

Not just a day at the beach: Challenges experienced by social workers in England's coastal communities

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Abstract

This article presents findings from interviews with current and former social workers in coastal communities in England, with a focus on the challenges faced. These findings form part of a larger research project looking at the recruitment and retention of social workers in coastal communities. Following an introduction to the context and limited existing literature on coastal social work, including outlining the reasons why coastal social work may face additional challenges, the research methodology is outlined, utilizing a critical realist framework. Interviews were carried out with twenty-three social workers and former social workers, and data analyzed using data-driven thematic analysis. Three dispositional themes are used to frame the findings: the neglect of coastal communities, the specific neglect of the social work workforce in these same communities, and the experiences of global majority and international social workers. These themes are then analyzed with reference to existing literature

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and models of workforce management under the headings of demands, control, and support. The article concludes by examining how this research can feed into later strands of the ongoing research project, as well as policy initiatives and investment in these areas.

Keywords: coastal; social work; retention; recruitment; critical realism.

Accepted: August 2026

Introduction

Seminal research has identified that social workers in England consistently rate their working conditions as extremely poor, negatively impacting on organizational outcomes such as turnover intention, presenteeism (attending work when sick), sickness absence, and the ability to provide the full extent of support needed (Ravalier 2019; Ravalier *et al.*, 2021). More recent studies have confirmed these findings, noting further issues around poor mental health of practitioners, high reliance on agency staff to fill vacancies, real term pay cuts, heavy workloads, and growing demand for services, all leading to unsafe staffing levels and untenable levels of unpaid overtime (Johnson *et al.*, 2023; Maddock 2024; McFadden *et al.*, 2024; Murphy *et al.*, 2024; Stanley *et al.*, 2025). While levels of workforce instability within England's social work sector are likely to vary across regions and geographical areas (Cook 2024), these issues are not often considered through this lens.

The focus of this article is on coastal communities. These communities disproportionately experience many of the social issues that social workers support, including high levels of crime, mental and physical health conditions, deprivation, social isolation, housing issues, unemployment, child poverty, substance use, and disabilities (Corfe 2017; House of Lords Select Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities 2019; Public Health England 2019; Chief Medical Officer 2021, 2023; Key Cities 2025). Yet, despite this, little is known of the specific challenges facing social work teams in England's coastal communities.

This article presents findings from interviews with twenty-three social workers and former social workers in coastal communities in England about the challenges they face. This forms part of a wider research project seeking to understand the challenges and opportunities of social workers practising in coastal communities in England and to identify 'best practice' in recruitment and retention in these contexts.

Working conditions and wellbeing

In 2004, the United Kingdom's Health and Safety Executive (HSE) released the Management Standards approach to support individuals and

organizations in effectively managing psycho-social workplace hazards (working conditions), and ultimately to support in managing stress at work (MacKay et al., 2004). The management standards suggest that if seven areas of the workplace (seven psycho-social hazards/working conditions) are left in a chronically poor state, this can lead to negative stress-related outcomes for employees. The seven areas covered in this approach are: demands (workload), control, managerial support, peer support, relationships, role, and change communication. This management standards approach has been used to look at working conditions, and the impact of working conditions on outcomes such as wellbeing, job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and more in a range of professions, including university academics (Kinman and Court 2010) and the police (Houdmont, Kerr, and Randall 2012).

Poor working conditions negatively impact on the health and wellbeing of workers. For example, a meta-review of seventy-two literature reviews by Niedhammer, Bertrais, and Witt (2021) found significant relationships between high-strain jobs and physiological outcomes such as heart disease and stroke. A narrative review of meta-reviews and other key publications across fifty years of research also found that exposure to poor psychosocial working conditions is related to poorer health outcomes such as mental health and cardio-vascular disease (Boot, LaMontagne, and Madsen 2024). Working conditions are also related to organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction and retention (Kakada and Deshpande 2021; Toropova, Myrberg, and Johansson 2021; Rodrigo, Kuruppu, and Pathirana 2022). Intentions to leave both the current role for a new employer, and to leave the sector altogether, have also been demonstrated to be closely related to working conditions across professions, including in social work (Ravalier et al., 2021; Murphy 2025). As such, working conditions are important not only due to the impact they may have on individual employee wellbeing, but also on numerous organizational outcomes and workforce stability.

