

Regulated professions qualification pathways

Careers in social work



General entry requirement

All routes into social work typically require the below. Universities/higher education providers may accept a range of other qualifications and consider different entry levels.*

GCSEs including English and Maths at Grade C/4 or **accepted UK GCSE equivalencies.**

Evidence of successful study at **Level 3 or above** (for example **A levels, Level 3 apprenticeships recognised by Skills England, Access to Higher Education Diplomas**).

Meet **fitness to train** requirements set out by higher education institutions (suitability declaration, health check, DBS).

How you could qualify

	Undergraduate degree in social work (Level 6)	Postgraduate qualification in social work (Level 7)	Degree apprenticeship in social work (Level 6-7)	Step Up to Social Work programme (Level 7)	Approach Social Work programme by Frontline (Level 7)
Description	A Social Work England approved undergraduate degree in social work. Students who successfully complete approved courses are eligible to apply to join the social work register.	A postgraduate qualifying course for those with an undergraduate degree in another subject.	A Social Work England approved qualifying programme combining employment with academic study to a degree level.	A 14-month intensive fast-track government-funded training programme leading to a PGDip in Social Work.	A three-year structured graduate programme delivered by Frontline; leads to PGDip in Social Work in Year 1 and Master's degree by end of Year 3.
Time commitment	3 years full time with part-time options.	1-2 years full time (varies by provider and award).	3-3.5 years for undergraduate; up to 18 months for postgraduate.	14 months full time.	Up to 3 years full time.
Desirable	Prior experience of social work encouraged but not mandatory before entry.	Prior experience of social work encouraged but level of experience varies by higher education provider. Typically require minimum 2:2 undergraduate degree for entry.	Prior experience of social work encouraged but not mandatory before start.	6 months experience working with vulnerable people (paid or voluntary).	No formal experience required before entry, but suitability, skills, and competencies are assessed via selection process.

Newly qualified social worker

The pathways to qualification as a social worker may differ in several key ways, including the qualifications required to enter each route, how they are funded, level of employer involvement, the associated pay conditions, and any expectations around previous experience. They also vary in the length of time involved and in how academic learning is combined with practical work experience. It is therefore recommended to check with individual providers for detailed and up-to-date information on each option.

Previous experience

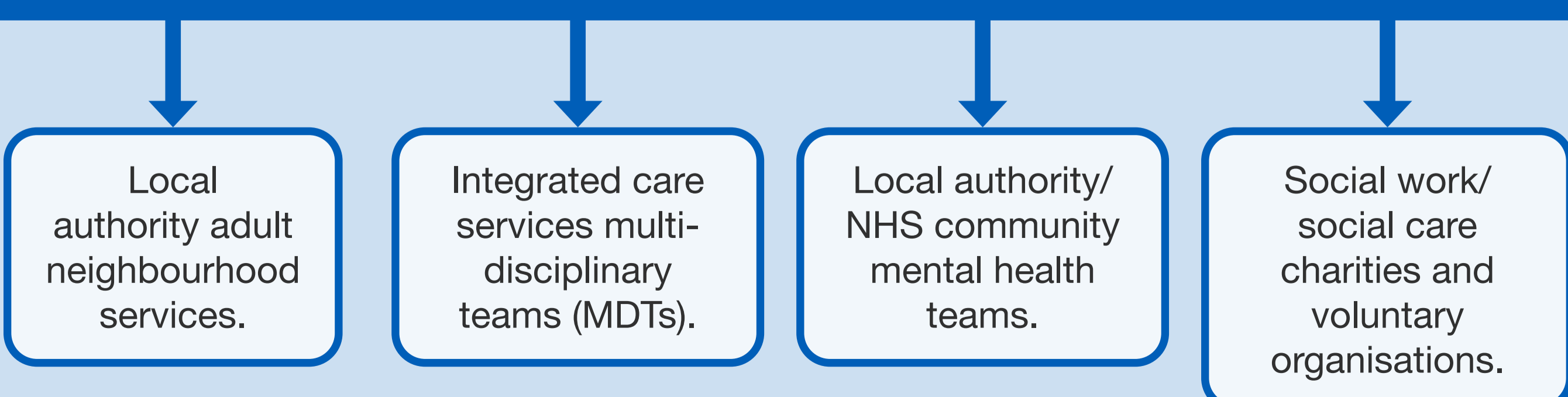
Prior direct or indirect experience of social care or social work is commonly encouraged for entry to social work qualification programmes. This experience enables applicants to evidence an informed understanding of the sector and the social worker role, including its professional ethics, values, and responsibilities. Alongside readiness to engage with both the academic study and practice-based learning required for professional social work training, exposure to supporting vulnerable individuals and those with complex needs in social care settings and in the community are valued as part of a strong application, as it indicates realistic expectations of the profession and a commitment to working with vulnerable groups.

