

Adult Social Work in Gloucestershire

Principal Social Worker's Annual Report 2025–2026

A companion to Making the Difference That Matters Annual Report



More info:

www.gloucestershire.gov.uk

Contents

1. Welcome and purpose
2. Professional practice: the year at a glance
3. How we improved practice
4. Developing the social work workforce
5. Learning, quality and people's rights
6. Our priorities for 2026–2027
7. Closing message from the Principal Social Worker

1. Welcome to this report

This report is for Adult Social Care practitioners, partners, people who draw on support, unpaid carers and anyone who wants to understand how social work practice is developing in Gloucestershire.

About this companion report

[Making the Difference That Matters](#), Gloucestershire's Adult Social Care Annual Report gives the wider picture of services, performance, spending and people's experience. This companion report looks more closely at professional social work practice: how our workforce are supported to make sound decisions, learn from evidence and feedback, protect people's rights and improve the quality of their work.

Foreword from Jo Sutherland, Principal Social Worker



Welcome to my Principal Social Worker (PSW) annual report on adult social work in Gloucestershire.

Social workers often meet people at times of change, uncertainty or crisis. Our responsibility is to listen carefully, understand what matters to each person and make decisions that are safe, fair and respectful of their rights. This depends on a skilled workforce who have time to reflect, learn and use professional judgement.

This report focuses on the professional work behind the wider progress described in Gloucestershire's Adult Social Care Annual Report. It explains how we have supported social workers, strengthened learning from audits and safeguarding reviews, developed new practitioners and prepared teams for significant service change.

There is much to value in the commitment, compassion and professional curiosity shown by our workforce. I am particularly pleased to see stronger opportunities for shared learning and reflection, more people developing through early-career routes, and closer links between everyday practice, research and the experience of people who use services.

We are also open about where more work is needed. Improvement is not yet consistent across all teams. Some records and information need to be clearer, and we need stronger evidence that learning leads to a better experience for people. Being honest about these challenges is an important part of professional leadership.

Thank you to our workforce, people with lived experience, unpaid carers, students and partners who have shared their knowledge and helped us improve. In the year ahead, I will continue to champion social care practice that is thoughtful, evidence-informed and centred on what matters to the person.

Throughout the report, I have included short reflections in highlighted quote boxes. These are there to emphasise why each area matters: not as a separate commentary, but to connect the work of our teams with the standards we expect and the difference we want people to experience. Together, the quotes underline the importance of a supported workforce, learning from evidence, listening to lived experience, developing the future workforce and keeping people's rights at the centre of practice.

Jo Sutherland

Principal Social Worker for Adults
Gloucestershire County Council

What the Principal Social Worker Does

The Principal Social Worker provides professional leadership for adult social work across the council. The role focuses on:

- promoting safe, respectful and person-centred practice;
- supporting social workers to learn, reflect and develop;
- using research, audits and people's feedback to improve practice; and
- advising senior leaders on the quality and consistency of social work.

The role is underpinned by key legislation:

Legislation:	Duty:
The Care Act 2014	The Act places a duty on local authorities to promote individual well-being and outlines the PSW's responsibility in ensuring high-quality, person-centred practice. The PSW also contributes to safeguarding and supports workforce development.
The Mental Capacity Act 2005	The PSW ensures that practitioners follow best practice in supporting individuals to make decisions, assessing capacity, applying the principles of the Act.

Legislation:	Duty:
The Mental Health Act 1983 (amended 2007)	The PSW plays a crucial role in ensuring that social work practice aligns with the principles and requirements of the Mental Health Act.
Human Rights Act 1998	Social work is a human rights-based profession. Every day social workers across the UK tackle issues that are underpinned by human rights.
The Children and Families Act 2014	Although focused on children, this Act influences transition planning for young people moving into adult social care, an area where the PSW provides oversight and guidance.

How practitioners and teams can use this report

This report is designed to support reflection and discussion, not just to record what happened during the year. Social work practitioners, occupational therapists, managers and wider teams can use it to:

- discuss the key messages in team meetings, huddles and supervision;
- reflect on how the findings relate to everyday practice and people's experience;
- identify strengths to build on and areas where practice could be clearer or more consistent;
- use the audit and safeguarding learning to review decisions and recording;
- support learning plans for individuals, newly qualified practitioners, students and apprentices; and
- agree practical actions and check whether they lead to improvement.