Extant research consistently shows that social work in the UK is a challenging profession with poor working conditions (Ravalier 2019; Ravalier et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2023; McFadden et al., 2024; Murphy et al., 2024). High levels of psychological distress, including anxiety and depression, have been documented among social workers, with several studies identifying a substantial proportion of the workforce experiencing clinically significant symptoms (Maddock 2024; Stanley et al., 2025). Another study found that 70% of social workers in England now believe they are working in settings with unsafe staffing ratios (McFadden et al., 2024).

Stemming from this body of research, the wellbeing and working conditions of social workers have received increasing attention in recent years, including in national campaigns and resources for employers (Cook 2024; British Association of Social Workers and Social Workers Union 2025). However, national survey data still shows a decline in morale and wellbeing, with many social workers reporting a reluctance to recommend the

profession to others (Maddock 2024; McFadden *et al.*, 2024; Murphy *et al.*, 2024; Stanley *et al.*, 2025).

Social work and coastal communities

Although coastal and rural areas can at times be lumped together in research and literature, many rural areas are comparatively affluent, while coastal areas are more likely to experience disproportionately high levels of deprivation, linked in part to the decline of industries like domestic tourism, fishing, and shipbuilding (House of Lords Select Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities 2019; Key Cities 2025). As outlined in the introduction, these communities also experience high levels of housing problems, social isolation, physical and mental health conditions, unemployment, low educational attainment, limited educational opportunities, crime, substance misuse, and disability, each of which falls within the remit of social work support (Corfe 2017; House of Lords Select Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities 2019; Public Health England 2019; Chief Medical Officer 2021, 2023; Key Cities 2025). Linked to these challenges, coastal communities have also been found to have high levels of child poverty, children in need, and children entering care (Radcliffe *et al.*, 2020; Bennett *et al.*, 2022; El-Hoss *et al.*, 2024; Key Cities 2025).

The populations of coastal communities also tend to be older than the national average, influenced in part by in-migration of older retiring people and out-migration of young people in search of employment and educational opportunities that are not locally available (House of Lords Select Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities 2019; Public Health England 2019; Chief Medical Officer 2021). Unlike rural communities, which also have a higher proportion of older residents but generally experience more favourable health outcomes and higher life expectancy than urban areas (Local Government Association 2017; Public Health England 2019), coastal communities have worse-than-average life expectancy, healthy life expectancy, and a higher proportion of individuals reporting poor health (Public Health England 2019; Chief Medical Officer 2021). There are other issues that impact on coastal communities that social workers respond to, including greater impact of environmental disasters, such as flooding (House of Lords Select Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities 2019; Chief Medical Officer 2021). The role that social workers play in disaster response, recovery, and resilience-building is increasingly recognized in England (Bartoli, Stratulis, and Pierre 2022; Hanley *et al.*, 2025).

Despite all this, social work is rarely mentioned in national reports and policy documents related to coastal communities (Local Government Association 2017; House of Lords Select Committee on Regenerating

Seaside Towns and Communities 2019; Public Health England 2019; Chief Medical Officer 2021, 2023). In keeping with this, social work reports and national policy often overlook the specific challenges of coastal working (MacAlister 2022; Department for Education 2023). Even when geographic breakdowns are provided nationally for the social work workforce, they are usually related to very large areas, such as ‘South West’ or ‘Yorkshire and the Humber’, not a breakdown based on type of community or between rural, coastal, and urban workforces (Skills for Care 2024: 50; Social Work England 2025: 10).

There are some small-scale case studies related to social work in coastal communities in England, usually focused on a specific area of practice, such as child protection (El-Hoss et al., 2024), young parents (Geddes and Wenham 2025), and child sexual exploitation (Radcliffe et al., 2020), rather than workforce challenges. The focus of these studies also tends to be on wider teams rather than specifically social work. However, they will be returned to in the discussion and conclusion in relation to how they can inform and complement the findings of this research.

