. Additionally, having a policy is not an indication that a policy is being implemented.

▶ **Figure 16: I am interested in CPD on environmental sustainability and social work practice.**

	Number of respondents	Percentage	
Strongly agree	117	9.63%	636 = 52.35%
Agree	519	42.72%	
Disagree	346	28.48%	447 = 36.79%
Strongly disagree	101	8.31%	
Not applicable	127	10.45%	
No response	5	0.41%	

Somewhat over half of respondents (52.35%) agreed that they would be interested in CPD on environmental sustainability and social work practice being offered. Over one-third (36.79%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

▶ **Figure 17: Climate change can impact anyone, but some people are more acutely affected than others. The extent to which people are affected depends not only on their exposure to events like floods and heatwaves but also on various forms of social vulnerability. Disability, absence of community support and lack of private transport and income can all make people more vulnerable to climate impacts.**

With this in mind, please consider the list below and tick those that you believe pose a risk to the people you work with.

	Number of respondents	Percentage
Access or affordability of nutritious food	906	74.57%
Extreme cold	722	59.42%
Flooding	602	49.55%
Air pollution	576	47.41%
Heavy rainfall and storms	512	42.14%
Reliance on fossil fuels (gas, oil, coal)	470	38.68%
Loss of green space	462	38.02%
Extreme heat	428	35.23%
Psychological impact of climate crisis	389	32.02%
Fire	226	18.6%
None of the above	49	4.03%

The most prominent risk identified by respondents is the impact of lack of access to and/or affordability of nutritious food, selected by almost three-quarters of respondents (74.57%). This was followed by extreme cold, selected by almost three-fifths of respondents (59.42%), echoed in the findings of Figure 4 on government help for better insulation and more energy efficient homes. Almost half of respondents selected flooding (49.55%), followed by the impact of air pollution (47.41%) and heavy rainfall and storms (42.14%). Almost all options were selected by almost a third or more of respondents, indicating the wide range of challenges that are being thrown up by changes to the climate or environmental degradation and which are predicted to become more acute going forward.

What does the term "sustainability in social work" mean to you, if anything?

Respondents to the survey were also given the opportunity to share their views on what the phrase "sustainability in social work" meant to them, or indeed if it meant anything at all. The question elicited a very broad range of responses with 553 comments being received in total. A summary of the key themes emerging from those comments is presented here[1].

The dominant theme emerging from the qualitative comments was the **need to look after the workforce**. The most common issue arising in this respect was the need to retain staff, followed by recruitment. These topics were linked to many comments about issues and challenges that are viewed as contributing to turnover and loss of staff, such as burnout, caseload, management, fair pay and resources.

> *"Sufficient quality trained staff, suitably supported and remunerated."*

Many of the respondents referred to the need for 'adequate' or 'safe' levels of staffing. Some highlighted high caseloads, especially in light of the increased complexity of cases and growing demand. The need for realistic expectations of what social workers could achieve in the current climate of limited resources, budget cuts and local authority bankruptcies was mentioned.

Some respondents referred to the importance of retaining experienced staff in the workforce, with their presence in frontline roles and in balanced teams being highlighted. High turnover rates were also mentioned. In the words of one respondent:

> *"Nobody gains from having a high turnover of staff…"*

A need for supportive management with practice experience was brought out in some comments. Others focused on the need to reduce bureaucracy and allow more time for relational practice. Some highlighted the need for a better work-life balance, enabled by employers, to prevent burnout and people leaving their roles.

> *"Having manageable caseloads and being able to manage a work/life balance."*

Overall, there was a strong focus on the need to improve working conditions and support the workforce in ways that allowed people to feel able to stay in the profession for longer than some respondents currently thought likely.

> *"It means ensuring that people remain in the profession and stop leaving in droves."*

Some of those who responded to this question spoke in personal terms of the impact they were experiencing in their own lives and their need to be supported. They identified the need to avoid burnout as core to their interpretation of sustainability. Some respondents spoke of wanting to be able to deliver good practice, implying the challenge of doing so currently.

> *"Not burning out."*

Others were looking for support to maintain their own well-being, physical and mental, or their wish to feel supported in their role. In essence, they, as with many of the other respondents, wanted to be able to do their job effectively on an on-going basis, without confronting worries about lack of resource.

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[1] All quotations are taken from comments made by the anonymous contributors to the Annual Survey.

> *"It means appropriate levels of funding and support to ensure that those we support can have a good quality of life."*

Stepping back from the immediate concerns about the sustainability of the workforce, a second significant theme emerged relating to **concern about the sustainability of the profession**. Some respondents shared their view that the profession and/or sector were not sustainable in their current form.

A principal issue here related to the need for adequate funding and resources so that social workers were able to provide support long-term and services were able to deliver with standards maintained. This was seen to need a qualified, experienced and adequately resourced workforce. For some there was a perceived need for greater honesty about what can be done with the resources:

> *"The current situation is not sustainable due to the chronic underfunding of the NHS and social care, we cannot do more with less no matter which way you try to flower it up."*

Some were concerned that the profession lacked recognition or needed a clearer identity. There was some concern about upholding core values, about the role being respected and understood – by other professions, by political decision-makers and by the public – and the loss of identity as a consequence of greater integration with health. With some comments, there was a sense that the profession's viability and identity was viewed as becoming more fragile.

Some respondents had a vision of what a sustainable profession could mean:

> *"The ability by social services to provide a meaningful, value based and ethical service supported by adequate public funding. General public and government support and belief in the long term adequately funded provision of social services to the marginalised, disempowered and vulnerable members of our national community."*

Others were more pessimistic, calling for a complete system overhaul if the service was to continue to be able to deliver support where it was needed in the longer term.