A simple approach for teams

Choose one section, discuss what it means for your work, agree one action and return to it later to see what has changed. The highlighted quotes can be used as prompts to start these conversations.

My year in summary

Progress: stronger practice support, a successful mental health social work transition, more structured learning and growing routes into the profession.

Challenge: impact is not yet consistent, and some records and public information need to be clearer.

Next: test whether learning improves people's experience and strengthens professional standards through further audit, development and research.

Rights and duties: Social workers apply the Care Act, Mental Capacity Act, Mental Health Act and Human Rights Act. In practice, this means protecting rights, promoting wellbeing and keeping the person at the centre of decisions.

Professional practice at a glance

- Mental health social work returned to council management on 1 June 2026, supported by new referral routes, decision tools and induction.
- 9 newly qualified social workers completed their supported first year; 8 joined the next group and 11 more are expected in autumn 2026.
- 14 final-year students and 19 social work apprentices were supported.
- Peer moderation improved shared learning from case-file audits.
- Mental Capacity Act audits found strong attention to people's wishes and clearer best-interest decisions.
- 56% of the workforce responding about refreshed team huddles reported a benefit; 43% reported no change.

What this means for people

Social workers are receiving more structured support and scrutiny. The aim is more consistent decisions, clearer records and better protection of people's rights.

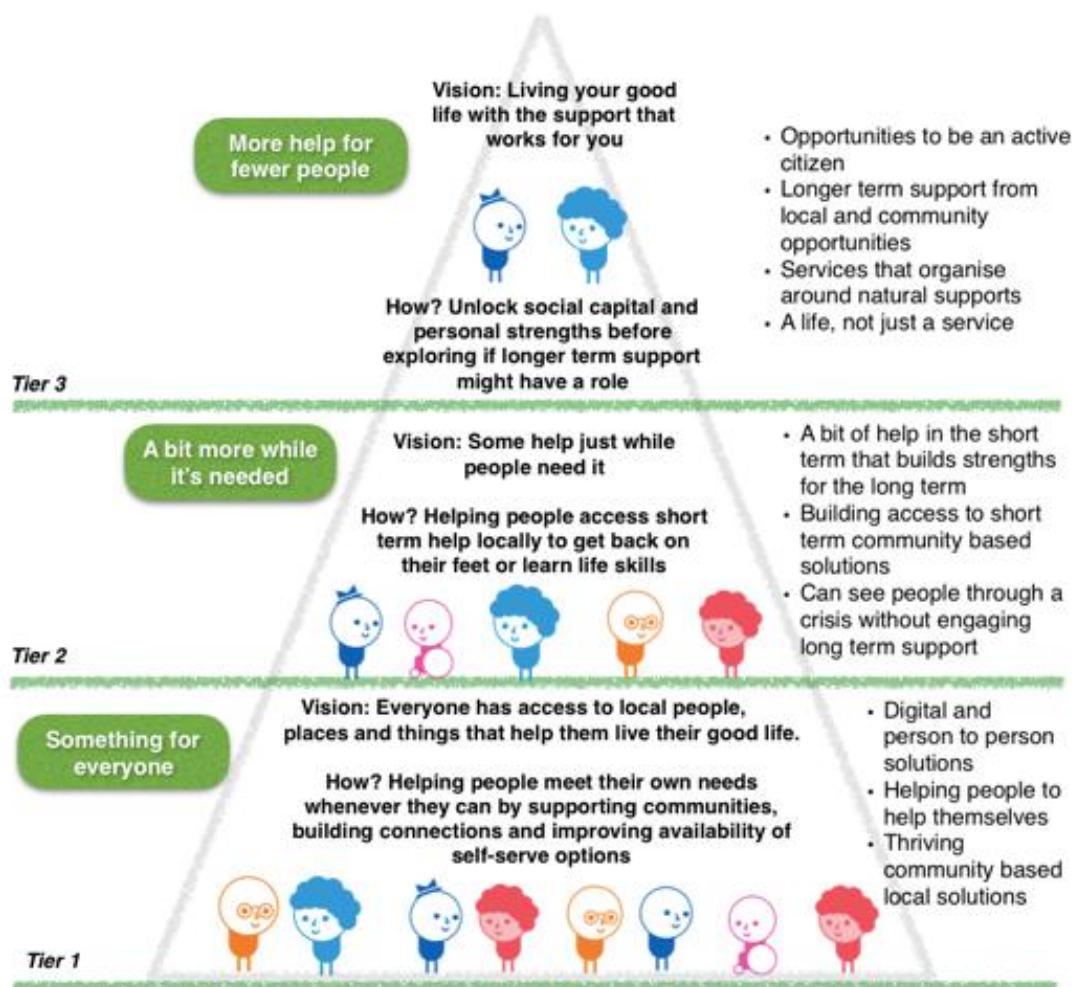
“Better-supported social workers can make clearer decisions and provide more consistent support.”