Methodology

This article presents findings from one strand of a wider mixed-methods project looking at social work in coastal areas of England. The research is funded by National Institute for Health and Social Care Research (NIHR). The overall aim of the study is to identify best practice when it comes to the recruitment and retention of social workers in these communities. The wider project also includes a literature review looking at research across professions, interviews with stakeholders (employers, educators, and stakeholders), deep-dive case study analysis and an appreciative inquiry approach to co-developing best practice guidance. The findings of these other strands will be published elsewhere. Every aspect of the project was informed by engagement with practitioners and experts by experience in the social care system, and ethical approval was obtained from the University Research Ethics Panel of Buckinghamshire New University.

This article presents the findings of interviews with social workers and former social workers, focusing on the challenges faced by social workers in coastal communities, and how this impacts recruitment and retention of social workers. A subsequent article will present findings related to the opportunities identified by this same sample. Some of these opportunities include the attractiveness of the environment and communities, and targeted recruitment and retention initiatives within local communities. The decision was made to split the findings across two articles in this way to account for the richness of the data, and the novelty of the research being conducted and the findings being presented.

There is no universally accepted definition of the term ‘coastal community’ (Corfe 2017; El-Hoss *et al.*, 2024). The complexity of defining coastal communities has led the Centre for Coastal Communities at the University of Plymouth to undertake a research project aimed specifically at developing a universal definition. At the time of writing, that project remains ongoing. For the purposes of this research, we use the definition adopted by the Social Market Foundation, that a coastal community is a local authority with a coastal boarder (Corfe 2017). This definition aligns well with social work practice, where services are predominantly organized through local authorities.

Participants were recruited between March and October 2025 through social media, and advertisements and publicity in trade publications. They were offered a gift voucher for their participation. Convenience sampling was adopted, and all participants who came forward that met the criteria of being a social worker or former social worker in a coastal community in England were interviewed. All names in the findings are anonymized. Specific locations are also redacted, because many of the coastal towns and villages identified were relatively small and only covered by a small number of social workers, increasing the potential for identification of participants. There will be an opportunity for more in depth analysis of potential differences between types of coastal community (cities, tourist villages, rural areas, etc.) through the case study analysis that will form a later part of this research project.

A critical realist framework was adopted with the intention of identifying general tendencies and causal mechanisms through analyzing current challenges and opportunities related to the recruitment and retention of social workers in coastal communities (Houston 2023). This approach promotes engagement with the broader socio-political contexts that shape research and findings (Sturgiss and Clarke 2020). The emancipatory focus emphasized through critical realism also makes it a model that is well suited for research involving social workers, a profession with a noted emancipatory emphasis (International Federation of Social Workers 2014). It is also an approach suited to research seeking to identify and challenge social structures and processes that might be conceived as problematic. Houston and Swords (2022) argue, from a critical realist perspective, that if researchers come across harmful generative mechanisms, there is an obligation to challenge them in this way.

Data analysis was undertaken using a data-driven thematic analysis approach (Wiltshire and Ronkainen 2021). In the initial phases of analysis, members of the research team, including former practising social workers, familiarized themselves with the data and generated initial codes. These codes were developed inductively and organized around experiential themes, representing explicit views expressed by participants. As the analysis

progressed, the researchers identified inferential themes based on logical interpretations of participants' accounts and, in later phases, dispositional themes that reflected broader patterns in participants' ways of being and relating. This approach supports analytical rigour within a critical realist framework by interrogating whether themes are grounded in the data (empirical adequacy), make sense considering the real-world context of social work (ontological plausibility), and offer meaningful insight into why or how phenomena occur (explanatory power).

Findings

The pseudonyms and demographic information collected for the twenty-three participants is outlined in [Table 1](#).

The five male social workers, representing 21.74% of the sample, was slightly above the 17.3% of social workers across England who are male. The age of participants ranged from twenty-four to sixty-one, with an average age of 42.7, compared to the national average age of social workers in England of about forty-six. Of the twenty-three participants, nineteen described their ethnicity as White British, or about 83%, compared to the approximately 63% of social workers nationally ([Social Work England 2025](#)). This suggests either the sample was lacking representation or different demographics of coastal community social work teams, a discussion returned to below.

The findings are now presented under the three dispositional themes that were identified related to challenges facing social work in coastal communities: the neglect of coastal communities, the workplace challenges experienced by social workers, and the challenges for global majority social workers.