What are some of the early career opportunities in adult social care post-qualification?

Most newly qualified social workers choose to undergo an **Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE)** — a structured, 12-month transition period that bridges the gap between academic training and professional practice, often in local authority social services teams, the NHS and voluntary, community and social enterprises (VCSE).

Opportunities in adult social services settings

Supporting vulnerable adults by assessing their needs, managing risks, and creating care plans.



*We recommend checking with relevant higher education institutes and individual providers for detailed and up-to-date entry requirements, as well as information on specific programmes.

Careers in social work

Amina's story — from Care Worker to Social Worker

Amina was just 17 when she started working as a care worker in a nursing home.

Through helping residents with personal care, daily routines, and everyday conversations, she began to understand just how much good care can shape someone's quality of life. Those early experiences stayed with Amina. She realised she wanted a career where relationships, dignity, and person-centred support really mattered - even if she didn't yet know exactly what that career would look like.

When Amina went to university, she chose to study sociology. She was interested in understanding society, inequality, and how systems affect people's lives. Alongside her degree, she worked part time as a healthcare assistant in the NHS. The role was fast-paced and sometimes challenging, but it helped her build confidence and develop new skills.

After graduating, Amina had the opportunity to join an NHS graduate programme where she gained a wider view of how health and care services connect. It was here that she regularly worked alongside social workers. She saw how they supported people with complex needs, helped plan safe hospital discharges, and worked with families during difficult times. What stood out for her was their ability to look beyond immediate medical issues and focus on the bigger picture - someone's home life, relationships, independence, and long-term wellbeing.

Gradually, Amina realised that this was where her strengths lay too. The only challenge was how to qualify as a social worker without stepping away from paid work. That's when she discovered a fast-track master's degree apprenticeship in social work. The apprenticeship meant she could train, earn a salary, and apply her learning directly in practice. Amina's academic background, along with her experience in social care and healthcare, supported her application and helped her secure a place on the programme.

Over the 18-month programme, Amina combined academic study with hands-on experience in adult social care teams. She developed key skills in assessment, safeguarding, and care and support planning, working with people facing complex challenges. Regular shadowing opportunities, along with supervision and support from experienced social workers, helped her grow in confidence. Although balancing work and study was not always easy, learning in real-life settings allowed her to put theory into practice straight away, helping her to build and consolidate her skills.

Today, Amina works as a social worker in adult social care, supporting adults with mental health and substance misuse needs. She often reflects on how her journey began with a care worker role at 17. For her, that early experience built the foundation for everything that followed.

Could this be you?

If you're already working in adult social care and enjoy building relationships, understanding people's situations, and helping them navigate change, social work could be a natural next step. Degree apprenticeships offer a way to qualify while staying in employment, building on the experience you already have. Amina's journey shows that starting in a care role can open the door to a long-term professional career - and that progression is possible with commitment to learning and the right support.

An employer story

A local authority developing its own social workers through apprenticeships

A local authority was facing persistent challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified social workers in adult social care. Vacancies were hard to fill, teams were stretched, and reliance on agency staff was placing pressure on budgets and continuity of support.

At the same time, leaders recognised something important: the organisation already employed people with deep experience, strong values, and a strong commitment to supporting vulnerable people and local communities. Some had long aspired to become social workers but were unable to step away from employment or take on the financial and personal commitment of traditional qualification routes.

Rather than relying solely on external recruitment, the council made a strategic decision to develop its own social work workforce.

In partnership with a local university, the authority introduced a social work degree apprenticeship pathway. This enabled experienced staff to remain in paid employment while undertaking accredited academic study alongside structured, work-based practice.

From the outset, the council embedded practical support into the programme. Apprentices were given protected study time within their working week to attend university teaching and complete off-the-job learning. Caseloads were carefully managed so practice learning aligned with academic modules and apprentices could build responsibility progressively. Qualified supervisors and practice educators were assigned to provide regular reflective supervision and professional guidance, ensuring theory was consistently applied to real cases. Ongoing communication between the council and the university helped keep learning closely connected to day-to-day practice.

This clear structure enabled apprentices to grow in confidence and competence while continuing to contribute meaningfully to services. On completion of the programme over 3 years, apprentices were able to transition smoothly into newly qualified social worker roles within adult services.

The impact has been tangible. Teams benefited from greater continuity of service, reduced turnover, and growing shared learning and internal expertise. Over time, reliance on agency staff reduced and retention improved. By choosing to develop social workers from within, the authority has strengthened sustainability of its social care workforce and created a talent pipeline with visible progression pathways across its adult social care services.