Strengthening Everyday Social Care Practice:

What changed: We brought professional support closer to everyday practice. I continued regular Principal Social Worker drop-in sessions, increased visits to teams and created more opportunities for practitioners and managers to raise questions, discuss complex situations and share what is working well.

A staff survey completed in January 2025 found that team huddles were not being used consistently and that practitioners had different views about their purpose. A Practice Development Social Worker helped review and refresh the huddle model, with clearer guidance to support reflection and discussion.

Leads from the Practice Development and Innovation Hub also introduced an in-reach offer. They now work directly with their local teams and join huddles, helping the workforce consider learning from complaints, Safeguarding Adults Reviews and audits and apply it to current practice.



Difference: Practitioners have more direct access to professional advice, challenge and support. Feedback following the huddle refresh showed a small positive shift. While 56% of respondents reported a benefit, 43% reported no change, showing that the impact remains mixed across teams.

Next: A fuller analysis of the feedback will be available from July 2026. We will use this to understand what works best, continue the drop-ins and team visits, and strengthen the involvement of Practice Development and Innovation Hub leads in huddles.

Bringing Mental Health Social Work Back to the Council:

What changed: Mental health social work returned to council management on 1 June 2026. We prepared service plans, clearer referral routes, a decision-support tool, and induction and training for returning colleagues.

Thank You

you make the difference that matters.

Every day, you bring your commitment, care and collaboration to life—supporting our communities and each other.
Together, we're achieving our vision.

Our vision
We make the difference that **matters.**

Our mission
We aim to empower individuals to help themselves and each other, building resilience and enabling people to thrive and live fulfilling lives.

Our core principles underpinning all our improvement work

					
COLLABORATE Working together with people, families, carers and communities.	ADVOCATE Championing people's rights, treating them with dignity and respect.	ENABLE Promoting independence, wellbeing and healthy lives.	COORDINATE Putting people at the centre, listening and responding flexibly.	COMMUNICATE Promoting inclusion, challenging inequality and communicating openly.	LEARN Using insight, evidence and technology to learn, adapt and improve.

Enable people to help themselves and each other
Tier 1 "something for everyone". Everyone has access to local people, places and things to help you live your life

Help people thrive and live a good life
Tier 3 "more help for fewer people". Living your life with the support that works for you

Help people build resilience
Tier 2 "a bit more while its needed". Some help while you need it

ii ASC | Achieving our vision. Together.  Thank you for making the difference that matters. 

Difference: Returning colleagues gained a clearer professional base within adult social care.

Next: We will fill vacancies, strengthen practice support and use lessons from the transition to help occupational therapy and reablement colleagues return to council management.

Bringing Learning Closer to Teams:

What changed: The Practice Development and Innovation Hub brought together the practice quality assurance audit programme, operational complaints, mediation, learning from safeguarding reviews and targeted support for teams. Through regular case-file audits, the checks of practice quality and consistency of practice, identifies strengths and gaps, and agrees clear actions with teams. Peer moderation helps our workforce to apply standards consistently, while follow-up audits show whether improvements have been sustained. The Hub also added professional expertise in Occupational Therapy and working with people who have lived experience through Co-production.



Difference: Leaders and teams now have clearer evidence about the quality and consistency of practice, including where further support is needed. Audit findings inform supervision, team learning and service improvement, helping quality assurance lead to practical action rather than simply checking compliance.

Next: The Hub will follow up agreed actions, repeat audits where needed and check whether improvements are sustained. It will also help our workforce to build confidence in using research and evidence to strengthen practice.

“Learning matters when people can see and feel the difference it makes.”