Neglect of coastal communities

Participants described a range of geographically related challenges impacting both their personal and professional lives. A common concern was isolation due to remote locations and poor infrastructure, including transport links and road networks. These were cited as creating barriers to both recruitment and retention, including by Lucy, a social worker in a small coastal town:

I think the traffic situation discourages people from coming in. It is a trek to get through the traffic, and I think that does burn people out. So people that come from the nearby towns don't usually stay that long.

Resulting from these access challenges, social workers often lived within or close to the communities they served. Participants described challenges

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Area of practice	Location	Current/former coastal social worker	Current/most recent role
Anne	56	F	Portuguese	Child protection	South East	Current	Social worker
Ben	37	M	White British	Child protection	South East	Current	Social worker
Bob	49	M	White British	Children and families	North West	Current	Social worker
Eliza	61	F	White British	Children and families	South West	Current	Social worker
Emily	26	F	Indian British	Older adults (NHS)	North West	Current	Social worker
Evie	53	F	White British	Adult safeguarding	South West	Current	Social worker
Fern	55	F	White British	Mental health	North West	Former	Mental health specialist
Francesca	35	F	White British	Adult safeguarding	North West	Former	Team manager
Helen	31	F	White British	Autism diagnostic (NHS)	North West	Current	Team manager
June	41	F	White British	Mental health	North West	Current	Social worker
Katie	42	F	White British	Children in care	South Coast	Current	Social worker
Libby	60	F	White British	Mental health	North West	Former	Social worker
Lila	58	F	White British	Children and families	South West	Former	Social worker
Logan	52	M	Japanese British	Mental health (NHS)	South East	Current	Social worker
Louise	35	F	White British	Child protection	South East	Current	Social worker
Lucy	39	F	White British	Mental health	East of England	Current	Social worker
Mark	35	M	White British	Child protection and adult mental health	South East	Former	Social worker
Marriam	25	F	Bangladeshi	Mental Health	North West	Current	Social worker
Mary	09	F	White British	Child protection	South West	Current	Social worker
Sarah	36	F	White British	Mental health (NHS)	North West	Current	Social worker
Sofia	24	F	White British	Young adults	South West	Current	Social worker
Toby	68	M	White British	Safeguarding consultant	South East	Current	Social worker
Yazmin	25	F	White British	Mental Health	North West	Current	Social worker

of this proximity in maintaining professional and personal boundaries, including Anne and Mary, who both worked in child protection:

If you have work in the same communities where you live, especially in child protection, you know, in the past I was followed home. I was threatened, I had my car slashed (Anne).

You don't want to be practising where lots of your children that you're likely to be working with are, because your child's going to get bullied. I speak from personal experience and well, they tried to bully [my daughter] (Mary)

However, the issues did not only impact on those working in child protection. Helen, who worked as a team manager in an NHS autism diagnosis team, also described:

I have bumped into lots of previous service users, who, because of the nature of our work as well, may not want to see me ... I've definitely gone out of my way to go a different route before.

Each of these participants were female, and from a variety of age groups. While these themes around personal boundaries and proximity did come up with male participants too, they did not describe similar feelings around risks to their personal or familial safety.

Other participants described the emotional strain of seeing distress in one's own community as a result of their social worker role. Fern, who previously worked across a range of deprived coastal towns and villages as a mental health specialist, described:

All I see is all the poverty that I've seen, and all the really difficult lives of people that I've visited and difficult places. So it, for me, another part of working in a coastal areas is sometimes it can kind of ruin it a bit as a place.

A prevalent concern expressed by participants was the lack of resources in the community. This included services that participants access themselves, like schools and GP surgeries, as well as resources that they access for the people and families they supported, such as care homes, day centres, children's homes, and voluntary support services. Participants who worked across both coastal and non-coastal areas, or who had experience of working in both, identified that this was a particular challenge for small coastal towns and village, and their surrounding areas. This includes Helen, who worked across a range of geographic areas:

So for example, if you're, if we're working with a [City] service user, our options are tenfold for where they can be signposted to. There are some charities actually that do offer support ... but they're few and far between.