A number of respondents took a **broad view** of the idea of 'sustainability in social work', linking it to concepts and issues such as disaster management, social justice, social cohesion, community, and co-production. These respondents were inclined to take a long-term perspective of the ability to provide services with continuity and consistency.

> *"The importance of the work we do being realistic and sustainable for the individuals we work with to maintain once services have stepped away."*

Some comments related to the need for action to promote positive change at individual and/or at community level. They focused on the possibility of sustainable interventions and/or outcomes which would improve lives, prevent repeated contact with services and enable people to maintain changes or continue to change after external support ended. There was a focus on lasting solutions as opposed to what were seen as "sticking plaster" fixes. Mention was made of the well-being of people and communities and a recognition that there should be no compromising the quality of life of future generations.

> *"Developing strong, stable and 'wise' teams to deliver services that are rooted in local community needs and tread lightly on the earth."*

There was a perceived need for stable services that were rooted in the needs of local communities, with individuals and communities being empowered to address issues. Other issues raised include the importance of early help, the need to address underlying structural issues and a focus on considering the long-term impact and consequences of current actions.

> *"It means not just putting a sticking plaster over problems but trying to resolve systemic issues to prevent them happening in the first place or repeat occurrence."*

Some respondents made very explicit connections between the idea of 'sustainability in social work' and the **climate crisis and risks posed by environmental degradation**. Concerns were raised around the impact these had, and would have, on vulnerable and marginalised people. Some spoke to the need for sustainable measures in the workplace and a few questioned whether social work could continue to operate in the same way. This raised the issue of how to practice social work in a sustainable way, how social workers could reduce their own impact on the climate and environment and how to mitigate the impact of a changing climate on those being supported. Some respondents raised the importance of recognising the impact of what we do now on future generations.

> *"Building services that meet the changing needs of the population whilst reducing our environmental impact."*

Some explicitly recognised the importance of the climate crisis whilst acknowledging the difficulty of prioritising it when faced with so many immediate challenges in daily practice.

Some respondents expressed a negative view about the focus of the question or acknowledged that they had not reflected on it before, were not clear what it meant, viewed the term as meaningless or stated that it meant nothing to them.

> *Things need to change in order to achieve this."*

Summary

There were two clear strands of thinking in the qualitative comments. One strand focused upon the sustainability of the workforce, service delivery and the profession. The other focused on a more environmentally based definition of sustainability, with a view to how services could be delivered in a way that reduced impact on the environment and future generations. Some respondents explicitly acknowledged the tension between considering longer-term impact and being faced with urgent challenges in day-to-day practice.

The quantitative data gave some insight into the way in which 'green' activities are being – or could be – incorporated into practice to the benefit of those with whom social workers work. The data also demonstrated that social workers recognise, and are witnessing, the impact of climate change and environmental damage on the people with whom they work.

Appendix A –
How we conducted the 2023 Annual Survey

The BASW Annual Survey, from which these findings are drawn, was conducted on-line through the BASW website. It opened on 7 December 2023 and closed on 15 January 2024. The survey was designed to allow social workers, educators, and students to reflect on their experiences in the profession during 2023 and is thus the 2023 BASW annual survey. Although hosted on the BASW website, the survey was open to non-member social workers to respond.

The survey consisted mostly of closed questions. For some questions, respondents were able to select multiple responses. Some questions included the option to enter a free-text response to either provide an answer that was not listed or to expand further on the responses selected. The question on sustainability reviewed here is one of those open questions inviting free-text responses.
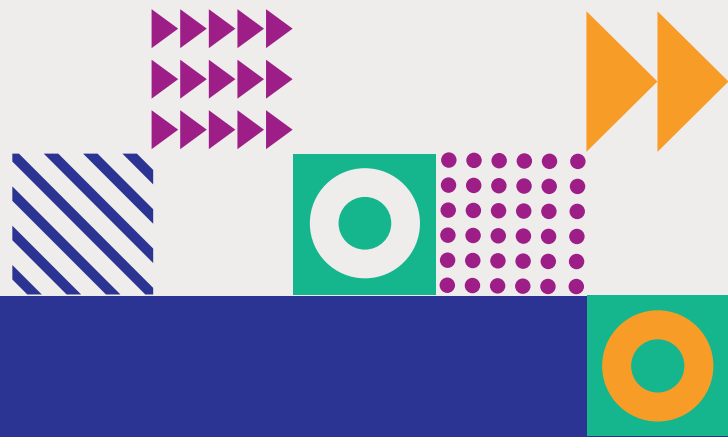
A number of questions adopted Likert scale responses, which are commonly used in surveys. The Likert scale is used as a way of establishing respondents' attitudes on an issue. The scale indicates the extent to which respondents agree or disagree with a given statement. In this instance, an option to indicate that the statement did not apply to their situation was also included. While Likert responses can include a 'neither agree nor disagree' option, this was not available for questions in the 2023 survey.

As an on-line survey, there are caveats that should be noted. Respondents represent a self-selecting sample, being those social workers, educators and students who felt motivated to respond. Consequently, this may result in bias if those with particular types of experience were more likely to respond.

In total, the survey received 1215 responses from across the UK. Descriptive statistics have been produced from the results for questions on sustainability covered here. Not all respondents replied to all questions. All of the questions on sustainability covered here were asked of all respondents.

The descriptive statistics contained in this additional report are calculated out of the full sample size of 1215. In the results, percentages have been calculated to two decimal places. Percentages may not total 100% due to non-responses and the rounding process. Where respondents were allowed to select more than one option in response to a question, percentages will not total 100%. Figure 17 shows the ranking of results in highest to lowest order, not the order in which options were presented in the survey, as respondents were allowed to select multiple options for this question.

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