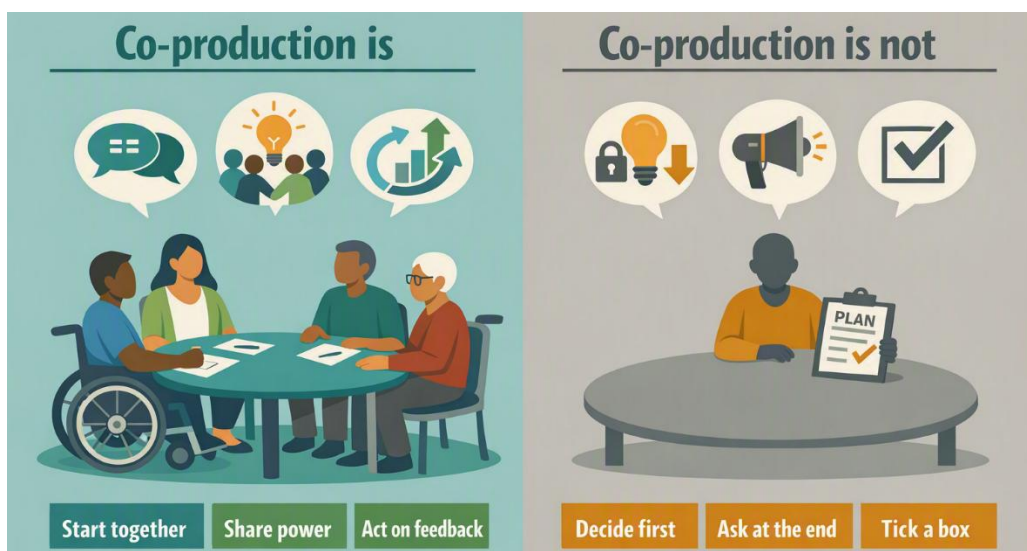
Working With Lived Experience through Co-Production

A key part of my Principal Social Worker role is leading co-production across Adult Social Care. This means helping the organisation work in equal partnership with people who draw on support, unpaid carers and community representatives. A newly appointed Co-Production Lead now supports me with this work and is helping teams put the principles and the [Co-production Charter](#) into everyday practice.

What Co-Production Means

Co-production means working with people, rather than making decisions for them. People with lived experience, unpaid carers, workforce colleagues and partners share knowledge and help shape the work from an early stage.

Good co-production is clear about what people can influence, makes it easy and safe to take part, values different experiences, and explains what changed as a result.



“Co-production means involving people early, sharing influence and showing how their contribution shaped the outcome.”

What changed: A number of facilitated events where people with lived experience, unpaid carers, Board Chairs and practitioners worked together to create the Collaborative Board Co-Production Charter. Before the Co-Production Lead joined, I developed an action plan to support their induction and give Adult Social Care a shared route for making meaningful co-production part of everyday work. A longer-term Co-Production Strategy will be developed with Partnership Board Chairs.

Building consistency: The Co-Production Lead and I reviewed the role descriptions and payment arrangements for Partnership Board Chairs so that expectations are clearer and more consistent. A new Carers Partnership Board Chair was appointed using this approach.

Gaps and next steps: We still need to establish an Older People's Partnership Board and appoint a formal Chair for the Collaborative Board. Once the arrangements for the other Chairs are consistent, the Partnership Board Chairs will be involved in appointing the Collaborative Board Chair. Future Chair appointments will reflect commissioning priorities.

Where practitioners can get help

Practitioners can use the Co-Production Charter and guidance on the Adult Social Care SharePoint site. Support is also available from the Co-Production Lead, Co-Production Champions, Partnership Boards and the Practice Development and Innovation Hub.

“People’s experience should help define what good social work looks and feels like.”

Developing Social Workers

Supporting Newly Qualified Social Workers

Nine social workers completed their supported first year in autumn 2025. Eight joined the next group, and a further 11 are expected in autumn 2026. The programme gives newly qualified social workers protected learning time, regular support and opportunities to build confidence as they begin their careers.

Across the two years to June 2026, the service supported 14 final-year social work students and 19 social work apprentices. Master's students and participants in the Approach Social Work programme also gained short shadowing opportunities.

Difference: These routes help build a skilled local workforce and support new practitioners to develop safely.

Next: We are developing a more coordinated apprenticeship model, including planned placements across different services.

Building Research Skills

Research helps social workers ask good questions, test assumptions and use evidence alongside professional judgement and peoples lived experience. Developing these skills early supports reflective practice and helps practitioners understand whether support is making a difference.