Housing issues were also noted by participants, again both in relation to how they impacted on social workers, as well as those they worked with. These issues arose across all types of coastal communities, but were

particularly noted in tourist and resort towns. As described by Eliza, working in one of these contexts, 'you get really poor-quality housing because all the all the best housing goes to tourists'.

Tourism and migration patterns in coastal areas were also noted to create additional challenges. Specifically, the transient nature of these populations was seen to introduce new risks for young people living in the area. Returning to Eliza, who worked within a children and families team, she explained:

if you go down to the beach or if you go to the fun fair that's on the beach, there's always strangers there who might not have your best interests at heart, to put it mildly. And so that kind of constant influx of people going through a place when it's very touristy places, I think that can be, that can be tricky for people.

Participants described a range of social issues impacting the people they worked with in coastal communities. The most frequently cited challenge was deprivation, including both widespread poverty and 'hidden' pockets of disadvantage within otherwise affluent areas. Participants emphasized that while poverty is unfortunately a national concern within England, these issues were particularly challenging in coastal communities.

Bob, working across a large geographic area, compared coastal towns with their inland counterparts:

I think [coastal work] just has its own unique challenges... it's industry has declined because it was probably fishing and it's quite remote compared to ... other places. So, there's a lot of... structural inequalities and barriers that are quite specific to that area.

Geographical vulnerability to criminal activity was also identified as a feature that was more challenging in coastal areas. Participants described how physical proximity to coastlines and county lines facilitated issues such as drug trafficking, heightening risks for children and young people. The combination of deprivation, limited services, and social risks was seen to contribute to high rates of mental health difficulties, domestic violence, and substance misuse as well.

Participants also reported that the combination of the various challenges outlined in this section could contribute to a negative reputation for some coastal areas as places to live and work, thereby undermining recruitment efforts. Mark, who no longer worked as a social worker in a coastal community, described how:

I think sometimes there's a reputation that comes with certain areas... and then people do get put off. You know, I think social workers are hearing and looking at moving. But as we know, there's a lot of potential opportunities in terms of where they go. Are you going to pick a coastal community that's well out of the way?

Neglect of coastal workforces

Participants all described unmanageable workloads as a central challenge in coastal social work. This was not only due to the number of cases but also the complexity and intensity of those cases resulting from the challenges in coastal communities discussed in the previous section. Participants who had experienced social work in both coastal and non-coastal communities emphasized that they felt these issues were exacerbated in coastal communities. This includes Mark, who as noted in the previous section had left work in coastal communities:

I do think that where those levels of deprivation, in particular coastal communities, are then higher, the potential complexities are higher ... So then your workload [is higher].

Mark's experience as a social worker had extended across both child protection and adult mental health, and so he was able to draw on this broad experience in underlining this point.

Participants described working beyond contracted hours due to these high workloads but also related this to the geographic and travel challenges already covered. For example, Anne highlighted:

The county is so, so wide, you know, there's no infrastructure to support. You sometimes, you take one hour or more to drive 20 miles. You get stuck, you know, and that pulls to your work-life balance. Takes time away from your family. Means that you have to work long hours that you are not paid for.

Staffing shortages were another common concern. In some areas, recruitment freezes due to budget constraints had left teams understaffed. Ben, who worked in a child protection team, identified his concerns related to safe staffing levels across the service:

What I what I can tell you is that there's been a recruitment freeze because there's no money ... There are four social work teams in [Coastal Community]. They should have 12 members of staff in each ... There's approximately 6 in each team. So we're running really low on capacity.

In other cases, recruitment and retention difficulties had created a reliance on temporary agency staff. Participants spoke of the knock-on effect of staff turnover, including disrupted quality of care for service users and greater workload for permanent staff. Yazmin, at age 25, was one of the younger participants, and had already picked up on this pattern and the tensions it created within her mental health team:

Social workers were leaving left, right and centre. Because obviously caseloads were going up and up and up ... and obviously the staff leaving, and not being able to get people in, or if we were to replace staff it was through agency. So then obviously staff who were not through agency felt

quite under-, kind of, appreciated because obviously they're getting paid a lot more than us.

These points were also noted to be worse in coastal communities, including by Bob, an older and more experience social worker working within a children and families team:

I think it's harder to recruit for those areas because quite often social workers don't always want to live and work in the same area, and because it's more remote and actually to work in those areas, you have to do a bigger commute.

