



NHS Mental Health Social Work: Our Essential Contribution

Mental health social workers are a critical but often invisible part of NHS multidisciplinary teams

We bring distinctive expertise in legal frameworks, social determinants of health, and partnership working that is essential to achieving parity of esteem and delivering the prevention agenda. This document clarifies what we do and why it matters.

Why this matters now

The NHS 10-year plan emphasises prevention, community-based care and addressing health inequalities. Mental health social workers are uniquely positioned to deliver on these ambitions, yet we are rarely included in workforce planning or strategic discussions. With over 4,000 mental health social workers across the NHS, our contribution to multidisciplinary teams and outcomes for service users of all ages deserves recognition and investment.

Our core contribution: what mental health social workers bring to NHS teams

Mental health social workers bridge clinical care and social support. We navigate complex legal frameworks, coordinate multi-agency responses, and address the social factors that determine mental health outcomes, for people of all ages and backgrounds. We are the 'glue' that holds systems together—connecting statutory, voluntary, educational, community, and spiritual partners to achieve better outcomes for people with mental health need.

What we do: our distinctive skills and knowledge



Legal literacy and statutory expertise

We are expert in applying mental health legislation and protective frameworks, including: Mental Health Act, Mental Capacity Act, Children Act 1989 & 2004, Working Together to Safeguard Children, Care Act, Equality Act and Human Rights Act. This includes conducting assessments of capacity and Gillick competence (for children), coordinating DoLS arrangements, identifying safeguarding concerns and managing high-risk statutory decisions.



Working with complexity, crisis, and risk

We specialise in supporting people, from childhood to old age, experiencing crisis or complex life challenges. We assess risk while promoting positive risk-taking and recovery, balancing safety with autonomy and personalised goals. We risk assess in a variety of areas, such as self-harm in adolescents, risks related to exploitation, online harm, peer groups and family and parenting dynamics.



Focus on social determinants of health

We understand how poverty, access to education, discrimination, housing instability, and social isolation affect mental health. We influence services and work across partnerships to help people overcome these barriers—aligning with the Community Mental Health Framework and prevention priorities.



Holistic assessment and care planning

We assess people within their social ecology—family, community, employment, housing, and relationships. Our assessments consider not just symptoms, but the structural and social factors that shape mental health outcomes.



Anti-discriminatory and trauma-informed practice

We are trained to recognise and challenge discrimination. We ensure that medical models are balanced with social and spiritual perspectives, and we work in trauma-informed ways that acknowledge the impact of abuse, inequality, and structural oppression on mental health.



Multi-agency and community partnership working

We coordinate with local authorities, schools, housing, employment services, voluntary organisations, faith groups, and peer support networks. This systems-level approach ensures that clinical interventions are supported by practical, person-centred care that extends beyond NHS walls.



Co-production and person-centred goals

We use advanced relationship-based skills—warmth, empathy, genuineness—to collaborate with people in defining and achieving their own goals. We value lived experience and work alongside peer workers and experts by experience to co-produce better outcomes.

What we need: recognition and investment

- Formal recognition in NHS workforce planning and national strategies, including the Long-Term Plan and Workforce Plan
- Strategic investment in Approved Mental Health Professional (AMHP) training and posts
- Parity with other professions in access to Continuing Professional Development
- Development and Advanced Clinical Practice opportunities
- Inclusion in Integrated Care Board (ICB) and Trust-level workforce planning and service design
- Support for the creation of a national organisation to champion NHS mental health social work

Mental health social work is not a 'nice to have'—it is essential to achieving parity of esteem, reducing health inequalities, and delivering person-centred, community-based mental health care.

By clarifying our role and investing in our workforce, the NHS can unlock the full potential of mental health social workers to improve outcomes for people, families and communities.

Mental Health Social Work National Steering Group 2026
Contact Inbox: [✉ spft.NHSSocialWorkIdentityGroup-uk@nhs.net](mailto:spft.NHSSocialWorkIdentityGroup-uk@nhs.net)