The Practice Development and Innovation Hub provides practitioners and learners with access to current research and is helping to build a culture of curiosity and continuous improvement. Colleagues have completed postgraduate learning in research, service evaluation and audit, and work is under way on a first research paper to help shape future training. The Hub is also connected to Adult Social Care's research governance arrangements.

Find out more or get support: Visit Research at Gloucestershire County Council for guidance on the research governance process and how to submit a proposal.

Difference: Social workers, students and apprentices can develop confidence in finding, understanding and applying evidence to practice.

Next: We will create more opportunities for developing social workers to take part in research, service evaluation and audit, and to share what they learn with teams.

“Investing in new social workers helps build safe and confident practice for the future.”

Learning, Quality Assurance and People's Rights

What We learned from Case-file Audits

As Principal Social Worker, I report themes from case-file audits, complaints and Safeguarding Adults Reviews to the Adults Practice Quality Assurance Board and the Adults Combined Assurance Board. This gives senior leaders a joined-up view of practice across the Care Act, Mental Capacity Act and safeguarding. The findings help decide where training, guidance and targeted support are needed. The Practice Development and Innovation Hub now manage the audit programme so emerging themes can be followed through into future workforce development.

Peer moderation was introduced this year. Practitioners review case records together, compare judgements and discuss strengths and areas for development. Feedback from the workforce shows that this is influencing everyday practice, including clearer recording of delays and a more balanced approach to analysis. It also supports greater confidence and consistency across teams.

Care Act audit findings

Strengths: Practitioners were open to reflection and showed clearer recording.

Areas to improve: Information about financial charges could be too long or difficult to understand. Some direct-payment records did not clearly explain the evidence or reasons behind decisions.

Audit Themes and Trends



Key Strengths

- Person-centred & strengths-based practice consistently evident; Individual's voice, wishes and independence usually well captured
- Clear eligibility decisions with good links to wellbeing and Care Act domains
- Strong MDT and family involvement, with partnership working evident
- Timely interventions in most cases; responsive and proactive practice
- Robust MCA/BI and safeguarding work where required
- Good recording of risks and management plans
- Support plans generally aligned to needs and outcomes; Informal support often well utilised



Key Areas for Development

- Protected characteristics: inconsistently recorded and rarely linked to impact
- Views of all parties: gaps in capturing input from wider professionals, providers, and some family members
- Support planning quality: not always sufficiently strengths-based, personalized, or outcome-focused
- Financial/Direct Payment discussions: inconsistently evidenced or lacking clear rationale
- Professional summaries: sometimes brief, generic, or lacking analysis
- Carer considerations: inconsistent identification, Impact analysis, and Carers Hub referrals

Next: Findings will shape targeted training and team support. Repeat audits will check whether improvements have been made and sustained.

“Audit is not only about checking records - it is about improving people’s experience.”

Learning from Safeguarding Reviews

What changed: I supported the Safeguarding Adults Team through bespoke in-reach support to help with capacity and workflow. The team responded positively to this approach. Learning from Safeguarding Adults Reviews and local safeguarding audits is now shared systematically with frontline colleagues through concise 7-minute briefings in team meetings. These briefings make key messages easier to access and create space for practitioners to reflect on how the learning applies to their own work.

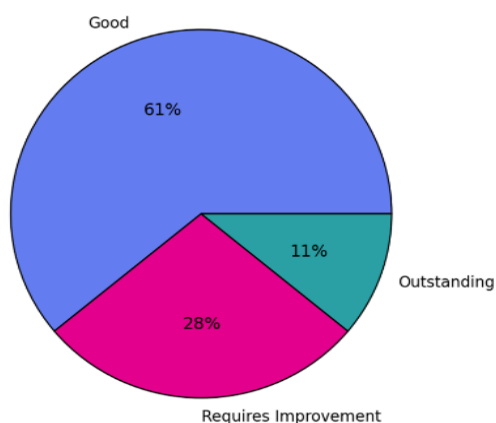
What the workforce should do: Read the 7-minute briefings and learning from Safeguarding Adults Reviews on the [Gloucestershire Safeguarding Adults Board website](#). Use team huddles to discuss the key messages, share professional perspectives and agree any action needed.

Next: A trauma-informed working group is developing training for community teams, with input from people with lived experience. We will also check that safeguarding learning is visible in professional decisions and case records, rather than measuring progress only through attendance at training.