Participants also expressed feeling unsupported due to the absence of consistent, competent management and supervision. This was highlighted by several participants as a reason why they had left a team, including June, who indicated her age (41) and life experience as a reason why she left a previous role in a mental health team within a coastal community:

The team manager felt very unsupportive. I suppose, when I came at social work later in life... I had lots of experience of social work type work without doing any social work, statutory stuff, and I felt really frustrated that I was working then in a frontline role being managed by people with less competence than me.

As with the previous points, participants highlighted that these leadership issues were made worse by the challenges facing coastal communities. This includes Francesca, who was able to draw on her experience as a team manager:

I think the big issue is that in these, like smaller, more deprived local authorities. Coastal, probably. They can be very insular... they don't bring in people; they don't go out looking for ideas. So, when someone does come in, in a leadership position... they try and change things, they're told that it's a load of rubbish and then they just get paid off. And I've seen it happen a lot. So, I think it can get quite stagnant because you're fishing from a small pond, if you will.

This lack of support was described as particularly acute for newly qualified social workers, including Yazmin:

Basically, newly qualified social workers shouldn't get a caseload as what an experienced social worker has, so I think it should be around 10 to 15 maximum for a newly qualified social worker to have on their caseload, but they were in the 20s.

Participants spoke about a lack of support for maintaining emotional wellbeing and work-life balance. Others described a lack of flexibility or understanding when dealing with personal circumstances, which had left them feeling undervalued. Unsurprisingly then, many participants discussed burnout and turnover intention. For most, this burnout was linked

directly to the challenges of working in a coastal community, including the higher needs of those they were supporting, and the lack of resources available.

Participants described they felt there was a negative public perception of social workers in coastal communities. While these points were raised particularly by those working in child protection, participants in other sectors also highlighted them. This included Libby, who described her previous work in mental health teams in coastal communities:

It is a stressful role, so you know, and it's a very challenging role, and it's not one that's always looked favourably on by other members of society.

This perceived negative public perception was noted to be emotionally draining and undermined their ability to feel effective in their roles.

Challenges for global majority and international social workers

While the sample was limited in relation to diversity based on ethnicity, most participants did highlight specific challenges faced in coastal communities for global majority social workers they had worked with. Many of the points raised related to the lack of diversity in coastal communities and social work teams within these communities. For example, Eliza, a white social worker working in a coastal city, highlighted:

I've had conversations with [Black British] people who were like, 'I can't bring my children to live in [Coastal Community] because they're going to just experience loads of racism and they're not going to see any other black people' ... I think it has real issues for recruitment.

These points were often framed within wider discussions about how coastal communities were experiencing demographic changes due to immigration, and the impact this had on these communities and the social work role. This point was particularly identified when the social worker's coastal experience covered predominantly larger cities, but it was also identified in other contexts. For example, Lucy, who worked in a small coastal town, noted:

I think racism has increased a lot round here. I think because it was quite a white British area and where it's got more diverse that is causing like a lot of difficulties between communities.

These challenges came through for the participants from global majority backgrounds too and were often connected with issues related to international social worker recruitment. For example, Logan, a Japanese British participant working in mental health, highlighted concerns related to recruitment of international social workers:

I know when they are trying to recruit... the majority of the applicants were people from abroad, and I think in, you know, I think there's sort of

issues around being able to offer any sort of sponsorship for people, which you know the council doesn't do at the moment.

Research elsewhere has explored the issue of insufficient and ineffective support when recruiting international social workers, factors that do not only impact on professionals from a global majority (Hakak *et al.*, 2023). In line with this, Anne, a Portuguese social worker in a child protection team similarly described:

They try to recruit, you know, social workers abroad. And again, this kind of brings all sorts of difficulties, when people come with expectations that, when they realise that it's far from the reality ... the reality is then when you arrive and you see the reality of living in a different country, different culture ... people end up leaving.

There were also extensive points raised by participants about how recruitment and engagement with international and global majority social worker could be improved, and these will be explored in more detail in the follow up publication examining opportunities.

Discussion

While many of the workplace issues raised by participants echo broader concerns across the profession (Johnson *et al.*, 2023; Maddock 2024; McFadden *et al.*, 2024; Murphy *et al.*, 2024; Stanley *et al.*, 2025), our findings suggest that these are compounded by the geographical, social, and structural characteristics of coastal areas. Participants who had worked across both areas emphasized this in particular, highlighting how factors such as geographical isolation, chronic underinvestment, and population transience intersect with organizational pressures to create particularly challenging working conditions for social workers in coastal communities. These findings reinforce concerns about the systemic neglect of coastal communities (House of Lords Select Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities 2019; Public Health England 2019) and contribute new insights into the consequences of this neglect for frontline social work workforce sustainability.

The issues identified align closely with the HSE Management Standards approach (MacKay *et al.*, 2004). Participants' accounts indicated risks across several domains of this framework, particularly in relation to work demands, lack of control, and inadequate support. Due to these conditions being well-established predictors of burnout and attrition (Houdmont, Kerr, and Randall 2012; Boot, LaMontagne, and Madsen 2024), this suggests that social workers in coastal communities may be particularly vulnerable to these outcomes.

Demands

Participants consistently reported unsustainable workloads, often driven by understaffing. Social work staffing shortages are a cause for concern across the UK, resulting in heavier workloads for permanent staff and reduced capacity to provide quality care (McFadden et al., 2024). Our findings suggest this issue may be especially acute in coastal areas, where recruitment is more difficult due to geographical isolation, travel barriers, and negative reputation. In many cases, understaffing led to a reliance on agency staff to fill vacancies, but participants described how agency workers could create additional pressures. These findings therefore align with national evidence suggesting that high agency use contributes to instability and undermines efforts to build and retain a resilient workforce (Department for Education 2023). These issues were compounded by the higher levels of case complexity experienced in coastal communities.

Control

Participants described a limited sense of control as a key contributor to burnout and turnover intention, expressing feeling powerless to meet the needs of service users within systems that were overstretched and under-resourced, alongside perceived negative public perception and insufficient managerial support, and the wider context of neglect of the coastal communities they worked in. Consistent with prior research, feelings of hopelessness were derived from the mismatch between service user needs and what could realistically be offered (Lloyd, King, and Chenoweth 2002; Stanley et al., 2025). Participants noted that the combination of complex casework, chronic understaffing, and limited resources within the coastal communities where they worked constrained their ability to provide meaningful support and was perceived to be more severe than in other contexts.

Support

A lack of support was a prevalent theme across participants' accounts. Many described inconsistent or absent management and limited supervision, and these points were noted to be worsened by the recruitment and retention issues faced in these coastal teams. Given the well-established emotional demands of social work, which may be further amplified in coastal communities by complex service user needs and limited external resources, this absence of reflective and emotional support is particularly concerning. The challenges of coastal social work were further compounded by a noted lack of work-life balance and mental health support. Our findings suggest this issue may be particularly critical in coastal communities,

where social workers often live and work in the same area, blurring professional boundaries and removing the potential to gain emotional distance.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations that provide important context for the results. The use of synchronous audio/video technology has the potential to lead to a loss of context and understanding of context for qualitative interviews (Weller 2017). This also created complicated ethical issues where some participants were perceived by the research team to be pretending to be social workers, likely motivated by the gift voucher we offered participants for taking part. To overcome this, new ethical approval was sought so that all participants were required to provide confirmation of their registration to take part. The research team has examined this experience, which was new to all of us, in an article published elsewhere (Murphy *et al.*, 2026).

The research involved only twenty-three social workers and former social workers in coastal communities, a relatively small population that was self-selecting. There was also limited ethnic diversity. The research team did put out a further call for participants and contacted some employers directly in an attempt to recruit a more diverse group of social workers, but these efforts did not succeed in significantly improving the representation of global majority social workers in the sample. It is important to note that coastal areas of England tend to be far more White British than average (Chief Medical Officer 2021), and that participants raised concerns about a lack of diversity in their teams. This suggests that the population of social workers in these communities is likely less diverse than the national picture, and this could account for some degree of these recruitment challenges. As part of the case study work package the research team will be conducting at later stages of this research project, we will be looking in more detail at the demographic makeup of coastal social work teams. While we did recruit from a range of coastal communities, the sample also had limited representation from the east coast of England. The research team will therefore further aim to supplement the data included here by placing more emphasis on east coast employers in later work packages.