Learning from Mental Capacity Act Audits

What we learned: Audits completed in March and April 2026 found that practitioners usually identified the specific decision clearly and used evidence when making decisions in a person's best interests. Records also showed that practitioners considered people's wishes and feelings and involved families, advocates and other professionals where appropriate.

MCA Audit Ratings (%)



Next: Drop-in support and a conference in September 2026 will focus on the areas that need further development. Follow-up audits will check whether practice has improved and remained consistent.

What this means for people

Decisions about your life should be clearly explained, reflect your wishes and involve family members, advocates or other professionals where appropriate. We will continue to check that this happens consistently.

Meet the team



The Practice Development Team has been renamed the Practice Development and Innovation Hub and refreshed its offer. It is now a multidisciplinary team, bringing together social work, occupational therapy and co-production expertise. The Practice Development Occupational Therapist is reviewing the learning needs of the returning occupational therapy workforce, including support for apprentices and newly qualified workers. The Hub also provides shared learning, placements and development opportunities, shaped with people who have lived experience, so they are practical and relevant.

The Hub supports community teams by managing operational complaints, mediation, case-file audits, Best Interest Assessor practice and learning from Safeguarding Adults Reviews. It also provides targeted support by joining team huddles, sharing practice guidance and working with team leads. Bringing these responsibilities together helps the Hub spot themes earlier, support colleagues more consistently and check that learning leads to real improvement.

Professional priorities for 2026–2027

The Target Operating Model describes how Adult Social Care will help people get the right support, at the right time and in the right way. It places greater emphasis on prevention, people's strengths, independence and clear responsibility across the person's journey. The professional priorities below show how social work leadership and practice will support the seven wider Adult Social Care priorities and the systems that enable them.

- **Assessments and support that are fit for the future.** We will embed the refreshed social work model, strengthen reflective supervision and support practitioners to make timely, strengths-based decisions. Practice will focus on what matters to the person, build on family and community strengths and promote independence wherever possible.
- **Earlier help, prevention and independence.** Social workers will work more closely with occupational therapy, reablement, mental health services and community partners. We will help the workforce identify opportunities to prevent, reduce or delay the need for longer-term care, while making sure people receive safe support when their needs increase.
- **Co-production and lived experience.** We will involve people and unpaid carers earlier in practice improvement, learning and service change. The Practice Quality Assurance Framework, training and professional standards will reflect what people say respectful, safe and effective support should feel like.
- **Safe and responsible digital practice.** We will develop workforce confidence in using digital tools and artificial intelligence responsibly. Technology should reduce duplication, improve access to information and give practitioners more time to focus on people, without weakening professional judgement, privacy or human contact.

- **A confident and sustainable workforce.** We will strengthen career pathways, apprenticeships, student placements and support for newly qualified social workers. Learning will prepare practitioners for changes in mental health and mental capacity law, new service arrangements and wider organisational change.
- **Strong partnership and joined-up services.** Professional leadership will continue to support the return of mental health social work, occupational therapy and reablement to council management. We will promote shared learning and clearer pathways across social work, health, commissioning, providers and community organisations.
- **Data, quality and evidence that lead to action.** We will use case-file audits, feedback, safeguarding learning, research and performance information to understand the quality of practice. Agreed actions will be followed through and repeat audits will check whether improvements have been sustained and made a difference to people.

The Enablers that Support these Priorities

Across all seven priorities, we will:

- strengthen leadership, supervision and professional accountability;
- use co-production and people's feedback to shape improvement;
- build workforce skills, confidence and research capability;
- use digital tools, data and evidence responsibly;
- connect audit and learning to practical action;
- work across organisational and professional boundaries; and
- show clearly what has changed and what difference it has made.

These priorities translate the wider Adult Social Care direction into the professional contribution expected from social work. They support a more preventive, joined-up and evidence-informed service while keeping people's rights, safety, choices and independence at the centre.

Closing message from me

Looking back

This year, we strengthened the professional foundations of adult social work in Gloucestershire. We supported the workforce through significant service change, expanded routes into the profession and made better use of audit, research and learning in everyday practice.

Where more work is needed

Improvement is not yet consistent across all teams and pathways. Some information and case records need to be clearer, and we need stronger evidence that professional learning leads to a better experience for people.

Our commitment for 2026–2027

I will continue to listen to people, support practitioners and challenge the wider system to learn and improve. Our professional standard remains clear: social work should be lawful, thoughtful and centred on the person.

“Good social work should be lawful, thoughtful and centred on the person.”