Conclusion

The findings in this article suggest that the challenges and issues that impact on the social work profession generally may be exacerbated by a range of factors specific to coastal communities. While a follow up publication looking at opportunities presented by these participants, and later work packages, will go on to place more emphasis on recommendations,

this section will outline some early recommendations stemming from the findings outlined here.

The neglect of coastal communities is noteworthy in how it was perceived by practitioners living and working in these communities. This suggests the need for sustained investment in these communities and those who live in them. Most discussions around investing in coastal communities tend to relate to increasing or re-igniting tourism (e.g. [Clarke 2026](#)). This research suggests more sustained investment focused on the community needs is instead/additionally required. The 2026 white paper *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* ([Department for Education 2026](#)) provides some hope in this regard. It includes a specific 'Mission Coastal', aimed at supporting schools to improve outcomes in disadvantaged coastal communities, in recognition that in these areas, 'opportunity can be limited by geography, fragile local infrastructure, and the compounding effects of disadvantage' (p.47). A similar 'Mission Coastal' may be appropriate in relation to social work teams and social services in coastal communities.

Current policy responses directed at supporting social workers and improving their conditions tend to overlook the specific challenges of coastal communities. This may have real and significant impacts on practice. For example, while there is a growing shift towards specialist child protection roles in England ([MacAlister 2022](#); [Department for Education 2023](#)), it can be harder to recruit specialists in rural and coastal communities ([Public Health England 2019](#)). This aligns with broader concerns that increasing standardization of local authority support has disadvantaged coastal areas by failing to account for their distinct contexts ([El-Hoss et al., 2024](#)). Therefore, another recommendation is that future workforce initiatives and national reforms should take specific account of how they reflect the needs of social workers in coastal communities, and how they may impact specifically on those communities. This research has also highlighted that social worker demographics may need to be accounted for within any national policy response. For example, global majority or international social workers may find integration into these communities more difficult if not provided with sufficient support. Female social workers, in particular those working in child protection contexts within communities where they live, also raised specific safety issues that may need to be considered.

Linked to this, it is noteworthy that participants highlighted concerns related to negative public perceptions, which were seen as demoralizing and isolating. For social workers, a belief in negative public perceptions has been identified as a barrier to recruitment and retention ([Murphy et al., 2024](#)). However, the widely held belief by social workers that the public has a negative view of them contrasts with research that has found that the public, in England and internationally, actually have generally positive perceptions of social workers and the role they play ([Hanley 2025](#)). It would therefore be prudent to explore what public perceptions are of social workers specifically in coastal communities, and whether this

may be impacted by higher needs and the correlating increased interactions with social workers (Key Cities 2025). In their research with young parents in a coastal community, Geddes and Wenham (2025) identified fear of social work intervention as a key theme, suggesting that this existed ‘almost as folklore within the community’ (p. 8). They found that for many this fear of social workers was based on their own negative interactions with social workers, either as children or adults (or both), or experiences shared by family or friends who had interactions with social workers. Stemming from this finding, as part of our case study research we will be examining these themes in more depth. However, there is also scope for a wider quantitative study that could identify specifically how public perceptions may differ across geographic contexts and the implications of this.

The findings of this research are timely as the challenges facing coastal communities around poor health outcomes, deprivation, and higher levels of children in need, are increasingly receiving media attention (Halliday 2024), alongside emerging media analysis of the pressures facing coastal social work teams (Hunt 2024). The findings in this article, and the study that it forms part of, have the potential to inform these debates with rigorous research. These findings should also be of interest to other jurisdictions facing similar problems and challenges, including other parts of the UK but also internationally. The Chief Medical Officer (2021) argues that ‘the concentration of poor health and wellbeing in coastal communities ... provides a clear and geographically defined target for national action’ (p. 7). The research findings presented here reinforce this point in relation to social work practice and, alongside findings from other stages of this research project, should provide clear evidence for this type of national action.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all of our research participants and everyone else who supported the research.

Conflicts of interest. None declared.

Funding

This work was supported by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (grant number: NIHR164236).

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